

Religious Beliefs and Practices of Kora-Mudi Tribe : Tradition and Transformation

Parikshit Chakraborty

Abstract : *The religious beliefs are concerning the blessings of God as the creator of this earth and humankind. There are many myths among the tribes about their religious beliefs and practices. The Kora religious beliefs subsist on supernaturalism is expressed through worship of ancestral spirits. However, Kora-Mudi is one of the little known Scheduled Tribes in West Bengal. They are widely spread in the districts of Burdwan, Midnapore, Bankura and Purulia of West Bengal. Various studies stated that tribal religious beliefs are a combination of traditional spiritual practice and Hinduism. Some researches pointed out that the religious faith of Kora tribe is under the threshold of Hinduism, though at the same time they practice their traditional worship. However, the author tries to explore the religious beliefs and practices of Kora-Mudi tribe in Purulia district, whether they practice the same thing or not. The author of the present paper collected data from Naudhia village under Purulia district of West Bengal, India. The study indicates that Kora tribe of Naudhia village practices both their traditional worship and Hindu God and Goddess. The study stated that the religious beliefs and practices of Kora tribe are a combination of regular worship of the tribes and the Hindu worship. Moreover, the study also provides that spiritual tradition of the Kora tribe is the vis-a-vis of religious beliefs concerning the blessings of God.*

Key Words : Religious Beliefs, Myths, Supernaturalism, Natural Worship, Ancestral Worship, Hinduism, Religious Practice.

Introduction :

The function of religion is the issues of empirical and experimental interest of society. In particular, religious beliefs and religious practices (Huber 2005) as such, beliefs and practices which influence different factors are ranging from micro-data such as individuals (Gruber 2003, Sosis and Ru-e 2003). Religious beliefs and practices are two essential features linked to faith-based organisations.

The beliefs and practices of every society of the world have manifested through the celebration of ritual and ceremonies. The religious beliefs and its performances among the tribals consist of their life cycle rites, communal rites and worship practices along with their ancestral worship practices followed by their different totems and taboos. Tribal people believe in Gods and Goddesses, witchcraft, magic and disaster is attributed to displeasure and malicious acts of the supernatural forces, evil spirits. However, religious beliefs and practices play an essential role in tribal myth. Their religious belief arranged on nature and creativity unless the Gods are first placated and give the signs.

However, in 1963, Paul Bohannan stated that maybe presently no particular subject matter is present where anthropology concerns itself nowadays, the literature is superior to religion, particularly, the Tribal Religion. After that, in 1964, Max Weber wrote, "*The Sociology of Religion*" where he stated that 'religion' "*can be attempted, if at all, only after the study*". Major sociologists and social anthropologists such as Malinowski (1974), Durkheim (1976) and Weber (1904), define 'religion' as a process of beliefs and morals and following the concerning issues which are a fundamental part of human culture and human society. Although, anthropological approaches of tribal religion and admiration of understandings of it through the customs of beliefs and practices is primary objectives associated with the social parts of society and culture.

Beliefs in religions and its practices are significant and perhaps devoted to structures of spiritual societies. The eminent sociologist, Emile Durkheim in 1950s, wrote "*The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*", where he stated that the interrelationship among religious beliefs and practices of a society or a culture forms a religion. At this point, Durkheim explored religion through

a comprehensive study, which showed the most primitive religion in existence is among the Australian totemism. Therefore, Durkheim pointed out that all human societies are separated into different territories of 'sacred' and 'profane'. However, India has a number of different ethnic communities and Kora community is one of them. Kora is the fifth largest tribal community in West Bengal. According to the 2011 census, the Kora population is 1, 42,789, which constitutes 3.2 % of the total tribal population of West Bengal. They spread in eastern provinces of India such as West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar and Jharkhand. In West Bengal, the majority of the Koras is found in the districts of Bankura, Bardhaman, Birbhum, Puruliya and Paschim Medinipur. They have four endogamous groups such as Mudi Kora, Kurmi Kora, Nagbanshi Kora, Dhargar or Orang Kora. However, the Kora tribal community maintains their existence as well as the religious practices in the threshold of Hinduism. In the year 1891 H.H. Risley purposely pointed out that the Hindu religion has fully influenced the Kora tribe. Risley said, Kora religion stays under the 'Hindu orthodox' and the practices of joint mobility which is outstanding in extensive assimilation of the Hindu religion and achieving the situation which is static to the Kora. Therefore, Risley in his 'Castes and Tribes of Bengal' states that,

"In matters of religion, Koras effect to be orthodox Hindus, worshipping the regular gods and calling themselves Shaktas or Vaishnabas accordingly, as they incline to the cult of Kali, Durga, Manasa or to that of Radha or Krishna, Manasa, the heavenly patroness of Snakes and Bhadu..... whom goats, fowls, pigeons, rice, sugar and plantain are offered on no fixed dates, and are divided between the worshippers and the deogharia Brahmans village gods. In Manbhum, the Koras do not employ a Brahman.....".

Thus, H. H. Risley proposed the process of caste-formation in India has been the gradual integration of the various tribal groups into the Hindu social system. Following Risley, few of Indian anthropologists such as Roy (1915), Majumdar (1937; 1950), Datta-Mazumder (1955) had taken up the problem of tribal transformation in terms of specific instances of Hindu Tribal acculturation. Furthermore, N.K. Bose wrote an article on *"The Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption"*, where Bose stated new factors which involved in the process of integration of tribes in terms of economic relationships between a tribal group and the multi-caste Hindu community (Bose: 1941).

However, A.K. Das 1964, studied Kora tribe of West-Bengal and stated that his field investigation about the religious life of the Koras also agrees in general to a great extent with that of Risley's statement made about three generations ago. K. P. Mitra 2004, the study on Koras of Birbhum district of West Bengal and stated that bridge between orthodox Hindu religion and the ideal traditional tribal religious belief, sometimes which may witness the fusion of these two. Moreover, in the present study an effort is made to understand the religious belief and practices of the Kora-Mudi tribe who lives in Naudiha village under Raghampur Gram Panchayet of Purulia district, West Bengal. The author attempts to identify the beliefs in religion and worship and ritual practices to regulate the spirit and soul which maintain the harmonious relationship among them. The study may be simplified to recognise the religious views and beliefs and retain the identity even within the broad Hindu socio-religious system.

Methodology :

For the present study, the author concentrated on the specific group of Koras of *Naudhia* village under *Raghampur* Gram Panchayet of Purulia district, West Bengal. The Naudhia village is a multiethnic revenue village inhabited by the Kora and other Hindu peasants castes such as *Mahishya* and *Goala*. They live into three separate hamlets. The Koras designate their hamlets as '*Mudi Para*' thereby the meaning of this tola is Kora-Mudi. The other hamlet of the Hindu peasant castes are '*Das Para*', '*Mandal Para*' and '*Ghosh Para*' however, these three hamlets together are referred as '*Hindu Para*'.

For the collection of data, the researcher has made the household census survey with the help of an unstructured questionnaire. For intensive data collection, useful anthropological methods are adopted. The anthropological methods of data collection include - Focus Group Discussions; Case Study; Case History methods.

Kora Religious Beliefs :

Before discussion of the religious beliefs of the Koras; it is essential to point out the tradition and myths, which had immense importance for flinging on the old mentality of the tribal world. The ritual may perhaps show the way of animal or human origin into natural events to explain as to the supernatural power.

The Koras, being one of the tribal communities of the world, have not deviated from such universal social system. They have to control some uncanny powers through certain rituals centering around a specific set of beliefs. The Kora religion keeps going through faith in supernaturalism which expressed through rituals. The mystical or religious beings cannot be seen, but the existence might be felt. The spirit is visualised as the darkness of the deceased individual. However, during study times it was found that the Kora people had simultaneous beliefs in Hindu gods and goddesses and worship of nature. Moreover, Kora people believes that undressed pieces of stones are resting places of specific deities where propitiation is done.

On the other hand, Kora people keep the figures or pictures of some deities into their living room. They also practice *Sharul* worshipping sacrifice animals. Kora peoples' religious beliefs subsist with their own traditional religious beliefs and are influenced or acculturated by Hindu religious beliefs. The conventional religious beliefs and traditions of the Kora tribe based on the animistic belief and supernatural power.

a. Traditional Religion:

The ethical practices of religion are the expressions of feelings and inner meaning which are termed as their traditional myths. However, sacrifice to the divinities had been different which are conventional. For different deity, the Kora people sacrifice various types of animals which are to be made to complete their regular worship.

Kinds of systematic worship practised by Kora tribal people are described bellow:

1. **Sahrul:** One of the conventional religious practices of the Koras is *Sahrul* which also is known as *Maghi puja* because *Sahrul* puja is held in the month of *Magh*. *Sahrul* is practiced by Koras of Naudiha at the community level. This traditional religion is practiced with the help of a priest. In Naudiha village the Kora people sacrifice a goat in the *than* for '*garam deity*'. The sacrifice is done for the welfare of the Kora inhabitants, in the evening of the *Maghi Purnima* day.
2. **Tusu:** Another most important traditional religion is *Tusu*, which is practiced by the Koras of Naudiha village. The *Tusu* festival is held

each year in January month and the day is known as *Makara Sankranti* that means the last day of *Pausha* (Bengali Months). *Tusu* puja is performed with the uses of Rice cakes. In the *Tusu* festival. Kora female folks sing the *Tusu* songs till the end of the celebration. The female members mainly celebrate it on the banks of river or tank. The *Tusu* song is dynamic which is performed by the female members of the Kora community. The song is given below:

*“Aachire pachire padma
Padma bai aar photena
Tusur hate jora Padma
Bhramar boi aar base na
Aamader Tusur ekti chhaitya
Kultale bai khele itai
Kon satiner dhula dila
Dhular baron gela nai
Cykele charia babu
biri-o-cisar dharaya
Khet khet yachhe babu
Ekebare yamalaya
Khatrari lal mati
Bitichhanar kate jhami
Jhanti patar Titir samal
Madia tai chamke daraya.”*

3. **Janthal:** The *Janthal* ritual is a form of thank giving to the deity for a good harvest. This ritual starts before harvesting time. The priest worships the deity ‘*Garam Thakur*’ sacrificing fowl and putting its blood on the seat of the goddess (*than*). The *Janthal* ritual is connected with agriculture therefore, the festival or ceremony is known as a pre-agricultural ritual.

4. **Muth:** *Muth* ritual is the rituals of seeding operation which is practised by the Koras. For this ritual, the cultivator of Kora people throws a trickle of paddy on the ploughed field. However, Kora do not start cultivation without performing the *Muth* ritual. On the day of the ritual the bullocks are bathed and their bodies are smeared with vermilion. Vermilion is put on the plough. The *Muth* ritual is practised with the expectation of good crop.

5. **Gram bandh Puja:** The '*grambandh puja*' is celebrated at the clan level of Kora tribal community once a time in a year, usually in the month of *Boisakh*. This is significant because it protects the clan members from chickenpox. The *grambandh puja* is accomplished for the deity of the village. However, in this worship, a goat is sacrificed at the *gram then*.

6. **Bonga-Buru:** The '*Bonga-Buru*' worship is also known as hill spirit worship. This worship is another essential festival of Kora tribe, which is their traditional religion. The *Bonga-Buru* festival usually happened on the day of *Chaitra Sankranti*. Moreover, this worship is also a natural believe system where the Kora people believe that their descendants or ancestors live in the hill. Therefore, in respect to their ancestors, the Kora people celebrate the *Bonga-Buru* festival. Though, in this festival, they sacrifice a black cock because if the ancestor had any evil soul then after sacrifice of a black cock the wicked soul will leave the ancestors. After that, the ancestors will protect the Koras.

7. **Soso-Giddi:** *Soso-Giddi* is traditional agricultural worship also is animal spirit worship of Koras at Naudiha village. In worship time, the priest adores all the animals' senses and tries to connect with the paddy field. Because if all the animals' souls related with the paddy field then any animal will never harm the crop in the area. Therefore, the animal spirit worship is performed just before sowing seed and is held in the month of *Jaystha*. As per the Kora tribe, the Kora religion originated from the Munda religion; therefore, it is essential fact that Munda people should be present throughout the worship. If no Munda

lives in the nearby village then priest will select someone as a Munda from Kora society.

b. Hindu Religiou:

In Naudiha village under Raghobpur Gram Panchayet, Kora tribal people also performed Hindu worship. The Koras are tribe but some practices have come under the fold of Hinduism as mentioned by Risley in 'Castes and Tribes of Bengal'. However, the Kora of Naudiha village has the beliefs on Hindu worship. The Kora of the studied community almost adopted the Hindu religion. Therefore, it creates infinite consciousness to put ahead the idyllic of their customary spiritual faith or their traditional religious system. Although, the Kora people in Naudiha village practised some Hindu worship personally and participated in some Mass celebration communally. The different types of Hindu religion which are practised by Kora tribe are described bellow:

1. Manasa: *Manasa puja*, guiding divinity of the snakes, is one of the Hindu puja which is performed by the Kora. The worship is done by a Brahman priest with sweets, fruits and un-boiled milk. Milk is offered to the snake during the worship. The cult is practised on the day of the *Nag Panchami* in the month of Shravan. However, some of the Kora family offer male duck sacrifice in the village. *Manasa puja* is known as *Dak puja* among the Kora. More or less all the Kora families of the village plant, a cactus plant, locally called '*Fani-Manasa*' or '*Manasa Gach*' within the homestead land.

2. Sitala: *Sitala* worship is practised in many rural parts of Bengal and which also is an old folk deity in rural Bengal. However, the Kora people observe the *Sitala* festival. Saturdays and Tuesdays are auspicious days for the worship. Among the Koras believe that that *Sitala* Devi is in charge of the disease of pox and if *Sitala* Devi becomes angry or the cult not appropriately performed then disease affects all the members of that particular house. Therefore, all the Kora people participate, and a Brahman priest completes the ritual. Moreover, Kora called the disease as '*Mayer Daya*' and they maintain some taboos such as to keep the house clean and sprinkled with holy water from the *Ganga*, avoided oil or soap during affected time, never ate fish like *Kai*, *Magur* and *Singi*

because the Kora people considered them as the carriers of *Mayer Daya* and the taboos are known as '*Mayer Niyam*' among Kora people.

3. Siva: God Siva is the greatest god; that's why he also is known as *Mahadeva*. Additionally, god Siva also is considered as the all-destroyer. The Kora people of the village had performed the worship for cure of forms of agony such as liver pain, gout, cardiac and several kinds of severe ailments. Worship is done with un-boiled milk, water of green coconut, leaves of bel, the custard apple. Worship of Siva is practised in every Kora family with the help of a priest. Therefore, every Kora house has a black stone which is a phallic symbol or linga representing god Siva. In several cases, some of the adult Koras hang a piece of tied by red thread on the branches of banyan tree near the Gram than. If their wishes are fulfilled they perform big Siva puja in the village.

4. Kali: Kali is a goddess of power, but in Kora society, they believe that she is responsible for causing different types of fever, bloodshed and accidents. They believe that if they worship kali, She will save them. '*Mata Kali*' is locally called and *Mata Kali* is black complexioned with three wide-open eyes, and her feet are resting on the *Mahadev Siva*. She has four hands where she carries different weapons, such as axe, spear, amputated human head and a human skull with blood dripping. The worship is performed by a Brahman priest on new moon day in the month of *Boishakh*. However, Kora people practice this worship occasionally once a time in a calendar year, and they sacrifice a black male goat to *Mata Kali*. Apart from this, a few of the Kora people practised worship of *Raksha Kali*. But the reality is the *Raksha Kali* worship is not communal worship. Thus only two people practised this worship in their household premises which had a better economic condition.

5. Saraswati: The Kora of Naudiha village worship saraswati for betterment for the improvement of their education. Puja is performed by a Brahman priest on the day of *Shree Panchami* in the month of *Magh*. All the Kora households contribute money for the puja. The

school-going children and young boys and girls arranged all the essential ingredients.

Conceptual Transition of Religious Belief:

Kora religious beliefs and practices are consistent with the supernatural, but on the other hand, the Koras are highly influenced by the Hindu religious beliefs and practices. As a result, all the Kora people practice worship of the Hindu gods and goddesses with the help of Brahmin priests. Interesting fact is that the Koras take services of the Brahmin priest for their postfuneral purification rites.

Koras worship gods and goddesses for wealth and bliss. Their major deities are – *Mahadev*, *Manasa*, *Sitala*, *Garam Thakur* (Village deity) and others. The majority of the gods are borrowed from the neighbouring Hindu castes. For example, Kora people worship the goddess *Saraswati* in every household. They buy *Saraswati* idol from the local Hindu potters and employ Brahmin priest who come from Hindu hamlets. One more illustration, Kora people also worship goddess *Manasa* and *Sitala*. They worship *Manasa* in their individual household but *Sitala* is worshipping in the commonplace known as *Sitalatala* with the help of a Brahmin priest. At *Sitalatala* both Koras and lower-caste Hindu people jointly worshipping the deity.

Despite the fact, that D. M. Hansda and D. Minz (2009), described the Kora of Jharkhand and stated that the majority of the Kora people belongs into Hindu religion and a good percent of Kora are converted into Christian and Muslim faith. In this study it is found that the Koras of the studied village practice their traditional religion and in addition they also follow some practices of Hindu religion

Following are some case studies.

Case - I

One of the informants named Tapas Kumar Mudi (Name changed) 56 years old man who lives in Mudi para of Naudhia village under Raghampur Gram Panchayet, is an elite person. Mr Mudi stated that “*on the new-moon day in the month of Kartick (October-November) they worship the goddess Kali who is known as ‘Mother goddess’.* However, *Kali Puja is a significant festival for the*

Hindu people while nowadays the Kora Mudi people also practice the Kali puja because the Kali Mata protect them from the evil spirit and she is the power of God.” In spite of that, Mr Mudi also stated that “since a long time we have close contact with the Hindu caste people, the Hindu caste-like Ghosh and Das are neighbours of our Mudi hamlets for which we adopted most of the Hindu Deities and the picture of the Hindu Gods and Goddesses are placed in our houses. However, these rituals traditions demand the sacrifice of a goat to the divine power. We decorated our houses through rangoli drawing. Kali puja is carried out late in the night and after that we seek the blessings of Maa Kali.”

Case - II

One of the informants named Mr Basudev Mudi (Name changed) 60 years old man lives in Mudi para of Naudhia village under Raghobpur Gram Panchayet. He is a senior citizen of the Kora-Mudi community. According to Mr Basudev Mudi, *“the goddess Manasa is a popular deity and the presiding deity. A cactus plant, called ‘Fani-Manasa’, represents her. Within the limits of a house a pyramidal mound, Tulsi plant, a cactus called Fani-Manasa and an iron trident is kept to identify the house of a sorcerer. Manasa is the controlling deity of the snakes. Devi Manasa usually is worshipped on the day of Dak Sankranti, i.e. the last day of Thapan Sankranti, and the Thapan Sankranti means the previous day of Jaistha (Bengali month). During this worship we offer some essential ritual elements such as milk, China rose flowers, cocks, rice beer and a male Duck.”* Mr Basudev Mudi also added that *“she is not our ancestral god but this worship we learnt from our neighbouring Hindu caste people. If we worship her then she will bless us and protect us from the snake bites. For this reason we worship Devi Manasa and my father also worshiped these gods.”*

Discussion:

The traditional religious beliefs and practices of the Kora tribe mean the supernaturalism which is expressed through rituals. However, they distinguished spirits which are beneficial to men, such as, *Bonga-Buru, Jaher Buri, Siva, Kali and Manasa* including *Jugni, Churil, Sugnibasa Bhut* (forest spirit) etc. The study also pointed out that the Kora has integrated their traditional worship Sarhul festival of old time with local Tusu Parab as an essential post-harvesting festival.

However, as Risley stated that Kora religion stays under the 'Hindu orthodoxy' and it is now at a static condition with the mobility and assimilation of the Hindu religion with the traditional beliefs and rituals. A.K. Das also agrees in general to a great extent with that of Risley's statement made about three generations ago. K. P. Mitra pointed bridge between orthodox Hindu religion and the ideal traditional tribal religious belief may be the witness of the fusion of these two. The above study is carried out at different times, and in different geographical location within the same tribal community but their outcome was the same. Therefore, this study done in a different time, and at different geographical location in the same tribal community and the study also agrees with the above statement.

Transformation and Sanskritization:

The supremacy of the Brahminical society produced Sanskritization and became fundamental matters of customary Indian society (Béteille 2005: 217). The progress of 'Sanskritization' among the aboriginal communities has remained and much of the tribal spiritual communities are transforming. Thus, some of the Hindu deities such as Shiva, Kali and Shitala have made place in to the religion of ancient tribal communities. Therefore, the process of Sanskritization has smashed many ancient tribal societies. On the other hand, the tribal sacred groves encompass no images of deities and spirits, while Sanskritization customarily gives rise to copying of a Hindu goddess (Spadoni and Deb 2005). Since the Kora-Mudi society of Naudhia village under Raghobpur Gram Panchayet have kept the pictures of *Shiva*, *Kali*, *Manasa*, *Shitala* and other Hindu deities in their houses, it clearly explained that the studied community has passed through the process of Sanskritization and transformation.

Subaltern Hindu deities such as *Manasa*, *Shitala* and *Dharma Thakur* are worshipped on certain days by the *Kora-Mudi* of *Naudhia* village, and those ceremonies are performed at the *Garam-than*, *Manasa-than*, *Shitala-than*. In spite of that when they practice their traditional religious festivals, they never look upon of all those Hindu deities/goddesses who have some specific images. Some of their conventional rituals are practiced in the sacred groves and in the holy places. At these places they protect some medicinal plants and safeguard them with their religious beliefs. It may provide an explanation for

the presence of dual belief system among the Kora-Mudi community in the process of transformation through Sanskritization and also with the presence of their traditional ritualistic practices.

Concluding Remarks:

The Kora religious belief and practices encompass their Religion. However, the study stated that the Kora of Naudiha village worship their traditional religion along with the worship of Hindu gods and goddess. At the same time *Bonga-Buru* festival and *Soso-Giddi* festival reminds the animistic belief of Kora tribe and relationship with their traditional religious system, but at the same time, *Sasa-giddi* puja presently moved with a devotion to Hindu religion.

Finally, the study stated that some of the Hindu religious ideas had entered in the Kora rituals, and at the same times, their traditional religious beliefs and practices have gone through supernaturalism. Moreover, the study raised the question that the traditional spirituality of tribes and Hindu religion, in reality, is a combination of dual spiritual practices or pragmatic religious beliefs into the tribal world; which may be a new issue for further researchers in the field of social anthropology as well as social sciences.

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Bio Note :

Junior Research Fellow, Anthropological Survey of India, Ranchi Field Station,
Kadru, Ranchi-834002, Jharkhand, India

And

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Dept. of Anthropology, University of Calcutta

E-mail: parikshitchakraborty1@gmail.com