

RAJBANSI FESTIVALS DECODING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT:

Indigenous Knowledge System/ IKS and the set of local-level material apparatus are dependent upon non-adaptive domains of the folk life (>folk culture>material apparatus). Altogether non-reflective intangible part of culture (cultural values, social norms, folkways, taboo and traditional belief); reflective and tangible part (set of material apparatus) and reflective but non-tangible part (information, knowledge and traditional technologies constituting TKS) constitute the Folk Life. Here, various aspects play major influence on the issue of Folk Life, such as, mode of communication (formal and informal): firstly, with people via exchange of goods/message/women/power of word; secondly, with nature via TKS; and thirdly, with Super Nature via performances (cultural/ social/ magical/ religious/ agricultural-seasonal) during religious festivals and other ceremonies. The network so formed maintains connectivity among agrofacts, artifacts, sociofacts and mentifacts/psychofacts; and in this way, the traditional social system (again highly non-adaptive) is built up on composition of various institutions. Of various institutions in traditional social system (non-adaptive); IKS (adaptive) is generally tested in the religious laboratory of survival (religious institution).

Within the traditional folk life of Rajbansi agrarian rural structure of northern West Bengal, a study has been conducted to quarry the role of their festivals in proper management of IKS as they could communicate with social system, nature and super-nature as well.

INTRODUCTION:

Traditional Knowledge System (TKS) is the set of knowledge traits produced through day to day life experience via trial and error; these traits are asymmetrically distributed

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worldwide among various gender and age groups, socio-economic strata as well as ethnic-identity holders. A TKS has two basic services: protection to Nature by virtue of proper balance between mode of exploitation of ecosystem but with certain amount of feed back and the minimum energy requirement of a given-size population attached to its folk life (>folk culture> material culture). Now, the supporters of Global Market Economy are willing to create a universally applicable “Indigenous Knowledge System” (IKS) through summation of all the TKS. It should be capable of simultaneous activity parallel to the Global Market Economy on capitalism. It would deliver some sorts of Global Public Service (GPS) and therefore help in reducing the negative impacts of Global Market Economy (such as pollution, biodiversity-loss, ecological degradation, emergence of new-drug resistant disease strains, genetically modified food, malnutrition, increasing levels of non-degradable and toxic compounds, global warming, drastic need of market expansion, severe competition and consumerism, outsourcing and unemployment, economic inequality and crisis-prone financial market, one-way development, mass-exploitation of nature, development of the system of production-consumption-governance but without any proper way of distribution, conflict between globalization and anti-globalization, localization-on-terrorism, fuel-crisis, war-on-resource-and-energy, space research and so forth). So, a balance between the Modern Knowledge System and the newly fashioned IKS is highly needed for two primary reasons: protection of nature through sustainable way of development and secondly, to check the least scope of emergence/reoccurrence/over-dominance of any singular alternative on the line of Socialism, various types of Extremism or other the traditional politico-economic systems. Backward communities- the ultimate providers of the Global Public Service- are traditionally highly against the Western way of Globalization and their concept of super-ordination over nature. There is a need to bring in these people under confidence via providing them with universally applicable protective measures- the Indigenous Rights for all the Indigenous Peoples (proposed by ILO, 1991). Indigenous Rights are further subcategorized into the domains like general policy, land, recruitment and conditions of employment, vocational training, handicrafts and rural industries, social security and health, education and means of communication, contracts and co-operations across borders, administration, general provisions.

IKS is a multidisciplinary subject and could be divided into

various domains like agriculture and post-agricultural practices; animal husbandry and poultry; ethno-fishery; hunting and gathering; artisan; disease treatment, ethno-medicine and folk remedy; traditional economic and political system. So, whether in favor of Globalization or not or in an intermediate way; in India there is a need to study applicability and impact of IKS. And to do this; primarily the community-specific TKS has to be thoroughly investigated on humanitarian ground from the paradox of the complex agrarian rural structure- heterogeneous and extra-caste extra-class extra-power in attitude with three major objectives: 1) sustainable development, 2) protection of biodiversity and 3) issue of Indigenous Rights and Indigenous Peoples. The major anthropological technique that could be used in this kind of study would be the communication system between informal and institutional sectors *via* farmer-to-farmer system, gender interaction, exchange of service, exchange of information, folk dialect and power of word and performances (magico-religious as well as agricultural and seasonal).

Here in this paper, performances in festivals of a traditional social system have to be investigated- their capacity of symbolic expression of the folk life and the scope to decode the IKS, especially the hidden knowledge traits.

Overlapping of etic and emic perspectives (from symbols to the World View and again from complex mind structure to ethno-science and folk taxonomy) have to be studied on post-modern humanitarian ground, in a qualitative way, deep micro-level study, objectivity overruling subjectivity and least amount of biasness during researcher-informant interaction.

COMMUNITY SELECTED:

Rajbansis constitute the backbone of the agrarian social structure on the planes of northern West Bengal. They have been thoroughly nourished by these animists, Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic as well as Western connectivity; and could also claim their belongingness to the ancient state of Paundrawardhana of undivided Bengal. According to Sanyal (1965), these rulers typically of Kashyapa-Bratya Kshatriya combination have now turned down to the status of simply agriculturists and in northern West Bengal and its adjoining areas and developed themselves as the Rajbansis. These people allied over various tribe and caste groups have gradually transformed from a simple community to a huge complex heterogeneous Social Fold. The latter has been incorporated with various aspects like Animism, pre-Aryan and Aryan versions of Hinduism, various mythical elements, Buddhism, Tantraism, Kashyap/ Bratya-Kshatriya

combination, quasi-egalitarian versions (Sufism and Vaishnavism), status mobilization (Kshattriyaization/ approximately started from the date of Rajput-Mogul interference on Coochbihar state) and Western impact on local economy and polity (during rule of British and their Native Collaborators). So, a direct conflict between folk life and modernity in form of peasantry versus urban-industrial development leads the Rajbansi agrarian rural structure of northern West Bengal in a situation culture opposing absolute civilization. Various peasant agitations were occurred and followed by class struggle, social reforms, anti-globalization process up to the level of localization, extremism and so on. This could be viewed as a new type of separatist movement on the notion of reservation from the saviors of Global Market Economy decided to prevent the negative impacts on nature by virtue of IKS; the target group (reserved) being the backward people previously in strong opposition of Globalization.

Rajbansis should be able to constitute a very important part of IKS applicable in service of the bio-diversity, sustainable development and community welfare of the region. However, there are again two distinct problems:

1. New way of colonialism
 - a. Scope of interference into the internal matter of a country and therefore, deviating that country's Constitution, administration, state machinery and Legal Provisions
 - b. Conversion of culture, society, knowledge, intellect, instruction, human resource and natural resource into capital
 - c. Scope of bio-piracy and illegal knowledge transfer: misuse of patent law and intellectual property rights
2. Scope of ethnic conflict among various folk communities regarding their degree of indigenusness.

DISCUSSION:

Here, the festivals are enlisted below with precise discussion on symbolic values of their performances under the Rajbansi agrarian rural structure communicated with both nature and super-nature.

1. Festival of Modon Kam / summer

Symbol of trans-national trade route with Buddhist World through mountain passes of Burma, Bhutan and Tibet (persisting thousands years ago);

Symbol of Vaishnavism: Divinity in love: male and femaleness, gender equality, concept of *Ardhanarishwara*,

female in gesture but male in soul): day-ritual and need of blood sacrifice (magical belief)

Performance by virtue of worship of seven poles symbolized for seven different senses: each pole wrapped in colorful cloth, covered by yak tail atop and carried by men in clothe of women and playing bells, and clappers and beating drums

INNER MEANING OF THE SEVEN SYMBOLS

[Bishahari: Symbol of snake goddess: snakes again symbolize water flows in dense jungle of North Bengal: ancient water ways once regulated by fishermen-cum-agriculturist communities: snakes come out from hibernation in summer when jungle area is cut off and fired to clean up for Sweden cultivation with the first drop of monsoon rain

Inner meaning: livelihood and prosperity from trade/agriculture/fishery/ forest yield; utilization of snake venom in different purposes]

[Salshwari Thakur: animism, symbol of tree deity, male deity, worshiped by men.

Inner meaning: appeal to the super-nature for protection of hunter-gatherers in forest from fierce animals: hope for a better new year with good opportunities of cultivation: soil preparation for next season; burnt jungles received summer sun beams destroying the pests within the ash heap good for Sweden cultivation]

[Tista Buri: Symbol of animism, female deity, river water source, rive ways, trans-national trade routes

Inner meaning: scope of prosperity through proper networking among fishing, peasantry and trade]

[Modon pir: Symbol of syncretism between strictly regulated Islamic life and agrarian rural structure where people basically depend on super-nature

Inner Meaning: appeal to appease the nature for good amount of crop yield and no natural disasters or epidemic (concept of pir is also there, such as, Satya pir, Pagalo pir and so on)]

[Goram: Symbol of village deity- rural society as an entity of people, activities, identity, culture, solidarity with nature and super nature

Inner Meaning: wellbeing of the village]

[Kali: female fertility cult, part of ancient *tantra* of pre-Aryan tradition in Hinduism, female entity of nature, controller of time scale, light in steep darkness, blood sacrifices, savior from the enemy, the mother, symbol of matriarchy in primitive societies, goddess for prevention of any difficulty and contaminated diseases during weather changing

Inner Meaning: hope for protection from evil and enemies, prosperity, high crop yield, good family life, and bless of the ancestral soul]

[Sanyasi: Symbol of mentor, saint, the Omnipotent, the Omnipresent, the Omniscient, Wiseman, Shiva, Mahakal and Buddha: notion of devotion, medication, knowledge, ethno-medicine, trust and protector Inner Meaning: freedom from all social attachment and sorrow]

Festival of Tista Buri/ summer

Symbol of animism, river deity, femaleness, worship of super-nature.

Inner meaning: appeal to appease the nature for regular water supply to cropland and system of fishery-cum-water transportation: means of livelihood of the folk life

Performance by virtue of worship of River and river-ways: reminiscence of alternative Silk Routes and trans-national trade with Tibeo-Burmese belt and Far East? alternative options of traditional Hindu hierarchical agro-economy?

Historicity of the Rajbansi agrarian rural structure:

Increased geo-strategic importance: immigration of various ethnic communities from various parts of the world: Kushana, pro-Kushana, Turk-Afghan, Kashmiri from the western side whereas Garo, Boro, Koch, Mech, Mogh, Khen, Lepcha, Barmana, Tibetan, Dukpa and so on from the orient: Emergence of several Diaspora of the ruling in-migrated people: Dominance of State-Trade nexus favored by Buddhist Religious Institution: intermixing and resistance to the intermixing in due course: replacement of Buddhism by quasi-egalitarian versions like Vaishnavism and Sufism as well as ancient beliefs under animism and pre-Aryan Hinduism/ Tantraism: pro-Indian policy supported by the Hindu Koch-Rajbansi rulers of Coochbihar state in Mogul and British era: formation of Multicultural situation on the core of Rajbansi agrarian rural structure: Emergence of elite section: opposition against Landlordism and thereafter initiation of big farm houses: requirement of huge labor force based on extended family system without any definite blood relationship (Halua system): within the non-Rajbansi sects outside Hindu mainstream, super-ordination of a tribe over another tribe (viz. Dukpa over Toto): system of Slavery?

Festival of Jagannath and Balaram/ summer

Symbol of male deities, Vaishnavism, quasi-egalitarian version of Hinduism.

Inner meaning: alternative option to the concept of social and gender equalities in Mahayana Buddhism and Islam: huge fold incorporating people engaged in agriculture, pastoral life, fishery-cum-trade and urban centers and other small settlements on the ancient trade routes

Performance of *Rash-chakra*: Symbolic expression of the

cyclical rotation of creation, existence and destruction

STORY

Precious *Yadu* dynasty on pastoral economy was destroyed due to internal clash; whereas their king Lord Krishna, described as an *Avatara* of the Savior Vishnu, was killed in jungle by a hunter and His elder brother Balarama with a power of thousand snakes died off in medication: body of Krishna was voyaged in river and then reincarnated in the form of wooden Jagannath: hint to incorporation of the forest dwellers, hunter-gatherers, snake-catchers, fishermen, herdsmen and artisans of wooden work under the huge fold of Vaishnavism- the quasi-egalitarian version of Hinduism

Festival of Dhormo Thakur/ summer

Symbol of Mixed deity, Shiva, Warrior and Protector, Buddha, Forest God, Medicine Man, Wiseman, and Rain God (Sympathetic Magic): notion of trust, ancestral soul, male portion of nature, seasonal change and male fertility cult, and hope of prosperity and good health

Connection to the symbol of Tortoise the *Avatara* of the Savior Vishnu- Gigantic Tortoise of Indian Ocean occasionally found in Ganges; relatedness with fish, tortoise, snake, bird and sun: Natural indicators of the ancient trade routes?

Connected to another symbol of Bird deity (*Garura*): symbolic expression of the Two-Soul Concept of sleep and death

STORY

Everybody contains two souls. During sleep, the minor soul bird goes to travel outside and before sunshine it returns to the body; in due course, shamans at night deal with these minor souls. When the major soul bird leaves the body, death occurs. Cannibalism was once practiced in belief of consumption of the soul of the ancestors as well as the enemies. Later on, mummification was done in the hope that one day the bird would come back and reincarnation would happen. Non-believers in reincarnation bury the dead in graveyards to let it rest in peace. Post-Arian Hindus worship fire and generally burn the dead body in cremation. However, shamans on some specific days deal with these major soul types.

The festival is continued for the whole month by the peasant society of Bengal; it includes the Rajbansis and other versions of Bratya-/Paundrya-/Borgo-Kshattriyas with common clan identity *kashyapa*

Performance of *Gajon*: mentors shouting at in rejoice, custom

of self-punishment - a very common practice performed by aboriginal communities in various parts of the World to show the ability during mate selection by the womenfolk

Inner Meaning: Hope for solidarity and prosperity of the folk society involved in peasantry in due course of life-cycle and seasonal rotation: appeal to the ancestral souls, benevolent sprits, the Super-Nature and the ultimate source of energy-Sun

Mechheni Khela/ summer

Symbol of village solidarity, interaction between genders, and feminism; illustration of the ever-lasting conflict between the snake worshipper fishermen and river-based traders praying the cults of manasha/Bishahari and Shiva respectively

Performance: wife of fisherman with fish (mow rice) in pot going all the household of the village and singing songs pray for wellbeing

Inner Meaning: hope for well-being in folk life flourished on the sides of river-course, clash with big traders using the water ways: in the folklore of Manasa,

Gram Thakur/ summer

Symbol of several Kali forms along with the Supreme God, Mahakal or Shiva

Performance: in each home establishment of *than* (the place where the deity resides), adjacent to the bamboo bush, no image, custom of blood-sacrifice, other offerings and use of vermilion (old tradition and highly magico-religious)

Inner meaning: reduction in the effect of malevolent deities and other spirits

Gochibuna/ monsoon

Symbol of hope for preparation of a good seed bed

Performance: magical/ agro-seasonal associated with measurement of seed fertility and knowledge of sowing seedlings (5-6 in each bunch) in late summer after plough the field, male dominated, use of rat soil in seed bed, separation of saplings and again sowing (3-4 in each bunch)

Inner meaning: hope for healthy production with high yield

Hudumdeo & benger biao/ monsoon

Symbol of Rain God

Performance: animism, magical, *tantra* to Hudumdeo; nude rain dance by the womenfolk at night in dry crop field around His image- drawing, dancing, singing, music and play; on the next stage, marriage giving ceremony of frogs

Inner Meaning: hope for good rain and adequate crop yield-role of monsoon in an agrarian rural structure

Prevention of severe drought situation due to inadequate shower in monsoon but required in paddy and jute cultivation
Sound from the vocal cord of male frog the indication of their mating period in full monsoon; frogs and toads are important fauna for the food web in paddy-cum-fish cultivation system and organic way of pest control.

Dhaner ful ana/ spring

Performance: seasonal-agricultural, magical, by females, prey for appropriate whether so that ears could come out in spring after full monsoon

Inner meaning: hope for high yield

Lokhir dak/ spring

Performance: the time when ears come out first, a *dhan bari*, made up of jute stick, is constructed with two earthen bells atop and the headman in the family prays for good yield with milk, plantain and dry pummel leaves at night shouting songs. Various major female fertility cults worshipped: Debi, Boro Debi and Bishohori with the Jatra, goddess of Wisdom, as well as Bhandani-on-tiger.

Inner meaning: hope for good yield and indication to the relationship between Rajbansi agrarian rural structure and the dense forest of Doors in sub-Himalayan region from where rivers come in and control the soil fertility of the lower plains

Dhan katar puja/ after spring

Performance: seasonal-agricultural, magical, by females, senior wife of the house goes alone to the field at night, cuts handful of ears and binds it on door of the bedroom- the process symbolizes that Laxmi, the goddesses of wealth comes into home

Inner meaning: Hope for better harvesting; regular harvesting initiates from the next day of the ceremony- bunches kept 2 days in the field so that all the leaves could be shed off and then piled up in *kholan*/ the thrashing floor

The waste product is burnt and paddy grains left on field feed mouse and rat- important fauna within the local ecosystem

Naya Khoi/ after spring

Performance: seasonal-agricultural, magical, the first amount of husked rice used in preparation of some precious rice foods to be offered to the nature and the Protector

Inner meaning: Hope for good amount of stalk raising; thrashing of all harvested paddy then dumped on *kholan*; preservation in forms of puffed rice, beaten rice, rice dust and *khoi*; use of seed coats in earthen wall construction, rice cotyledons as fodder, local economy on rice, its various

preserved forms and cakes manufactured from the rice dust (*vapa pitha*), folk cookery as boiled rice, fried rice (*chal vaja*), water emulsion of boiled rice and water-rice (*panta bhaat*); alcohol production from rice and so forth
Vegetable curry of *lafa* leaves that increases the amount of mucus in respiratory organ and therefore prevents from the dust allergy during paddy harvest

Khet Uthani/ after spring

Performance: magical practice, cow/ buffalo horn with a bunch of paddy straw on a stick driven in the empty field
Inner meaning: keeping evil eyes aside
Scientifically saying, let the nature do its works for revitalization of soil, fertility control and pest management

Pushuna/winter

For the whole month of Poush (the first month of winter in local calendar); thrashing, stalk raising and husking are performed; on the last day, rice cakes are prepared from the rice dust and served to all the participants in the cultivation program throughout the year; image of fox worshipped
Inner meaning: maintenance of solidarity for uninterrupted supply of huge labor force day-by-day and season after season required in intensive process of cultivation.

Shiv Ratri/winter

Pray to Shiva and various fertility cults associated with Him; at a special day in last of winter, Shiva worshipped throughout the whole night- all people participate
For the month of Magh, the last month of winter, no major work performed, vegetables grown reluctantly, Maghli Shinan or bathing performed in the water of sacred rivers at certain places where they flow northwards
Reminiscence of travelers from northern steep hills and their caravans down to the plains during Winter and Autumn?
Exchange of paddy and by-products and wooden items with warm clothing made of yak wool of Tibet?

Autumn festivals held at the month of autumn

Worship of *Shaleshwari* and *Rakhal Thakur* (the shepherd boy);
worship of *Bharar ghar chhuba* symbolizing animal herd in domestication that reminds us the *goru chumani* festival of after-spring;
worship of *Gorokhnath*, one of the pathfinders of Nathism, a quasi-egalitarian version of Hinduism- originated in North India but more successful in eastern part of the Sub-Continent at a time when Buddhist remnants were rapidly replaced by

Islam;

Worship of *Gamira* under Vaishnavism- another quasi-egalitarian version of Hinduism;

Chorok, the month-long worship of Shiva with Gambhira songs and Gajon/ self-healing;

Bishau festival: hunting performance where forest is burnt off for next-year shifting cultivation: males enter into the jungle with whatever weapons they could manage; there they have to kill at least one edible animal and cook it within the forest area;

Worship of *dham* or the homestead in honor of major deities (Shiva, female cults and Laxminarayana)

Inner meaning: When new leaves come out after prolonged period of winter, worship of the male forest deity, *Shaleshwari* shows the closeness to the forest biodiversity- the major source of animal product, timber, minor forest produce, gum, dye, honey as well as ethno-medicines and so on; throughout the season, ethno-medicines taken;

Success in *Bishau* would decide the fortune in the next season- the bless of the forest deity during further Sweden cultivation;

During *dham* worship folk singer *Gidal* sings song with musical instruments for whole week

So, at the year end, these festivals are organized in hope for good things in next year

Jurabandha/ friendship with tree

Worship of various plants like *jiga* and basil, performances to avoid the evil eyes of *mashan* and *joka* and the role of painters (*malakar*) with natural dye are other symbols expressing belief in animism and magico-religious performance for sake of good health, hygiene, traditional biodiversity management, indication of sacred grooves and indigenous mode of exploitation of nature with feed-back.

Conclusion:

The above symbols, festivals related to them and their inner meaning might be helpful in proper diagnosis of the folk mind set of the Rajbansi agrarian rural structure with both synchronic and diachronic perspectives. They show their relatedness to the communication system with rural society, nature and super-nature. They could do a lot for decoding the Rajbansi IKS. These symbols could be applied as an important methodology to fill the gaps existing within the interrelation among various aspects. These could be illustrated as production and technical practices in a specific farming system, conservation of crop-varieties, alternative

agricultural production, production of various cash crops/vegetables/spice/fruit and flower, maintenance of the nutrition level and traditional concepts of health, food preservation, ethno-fishery, animal husbandry and poultry, social forestry and use of forest products (timber and non-timber), maintenance of sacred groove, ecology and food-web, protection to the bio-diversity with feed-back, water & soil management in traditional way, house construction and kitchen garden, folk-taxonomy, magico-religious performances, belief in Super-Nature, cultural lag, emerging socio-economic challenges and transformation due to the impact of modern big-scale industry input from the civilized sector on Global Market Economy. Rajbansi countrymen have maintained their traditional customs and faith unchanged and that is very much helpful in maintenance of their World View and agro-based folk life- the basic source of Global Public Service from IKS (crucial for both the Global Market Economy and its other alternatives at macro and micro levels).

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