FESTIVALS AND RITUALS AMONG THE PAUDI BHUYANS: A FUNCTIONALIST APPROACH

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Abstract

Festivals and rituals have existed in human societies from the very beginning. Festivals play a number of roles in the society like satisfaction of personal needs, improvement of socio-cultural bonds, social acceptance, ritual compliances, social recognition and social respect. Observation of festivals and rituals provide information about the faiths, values, beliefs of the people and their interaction with others. They are an integral part of the most of the societies that help to shape culture and assist in establishing common connections between members of the particular culture. It also facilitates the understanding of their culture and heritage, and provides legacies for the future.

As an anthropological study, the focus of this research article is on the study of different festivals and rituals performed by the Paudi Bhuyans, a Particular Vulnerable Tribal Group of Keonjhar district of Odisha. It also highlights the functions of these festivals and their role in the survival of traditions of this community. The different elements of festivals like description of deities, place of celebration, the role of religious specialists, sacrifices,

offerings, and prayers have been discussed. The functional roles of these festivals and rituals among the Paudi Bhuyans are being considered in the background of theoretical concept of functionalism.

Key Words : Festivals, Rituals, Functionalism, Tribe.

Introduction

Etymologically the term festival derives from the Latin 'festum' which means public joy, merriment or revelry. Encyclopedia Britannica defines the festival as "a day or period of time set aside to commemorate, ritually celebrate or re-enact, or anticipate events or seasons agricultural, religious, or socio-cultural that gives meaning and cohesiveness to an individual and to the religious, political, or socio-economic community". Charles Winick (1956) defined the festival as a collective that centers on the magical operations. It may also be described as the religious observance, for the public at large for a specific period of time. Its prominence and outreach among the people grow as the society develops. According to Gnanambal (1969), festivals are institutionalized religious observances. It is an occasion for a social group, which either small or large to assemble for public worship and rejoicing. The most comprehensive definition is coined by Falassi (1987) "Festival commonly means a periodically recurrent, social occasion in which, through a multiplicity of forms and a series of coordinated events, participate directly or indirectly and to various degrees, all members of a whole community, united by ethnic, linguistic, religious, historical bonds, and sharing a worldview." According to Lyngdoh (1991), a festival is a symbol of identity. It is general in practice and the entire community feels emotionally involved. During the festivals, the entire community gets an opportunity of coming together. According to Cudny (2016) "festivals were an emanation of the culture and religion of primitive tribes". Thus, the festival is the occasion when the tribal community worships the cosmic forces under the guidance of a religious practitioner.

Festivals and rituals are key dimensions of cultures. Festivals offer a unique portrait of identity of a community that provides an opportunity to revive and preserve cultural practices. These strengthen and embrace social practices among communities, which provide a wide range of cultural heritage. Community festivals also play a role in socialization, entertainment and the establishment of social networks for enhancement of community cohesion and to build the social capital within a community.

Fairs and festivals are associated with diverse cultures of India. Festivals are of different orientations like religious, food, arts and trade which primarily exhibit special features of the cultures. It promotes unity and solidarity among the people of a society. Religious festivals are also associated to please the cosmic forces for curing of sickness, calamities or death (Taylor, 1970).

According to Tribhuwan (2003) festivals among the Indian tribes can be classified into eleven categories like agricultural festivals, seasonal festivals, hunting festivals, religious festivals, ancestral festivals, preventive health festivals, cattle welfare festivals and festival of renewal, cosmic movements and change, festival of medical practitioner and war festivals.

Objective

The objective of the present paper is to study the festivals which are celebrated by the Paudi Bhuyans of Keonjhar district of Odisha and to identify its functions in their social and cultural life ways.

Literature review

A number of studies have been done on different aspects of festivals of different communities both tribal and non-tribal in Indian context.

Basu (1927) illustrated the spring festival with a comparison between different provinces. Lall (1933) studied Hindu festivals in the Indian subcontinent. Chattopadhyay (1936) gave a detailed account of Charak festival in West Bengal. Sivananda (1947) provided the physiological aspects of Hindu festivals, vratas, fairs etc. The best descriptions of various fairs and festivals are available in the series of monographs that was published by Social Studies Division of Census of India in the period of 1951 to 1961. The details like location of fairs, duration, and time of occurrence, as well as average persons that attended these fairs, are organized and well presented in the tabular forms wherever necessary.

Mathur (1953) studied festivals of Chero tribe of Uttar Pradesh. Bhowmick (1957) also studied the festivals among the Lodha. Sinha (1957) studied the Karam festival among the Munda. Gnanambal (1967) described the deities, myths, and cultural

changes through festivals mostly celebrated by the Hindus. Pramanik (1959) gives light on the flower festival among Santhal. Sinha (1970) discussed the annual festivals among the Santhals.

Recent publications on the festivals are mostly a descriptive account of the major festivals of Hindus (Krishnaswami, 1984; Bezbarua, 2003; Sarma, 2008; Sastri, 2008; Gupta, 2012). Encyclopedia on art and culture by Gopal Bhargava (2008) in 27 volumes also describes various fairs and festivals in the different states of India.

Materials and methods

For the present study, Paudi Bhuyan community of Keonjhar district of Odisha have been taken into account. The methodology adopted for the present study include house hold schedules, case study, interview, focused group interviews and observation of different aspects of agriculture. Survey has been conducted in six villages under Kuanr Gram Panchayet in Keonjhar district of Odisha. Data were also collected from members of traditional councils and Gram Sabha, office bearers of Kuanr Panchayat and BDO office of Banspal block. The village Kuanr consists of 446 families with total population of 1828 (Males-902: Females-926).

The Studied community

Present studied community is Paudi Bhuyan. They belong to the Particular Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) of the state of Odisha. Paudi Bhuyan, one of the earliest inhabitants of eastern India, is mainly concentrated in Banspal Block of Keonjhar district of Odisha. They also live in the adjoining areas of Bonai and Pallahara sub-divisions of Sundargarh and Dhenkanal districts of Odisha. As they are inhabited in an around forest area their economy and livelihood pattern is related to the forest environment maintaining a symbiotic relationship. They traditionally practice shifting cultivation. Their economy is also supported by gathering and occasional hunting. They live in mostly nuclear types of families. Paudi Bhuyans follow patrilineal descent. Concentration of the tribe is found at 'Bhuyan Pir'. The meaning of the place name refers to a place where the community lived for a long time period. This implies that they perhaps are the original inhabitant of the area.

According to Nayak (2010), the Paudi Bhuyan is one of the major section of Bhuyan tribe which has been identified as a primitive tribal group of the Odisha state considering their habitat, technology, methods of getting food, low literacy rate etc. They are mostly found in Bhuyan pirha of Keonjhar, Banai mountainous areas, hill tracks of Sundergard and Angul districts. The name 'Bhuiya ' might have derived from the Sanskrit word 'Bhumi' meaning land or earth. The tribe is also called variously as Bhuiya, Bhuiyan, and Bhuinya. The racial and cultural elements of Paudi Bhuyans have greater affinity to Mundari group (Roy, 1935). Paudi Bhuyans speak their (Bhuyan) dialect as their mother-tongue, though they can speak Oriya. The religious beliefs and practices of the Paudi Bhuyans are the admixture of animism, animatisms, nature worship, fetishism, shamanism and ancestor worship.

Festivals celebrated by the Paudi Bhuyans

The Paudi Bhuyans celebrate a number of festivals throughout the year. Each festival is associated with specific deities. There are Gods, and Goddesses, ritualistic observances, special food items, agricultural cycle, activities relating to forest, shifting cultivation, hunting, fishing, food gathering, life cycle rituals and feast. It provides an opportunity for interactions and get together between kin members. It also helps Paudi Bhuyans for relaxation from monotony and boredom of daily routine works. They enjoy, unite with kins and friends and revive their fervour and interest for the successive years ahead. Festivals play an important role in inter-village and intra village solidarity.

New mango eating festival (Am Nua Khai) is a festival associated with seasonal changes. This festival is celebrated in the month of January- February when the mango blossoms come out. Offerings are made at the holy place and in the temple of the Goddess Thakurani (Community Goddess). Small green mangoes are offered to the Goddess and clearing of jungle for cultivation is started.

Festival of new rice eating (Nuakhai) is performed in the month of September –October. It is celebrated for reaping and eating of the newly harvested rice. On a festive day, the Village Priest (Dehuri) goes to his own field and cuts some sheaves

of paddy and offer them at the shrines along with some common offering, such as molasses, some flowers, mustard oil, milk, and sacrifice of a fowl. A small piece of sal wood (Shorea robusta) is carried from the house of the village head to the shrines and worshipped. This journey is locally known as Karam Jatra. Villagers bring the paddy from their respective fields and place them in their respective houses with the offering of prayers to god and goddesses and their ancestral spirits.

The festival related to the allotment of land for agriculture (Magah Podol) is performed during the month of January and February. On this occasion, they mark the allotment of land for cultivation. Though it is not mandatory to conduct this festival every year, it generally is conducted when the fresh land has to be allotted for cultivation in the next year.

Another agricultural festival (Kath Jatra) is observed in the month of January-February. In this festival residue of stem of paddy is worshipped for better growth for the next year. Village Priest and some villagers take part in this festival. The village Priest ceremonially sets a log in fire and some offerings are made in the shrines.

The festival of ceremonial hunting (Akhin Pardih) is generally held in the month of March-April. The village priest selects any Thursday and asks the villagers to perform a small scale offering in the shrines. As soon as a game is hunted the head of the game is given to that person whose arrow has pierced the game first. The person became the head for the next hunting. A big chunk of meat is offered to Village Priest and Head man of the village. Then the remaining meat is distributed among the hunters and their family.

An inter village festival (Thakurani Jatra) is celebrated in the month of February-March. People from seven villages participate in this festival. Most of the inhabitants from the nearby villages gather at Kuanar village for this annual festival. The festival spans for seven days. On any Thursday after Makar Sankranti (solar cycle of the Hindu lunisolar calendar) this festival is performed. This coincides with winter solstice. Two rectangular shaped stone emblems of Goddess (Maa mangal patha) and its accessories were taken outside the shrine and were washed in turmeric water. Then it is taken to the village headman's house where some ceremony takes place secretly. After seven days, it is placed back in the shrine

and the ceremony starts again. In the morning of the auspicious day, along with the prayers, some rice is cooked. After an hour or two, these emblems along with accessories are carried from shrine to the Ghumara nala at a point where it is deepest and widest. Most of the villagers join in the walk with drums and other musical instruments. On reaching the predestined place the articles associated with the stone emblems of daggers, swords, potsherds were washed in the stream one by one and it is shown to the people. It is always regarded as sacred and kept away from the local people throughout the year. After washing the articles, they return to the temple and keep them separately. The whole journey is locally called Jatra. People also make offerings to the Goddess. The villagers sacrifice animals to please the goddess.

Apart from the above-mentioned ceremonies and festivals, there are some Hindu festivals adopted by them. Some of these are mentioned here. The festivals of Jhulan where the females and kids ceremonially swing in a special swing made of wood. The date essentially coincides with Akshay Tritiya (the third lunar day of Bright Half).

The festival related with the worship of the serpentine goddess (Bisri Usha) is generally commenced after two-three weeks of celebration of the inter village festival (Thakurani Jatra). Generally, it takes place in the month of February-March. On an auspicious day, a potter is brought from the nearby village. The person is usually the traditional potter who prepares the idol for generations. He cleans and marks the ground where the idol is prepared. Then some alluvial soil is carried by the potter himself. He mixes the mud with water and kneads it. After the soil becomes properly malleable, the potter makes some pots, in which two are smaller in size and one is larger in size. The larger pot is fixed into the body of the deity. With some more clay face is made on top of the pot. The smaller pots are kept for related ritual.. The potter lets the figure to dry in the sun. This is the serpent goddess (Manasa). After a few hours, the Pradhan visits the place and then put some jewelry and clothes on the idol.

After the idol was completed it is carried by a woman on her head to the temple. On the way, she passes various houses, where house owners offer some offerings like uncooked rice or fowl with prayers and chants. Then the idol is placed inside the temple. All through the night, the folk singer (Gauni) along with other villagers

recites the folklore of Behula and Lakhinder (Characters of folk tales of Bisri Usha). This goes on for seven consecutive nights. The story narrates the devotion of Chand Saudagar, the famous trader and great devotee of Lord Shiva and his deep hatred towards the serpentine Goddess. This folk tale also narrates the struggle of Behula to bring back her husband from the land of the dead. Thus it is the story of the emergence of serpentine goddess (Bisri Usha) and her magnificent power to curb the evil and provide overall happiness.

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On the 8th day of the commncement of the festival the goddess is emersed in water. Villagers of kuanr and its adojoining village members take part in this occassion. The villagers offer various items which include uncooked rice, molasses, domesticated fowls, goats and as many objects which they afford to give. Young boys and girls actively participate in the festival. They dance with Oriya songs and Hindi songs while playing it on loudspeakers. In earlier days, they danced by playing of musical instruments of their own on this occasion.

The functional aspect of festivals among the Paudi Bhuyans

The functional approach that Malinowski (1944, 1945) had followed. attempted to explain the functions that are played by different institutions within the interrelated whole of a culture. In every type of society customs, material objects, ideas and beliefs have different functions. According to him, the function was a specific way of understanding institutions and customs of primitive people. He emphasized that functional method of investigation is best suited to give an accurate picture of the realities of culture. He added functionalism as the theory of the transformation of

organic, which implies that individual needs derive the cultural necessities and imperative.

In the present research, functional aspects of the festivals are wide-ranging. Specific functional aspects of festivals in both emic and etic views are done for understanding the role that festival plays in the society of Paudi Bhuyans as a whole.

Most of the festivals of the Paudi Bhuyans which are discussed above are religious manifestations of the community. The functional role that was played by these festivals can be classified as the promotion of inter-village bonding, propagation of religious beliefs, merriment, and it also helps in establishing matrimonial alliances. These functions are being discussed below in detail.

·Inter-village bonding :

The festivals are celebrated by the villagers. Members of the adjacent villages also take part in the festivals like the worship of serpentine Goddess (Bisri Usha) and inter-village festival like Jatra. It ties the relation of inter-village members. They share their knowledge and experience about personal and economic pursuits and thus new inter-personal bonding are developed.

·Religious manifestation:

The Paudi Bhuyans share common religious beliefs and practices. On this occasion, the villagers take part in the festival of the neighboring village. It helps them to carry out their religious performances. Thus, the festival not only helps the religious manifestation of villagers who organize the festival but also by the villagers who participated from the neighboring villages.

·Custodian of the heritage:

Festivals among the Paudi Bhuyans play a vital role in maintaining social customs and norms. Religious specialist (The Priest), functions as the custodian of these social norms and values. They help to maintain these social norms, values, knowledge, and tradition. These festivals are keys to social control and help to practice moral prescriptions and actions.

·Establishing matrimonial alliances:

Festivals also function as a platform to establish matrimonial alliances. The inter-village participation also facilitates the Paudi Bhuyans to choose the prospective bride or bridegroom for matrimonial alliances. Among Paudi

Bhuyans the marriage by capture is permissible. Thus the festivals act as the major platform where the prospective bride and bridegroom come in contact with each other and it facilitates many matrimonial alliances.

·Merriment:

Festivals also function as an escape route from the boredom of daily routine. They enjoy the companion of their family members, friends, relatives and many other peoples who may not be available on normal days. Thus, festivals give them a quality time with their compatriots and help in merry making and increase the overall happiness. Thus festivals function as a catalyst for their happiness as an individual as well as a community.

·Identity:

Festivals also act as an identity of the Paudi Bhuyans. The Paudi Bhuyans have specific festivals and customs which are different from other peoples. Thus it also functions as an identity to the community.

Conclusion

Festivals and rituals have been a coherent part of the human culture from the time immemorial. They are performed all over the world for a variety of purposes such as the satisfaction of personal needs, strengthens the socio-cultural bonds between people, social acceptance, ritual compliances, social recognition and social respect. The study of festivals and rituals were initially undertaken by anthropologists as a focus to understand the religion and their roots in tribal societies.

Present study helps to understand the concept of festivals and rituals among the Paudi Bhuyans. The findings of the study show that the festivals among the Paudi Bhuyans play a vital role in their society. Its function is multifaceted and provides the functional roles such as the promotion of inter-village bonding, propagation of religious beliefs, merriment, and it also helps in establishing matrimonial alliances. Thus the festivals' function is an indispensable part in the Paudi Bhuyans society. It also functions as their identity.

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