



IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL DEITIES AMONG THE MAHISHYA COMMUNITY OF EAST MIDNAPORE: A STUDY THROUGH NARRATIVES FROM EVERYDAY LIFE

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Abstract

People of rural India have been worshiped a number of village deities which are totally unknown to the urban population. Moreover which are specific to locality, villages and village community as well. These deities have no place in the great tradition of India but they have played dominant role in little tradition. They are popular to the villagers for their charismatic power. Villagers have been facing different problems in their personal and family lives throughout the year. In those crises, they have prayed to them to get relief from the probable hazardous situations. They felt that it is the blessing of their local deities.

This paper has been prepared on the basis of field experiences which have been gathered during October, 2018 to January, 2019 from two villages (namely, Bahadurpur village of Bhagawanpur-II Block and Ali Chak village of Khejuri-I Block) of East Midnapore. Researchers have been revealed that in both villages people have been worshipped 'Smasan Kali' and Lord Hori as their 'Grama Devi' and 'Grama Devata'. There are different existing popular narratives regarding these deities and their kind miraculous power. Researchers have been collected several narratives from there about these local deities. Villagers have gathered their motivation from those stories. So, this paper has been able to explore the dominant role of these deities in local level. This has been attempted to find out the significance of the narratives in context of deities in village life.

Key words: Village deities, Great & Little tradition, Worship, Narratives

I. Introduction:

Scientific study of village society had been started during colonial period. Thereafter, its style and temper had been changed in various ways. Scholars of 1960s-1970s had described Indian

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villages as a closed, isolated, static and self-sufficient unit. This picture has been begun transforming after 1990s. Since then various factors like liberalization, globalization, urbanization, rapid industrialization and so on had been roused changing the traditional notion of Indian village. Several structural and visible changes have been taken place in modern villages. Now villagers have been enjoying all basic amenities such as concrete road, clean water, electricity, irrigation facility, modern agricultural equipment, accessibility of ICTs and so on. School, college, health centers, hospitals are also available in their nearby locality. Migratory behaviour has been noticed among villagers for fulfilling their other different needs. Now modern entrepreneurs have also expanded their business in semi-rural areas. Though, agriculture has been considered as the main pillar of rural economy. A good number of villagers still have been dependent on agriculture. Their children have been admitted in schools and colleges. They have got different degrees and also have engaged in different sectors. Besides these, there have been found several rituals which villagers have performed from long ago and even now, they have been practicing those in similar way. Alike, their belief to their village deities has been quiet unchanged. Thus, the Mahishyas community of rural East Midnapore have been performed several rituals and customs regularly for their village deities. Village community have been collectively arranged rituals like *Kali puja*, *Horipuja*, *Horinam sankirtan* etc. Participating in those programs, villagers have been felt spiritually connected. Therefore, this can be said that traditional as well as modern both features are co-existed in present rural communities.

American anthropologist Robert Redfield explained rural society as traditional in terms of social behaviour, religious rituals and cultural practices. As per his version, rural areas are basically small, isolated and self-sufficient. On the other hand, urban areas are completely modern. Therefore, twice born castes, priests, ritual leaders are part of great tradition and whereas, medicine men, folk artists, poets, tellers of stories and riddles are members of little tradition (Redfield, 1948). Now both communities have been started interacting. Therefore, these clear cut divisions are not prominently observed all the time. So, this change has not been detected when villagers have practiced their indigenous religious rituals.

Religious rituals are also trying to bind individuals together. Eminent sociologist Emile Durkheim in his book “The Elementary Forms of Religious Life” (1912) described religion as ‘non-material social fact’. Beliefs, values, ideas of a particular community are associated with this concept. These non-material factors have been shaped the notion of ‘collective conscience’. This is an essential component for every religion because collective conscience of a particular society has been helped to frame the religious structure of it. Every village has its own specificity through which a peculiar religious expressions can be evident in their daily lives. As consequence, homogeneity in belief pattern has been manifested among the villagers in the case of village deities. Villagers have deep faith on them and use to share their problems with such deities. They felt that these deities have been definitely helped them to overcome their all crisis. This tradition of worshipping *Grama Devata* came into being from the tribes. In their locality, tribes have been made a separate place for their religious practices. They have been believed that their village god has been resided there and protecting them from all evils (Kochar, 1966).

The same can be said about the village deities who have been worshiped in different villages of East Midnapore. There have been popularised several narratives which have been guided local people to go some particular religious place for their practices. So, it has been observed that in different *thaans*, local Mahishyas have been performed a number of rituals for their village deities. In case of two study villages (i.e., Bahadurpur and Ali Chak village) members have individually and collectively performed different rituals. For performing these rituals they have been guided by their common morality. These have been viewed as ‘manifest functions’ because they desired for something to their deities through these rituals. In this paper researchers have been attempted to find out the significance of the narratives in terms of deities at the local level.

II.Method:

Individual narratives along with field narratives have been used for this paper which researchers have been collected from the local people of two study villages (namely, Bahadurpur and Ali Chak village) of East Midnapore district. They have chosen two blocks (i.e., Bhagwanpur-II & Khejuri-I) purposively from the total twenty five blocks of East Midnapore. From each block they have purposively taken one village. Therefore, they have respectively picked Bahadurpur village from Bhagwanpur-II Block and Ali Chak village from Khejuri-I block. The concentration of people representing Mahishya community is greater than the people of other community.

III. Analysis:

For the purpose of analysis four narratives have been illustrated in this section. Those are asbelow :

Narrative-1

Temples of *Smasan Kali* have been noticed in both villages. Villagers have seen her as ‘*Grama Devi*’ (goddess of their village). They have gathered their spirits from her divine power. They know about her kindness. So, in their all crisis they have recalled her and when they have been able to overcome all hardship they thank her.¹ Temple of this goddess which has been viewed in Ali Chak village is not an impressive one but the temple of *Smasan Kali* of Bahadurpur village is really a big construction. This bigness may create some fear amongst common villagers and finally they have surrendered themselves to the feet of this goddess. In their everyday life villagers have enjoyed very little opportunity. The chance of their mobility is restricted. So, the villagers have been easily moved by the enormous charisma of this local deity. Thus, a good number of people from the respective village and outside have come to the temples of *Smasan Kali* (i.e., in Bahadurpur and Ali Chak village) in every year and they have also made several vows to this deity for leaving all sorrow and suffering from their life. After fulfilling those promises, again they have come to these places for offering some special *puja* to this goddess. In some cases they have performed this *puja* by giving some special things viz, own blood, gold jewellery, *saree*, sweets, flower etc. When various programs have been arranged by the villagers in different days, which considered as numinous, then devotees come spontaneously and prays and presented their *puja*.²

Narrative-2

In both the villages few sacred groves have been found and situated nearer some of the temples. Villagers have acknowledged them as 'sacred' and recognized these trees as 'wishing tree'. They have expressed their wish before these trees and thereafter tied different things there for the fulfilment of their latent desires. Usually they have been using some earthen horse, brickbat, earthen pot, earthen 'diya' stand etc. for making their pledge. After fulfilling their oaths they have presented *puja* to the local temple besides which these sacred groves have been situated. People of both villages have regularly shared different magical stories about these groves. These stories are decorous enough for convincing village community. So, in various crises they have gone there for making vows.

Narrative-3

It is evident in the study villages that people have viewed Lord *Hori* as their village deity. Besides this, they have also considered him as their family deity. Villagers of Bahadurpur and Ali Chak have been worshiped this deity at their own places. In every Thursday and on *Purnimatithi*, they have been arranged some special *puja* in the honour of this deity and have been set programs for *Horinaam Sankirtan* regularly which have been continued for 3 days, to 10 days.⁵ These programs have been seen as some purification ceremony which symbolize as assayed to enlighten the mind of common people. *Mahishya Boisnab* people have sung different devotional songs in these programs which have been popularly known as *kirtan*. They have used instruments like- *harmonium, khol, khanjani* etc. for making these songs more melodious. By hearing this sacred song, villagers have tried to eradicate their all negativity. In those days ceremonial banquet has also been planned for these programs.

Mahishya Boisnab experts have come and join in these programs and read different sacred texts like- *Srimad Bhagwat Gita* or *Mahabharat* and also have explained the divine power of Lord *Hori* from different perspectives. Devotees have very much fond of hearing divine 'sloka' and their meaning from them. It gave them mental strength and pleasure. It has been noticed that this kind of arrangements collectively hold into the *Hori* temple situated in villages. Throughout the year they have made different vows to this deity.⁶

Narrative-4

Villagers have explained different unpleasant incidences such as drought, heavy rain fall, non-productivity etc. as the aggression of their village deity and to overcome those blistering incidences they have arranged some special *puja* and *Yajya*.⁷ In those catastrophes the whole village community have been tried to please their local deities for their survival and possible favourable condition. The members of different village temple committees have jointly arranged these occasions along with the elderly of the villages. They have discussed about arising problems with the villagers and thereafter have taken further decision.⁸

IV. Discussion:

There are existence of two village deities namely, *Smasan Kali* and Lord *Hori*, in both the study villages. Researchers have noticed that the temples of 'Gramadevi' (i.e., *Smasan Kali*) and

‘*Grama Devata*’ (i.e., *Lord Hori*). These deities are basically played the role of ‘village protectors’ for both the cases. So, each and every villager has been emotionally attached with them. It is common to the villages that villagers have been worshiped *Lord Hori* for eliminating all evil spirits from their village. ‘*Hori nam*’ has some magical power also and people have chanted it for eradicating all darkness from their life and surroundings. Likewise, villagers of both study villages have worshiped goddess ‘*Smasan Kali*’ for seeking protection. ‘*Smasan Kali*’ is another form of ‘*RakhshaKali*’ and people have venerated her for the well being of their village. They are also emotionally connected with their temples.

Different folktales are popular among local communities about these deities and their temples. These have been shaped a new kind of meta narrative. There is no place for this god and goddess in the great tradition of Bengal but they have created and maintained a kind of local tradition. They are the central figures of that meta narrative. This has been spread surrounding areas by the devotees. They have been experienced their kindness and overwhelmed by their charisma. Between the goddess of two villages, the idol image of *Smasan Kali* of Bahadurpur is most popular. People of this district are very much aware about her divine power. Therefore large number of people have gathered there regularly. In different prosperous days bride and groom have come with their kins and friends in this auspicious place and performed the ritual of wedding. People from distant places have arrived to this place for collecting *sindur* for their kin’s wedding. They have viewed this deity as their ‘mother’. They find her blessings in the *sindur* of this particular *thaan*. Thus, they have been collected *sindur* from this holy place before some wedding ceremony. On the day of wedding, they have been used that for performing the ritual of *Sindur daan*.

Agriculture is the main economic source of these villages which is also dependent on nature and different natural resources like ground water, rain water, fertility of land and so on. On the other hand, natural calamities such as drought, flood, heavy rainfall, storm etc. have been also regarded as some challenging factors to the farmers and villagers believed that their village deities have been aware about these and anyhow they have been protected them. In such manner, village community have been continuously engaged with them in various types of interaction by offering *puja*, making vows or giving some gifts. Sometimes different good things are also happened in their family. They have seen these as the benison of their village deities and assuming that they have been arranging some special *puja* for celebrating that event. In maximum cases they have preferred to offer *puja* during the time of annual festival which has been organised by the respective temple committees. In such way deities have been performed the role of village protector. Therefore, it may be said that religion of those villages has been somehow associated with social relations and ritual practices.

In both villages people have been appointed a local priest in the temple of *Smasan Kali* and *Lord Hori*. In the temple,s priests have been performed *nityopuja* (daily worship) as well as all kinds of special *puja*. For these religious services, villagers have given them remuneration also. Female members of these priests family have engaged themselves in preparing *bhog*. Every day they have performed this task very carefully. In the early morning after taking bath they have started cleaning kitchen and other utensils and then they have started cooking. Any persons from outside are not allowed for this job. During different special *puja*, temple committees have been appointed some

Brahmin cooks for preparing a huge amount of *bhog* for the devotees. In those special days cooks have prepared some special menus also. Devotees have also brought some food or sweets for offering those in '*bhog*'. Foundation days of these temples are very special. Every village temple committee has been celebrated that special day by arranging some annual festival. From the villagers it has been known that temple *puja* committees have been appointed a local potter for preparing the idol for their temple. They don't want to appoint any potter outside from their village. Very strictly *puja* committees have been maintaining this norm.

New economic opportunities have changed the previous economic system of Indian village society. Barter system has not been existed today but for organizing *puja* of their village deities, villagers have been provided different things and services. So, during the annual function of their village deities they have offered different things to these deities and in such way they have expressed their thanks to them. So, in different festivals, voluntarily they have given some grains, vegetables, different cooking spices, different raw materials etc. to the *puja committees* for arranging some religious banquets. Local artisans have helped them by presenting some potteries. In such way the whole community have been involved in the worship of their village deities. So, practice of ritual is not only a mere activity but it has also taught villagers some foundational lessons like- sharing, efficiency, cooperation and so on. Villagers have thought that they have been regulated by these deities. Their belief is that in all circumstances they have been protected by them. Therefore, continually they have been paid respect towards them. Their kins have also known about these deities from them. So, when they have visited their place they must come to these *thaans* and also offer *puja* (Rangarajan, 2018). It can be said that these places have been created one type of communication channel between these villages and their surrounding areas.

Village community have also able to make one type of kinship with these deities. They have seen them as their 'father' and 'mother'. They are shared their all joys, sorrows and mundane experiences with them. This tie is vertical as well as horizontal both. These deities have some super natural power and devotees have called them '*Ma*' or '*Baba*'. That means they have been using these intimate words for referring them and they have been successfully built some intimate relations with them. So, these deities have been played a major role in developing notions regarding different rituals and belief system of this community. This bonding has been created through different social activities including hearing story, participating in different rituals, taking *prasads* and so on. Therefore, these activities have some positive role in creating a sense of social bonding among the village community. When people have been participated in these activities then they have get the opportunity to involve with social interaction with their community members. So, different activities of these places have been allowed devotees to create a larger social network (Dunbar & Schultz, 2007). Expansion of this horizontal relationship is not confined within the boundary of village community. These deities have been also appreciated by the people of other villages. In different special days they have come to these places and offer *puja*. They feel very akin with them and also made vows when they have faced different critical problems. In such way, religious system of this particular area has been started interacting with great tradition.

V. Conclusion:

With the preceding narratives, it can be said that the integrative nature of religion is evident in the villages. In this regard their concluding observations are as below:

Firstly, local deities have played a key role in building some sort of family ties, memory and belongingness and these religious places have been provided some opportunities to the local people such as meeting spaces, various kinds of symbolic and material resources and suitable circumstance to mobilize people. People have also get chance to meet some likeminded people and understand their identity and origin.

Secondly, such type of religious practices not only confined within some mere religious activities rather these have been helped to develop some humane qualities like beliefs, values, trust, tolerance and fellow feeling among the villagers at the local level.

Now rural community has been started interacting with great tradition but their common cultural consciousness is not changed. There elements of great tradition have been changed at the local or village level which is popularly known as the process of parochialisation. In this process, elements of great tradition have circulated towards downward and this has been occurred in the case of both study villages.

VI. Notes:

1. **Individual narrative:** Name- Sandhya Maity (Changed name) (23+), Occupation: Student, Economic Level: Middle class, Address: Bahadurpur village, Bhagabanpur-II block, East Midnapore, Date: 17.10.2018, Interviewer: Researcher, Place: Bahadurpur Hori Temple.

2. **Individual narrative:** Name-Kamal Maity (Changed name) (53+), Occupation: Housewife, Economic Level: Middle class, Address: Ali Chak village, Khejuri-II block, East Midnapore, Date: 21.12.2018, Interviewer: Researcher, Place: At her place.

3. **Individual narrative:** Name- Arnab Maity (Changed name) (71+), Occupation: Retired Primary School Teacher, Economic Level: Middle class, Address: Ali Chak village, Khejuri-II block, East Midnapore, Date: 20.12.2018, Interviewer: Researcher, Place: Ali Chak Primary School.

4. **Individual narrative:** Name- Chitra Mondal (Changed name) (39+), Occupation: Housewife, Economic Level: Middle class, Address: Bahadurpur village, Bhagabanpur-II block, East Midnapore, Date: 21.11.2018, Interviewer: Researcher, Place: Bahadurpur Hori Temple.

5. **Individual narrative:** Name- Sujay Mondal (Changed name) (20+), Occupation: Student, Economic Level: Middle class, Address: Ali Chak village, Khejuri-II block, East Midnapore, Date: 20.12.2018, Interviewer: Researcher, Place: Ali Chak Sporting Club.

6. **Individual narrative:** Name- Ronit Jana (Changed name) (22+), Occupation: Student, Economic Level: Middle class, Address: Bahadurpur village, Bhagabanpur-II block, East Midnapore, Date: 22.11.2018, Interviewer: Researcher, Place: At his place.

7. **Individual narrative:** Name- Dipak Kumar Das (Changed name) (41+), Occupation: Business, Economic Level: Middle class, Address: Bahadurpur village, Bhagabanpur-II block, East Midnapore, Date: 23.11.2018, Interviewer: Researcher, Place: At his place.

8. **Individual narrative:** Name- Madhumita Jana (Changed name) (53+), Occupation: Primary School Teacher, Economic Level: Middle class, Address: Ali Chak village, Khejuri-II block, East Midnapore, Date: 19.12.2018, Interviewer: Researcher, Place: At her place.

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