

The Hinduization of Tribals of Jharkhand: An Outline since Beginning

Ambrish Gautam*

Central University of South Bihar, Gaya Campus, Bihar, India

*Corresponding author: Ambrish Gautam, Central University of South Bihar, Bihar, India, Tel: 0612-2227600; E-mail: ambrishgautam@cub.ac.in

Rec date: Sep 17, 2015; Acc date: Feb 23, 2016; Pub date: Feb 26, 2016

Copyright: © 2016 Gautam A. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction on H₂O in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Abstract

None of the pre-Aryan races, the Negritos, the pre-Australoids, the Mongolians, the Dravidian had any contribution to make towards the formation of caste¹ (Compare Rai Bhadur S.C.Roy's Presidential address to the Anthropological Section of the Indian Congress in 1931). Unless it is inferred to mean primitive aboriginal taboos on food and marriage. Strictly speaking, restrictions as to inter-marriage and inter dining cannot be said to be the only two tests of the caste system; they are really the tests of tribal divisions among the primitive races. It may be argued that this non-Aryan spirit of tribalism and separatism ultimately developed into the present caste-system of the Indo Aryans as a compromise between the ideals, institutions and beliefs, which the Aryans found rampant among the peoples in the land of their adoption, and that by the natural process of adjustment three thousand or more castes were formed among the Hindus, on various bases, namely race-mixture, vocation of occupation, social usages, out casting or ostracism, special religious doctrines and so forth.

The clash between the two racial and cultural traditions and ideals seems to have affected the Aryan Society almost as much as it affected the non-Aryan communities who entered the Hindu fold. In the present stage of imperfect materials, it is difficult to determine how much of the one was taken up by the difficult to determine how much of the one was taken up by the other. But this much seems apparent that each had to adapt itself to the new conditions of social life and that usages and practices which are not to be found in the sacred books of the Hindus must have been borrowed from the aborigines; and the customs and habits of the non-Aryans which are not in accordance with their traditional practices must have been taken from the Aryans.

Keywords: Manusanhita; Hypergamous; Septs; Saraks; Bhagat; Gotra; Khand; Bhar; Doms; Dosads; Bhogtas

Introduction

From the study of the tenth chapter of the Manusanhita it seems that the origin of the mixed-castes was the result of some complicated crosses between the two races, and that, while some of the non-Aryans were still in the tribal stage, most of them assumed the Hindu cast system. This process of transformation of the aborigines into a Hindu caste, which had probably taken place in the past since the days of Manu may also be traced among the aboriginal population in Chota Nagpur at the present day, where the caste system is in the process of making. With regard to the advance of Brahmanism in Chota Nagpur, Sir Alfred Lyall [1] has mentioned certain phases of "the gradual Brahmanising of the aboriginal, non-Aryan or casteless tribes".

In this connection we may mention the tendency, long at work among the different aboriginal groups in Chota Nagpur towards Hinduism, by a slow process of gradual development and adaptation. These groups may be divided into four such classes, namely:

The aborigines who were fortunate to become landed proprietors.

Those who embraced the tenets of some Hindu religious reformer.

Sects of aborigines who, though they still retain their old tribal designations have been totally Hinduised, with regard to their language, social and religious customs.

A large scale enrolment of the whole of the aborigines, who have not adopted Christianity by introducing the exogamous, endogamous and hypergamous principles in their respective totems or septs.

Under the first group we may mention the leading families in Chota Nagpur, who now call themselves Rajputs. The process by which they usually set themselves up as Rajputs was in the first place to have a Brahman priest, who could invent for them special legends of miraculous production. In course of time they managed to intermarry by force or by persuasion with another superior order of Rajputs. By degrees a real change of blood having taken place they have been fully absorbed in the Hindu caste system and are locally accepted as Rajputs. Co. Dalton, says: "It is pretty certain that the Zamindars of all these states are of the same race as their people. Others who call themselves Kshatriyas or Rajputs, are not acknowledged as such by any true scion of that illustrious stock. But each family has his own special legend of miraculous production." Again as to the chiefs of Gangpur, Bonai, Keonijhur and Bamra, the same learned author says that although they call themselves Rajputs, "their position altogether renders their claim to be considered Rajputs extremely doubtful, and the stories told to account for their acquisition of the dignity are palpable fables. They were no doubt all Bhuiyas originally. They certainly do not look like Rajputs." [2]. Similar observations have been made with regard to the chiefs of Panchet, Chota Nagpur, Ramgarh and other zamindars.

Influence of Hindu Reforms

A large number of aborigines have been absorbed in Hinduism by following the doctrines of some Hindu religious sect that does not recognize castes among people. Buddhism, Jainism, Saivism afforded

the greatest opportunities in the past to casteless people to become converts to Hinduism. The Kushan, the Yeuchchis, the Saka, the Hunas, the Indo-Bactrians, the Parthians the Scythians, and many other kindred casteless foreigners who were freely admitted into the fold of Hinduism are historical instances to show that Hinduism was a proselytizing religion. A similar process may be noticed in Chota Nagpur where the Saraks of Singhbhum and Manbhum became Jains; the Bhagats of Central Chota Nagpur, originally Oraons, became Hindu by following the tenets of Vaianavim. The Saraks of Chota Nagpur who are chiefly distributed in Manbhum, Singhbhum and Ranchi claim to be originally Jains, and the local legends also ascribe to them the ruined temples and the abandoned copper mines of Manbhum and Singhbhum. They themselves say that their ancestors were traders and revered Parashnath, but they are Hindus.

It is difficult to trace now to what race they originally belonged prior to their conversion to Jain faith. But their absorption to Hinduism, we cannot deny, as they are served by Brahmans and have adopted as many as seven gotras or exogamous groups, viz. Adi Deb, Dharam Deb, Risni Deb, Sandilya, Kashyapa, Ananta and Bharadvaja. The Goutam and Vyas gotras of the Hindus have been added to the list by the Saraks of Birbhum, and the Batsya gotra by the Saraks of Ranchi. They are still a quiet and law-abiding community have extreme tenderness for animal life and there is no distinction between the ways of life of the Saraks and those of ordinary Hindus amongst whom they live. This may, therefore, be said to be a case of true absorption.

In the district of Ranchi many Oraons call themselves Bhagats, a corruption of Bhakat. Those who belong to this Bhagat fraternity of the Oraons generally abstain from animal food and liquor. And without completely abandoning their old religious observances, they have adopted the worship of Lord Shiva, one of the most proselytizing gods of the Hindus. In their external ways of life they appear to be vaisnavas.

The cult of Vaisnavism which had made a profound impression among the aborigines of Chota Nagpur may be traced to the 14th Century A.D., when Lord Chaitanya, the founder of the sect had passed through Jharkhand, as Chota Nagpur was then called.

Total Absorption

Thirdly, we have the cases of a whole tribal or the section of a tribe of aborigines, which has been converted to Hinduism. Nevertheless, they had maintained their tribe designations. Under this section or sections should be placed the Bhumij, Rajwars, Mahatos, Kurmis, Goalas, Kamars, Kumhars etc. of the district of Manbhum, who have forgotten their original language and having adopted the Bengali language, worship Hindu Gods and Goddesses. The more advanced of them employ Brahmans as their family priests and have replaced their totems by the Hindu gotras or exogamous groups. Except for their physical characteristics there remains nothing against their being accepted as Hindus. The similarly Hinduised castes in the district of Palamau, who were formerly of aboriginal descent are: the Cheros, Ahirs (gowalas), Kharwars, Bhogtas, etc. they have now been assimilated into the Hindu social system, and speak Bihari Hindi, also known as Bhojpuri, they now rank among Hindus and employ Brahmans. Similar ranks as Hindus have been acquired by the Gowalas, Telis, Koiris, HAJJAMS, Kumhars and Barhis in the district of Hazaribagh; the gowalas, Tantis, Kurmis and Kamars of Singhbhum; and the chik Baraik, Mahalis, Pas, Loharas, Bhogtas, Rantias and Garaits of Ranchi, who though probably non-Aryan in descent claim to be and are recognized as Hindus. "even though, it is admitted that at the outset they were not Aryans", remarks Rev. M.A.Sherring [3], still

from their extensive inter-marriages with the three Aryan castes, they have become so far aryanised that, in some instances, they have gained more than they have lost and certain tribes now designated as sudras are in reality more Brahmans and Kshatriyas than anything else. In short some of the castes have become so perfectly absorbed into the Hindu castes, that it is impossible to draw a line of demarcation between them. "All that can be said respecting them is, that they either belong to some of the many ramifications of the great sudra caste, or to castes of a lower grade still" [3].

The fact seems to be that the process or gradual absorption of the aboriginal of Chota Nagpur into the Hindu community has been going on for so long a time and there have been so many intricate crosses that it is extremely difficult at the present day to assert definitely the amount of Aryans blood in them. Physical features are now the only tests, and even then, as a result of their long absorption they have imbibed most of the Aryan features. As a specific instance, the Kahars of Chota Nagpur deserve a little more than a mere passing mention, by reason of the fact that they represent a mixed-caste, but are employed as domestic servants in high caste families. They are most numerous in Bihar and in the districts of Hazaribagh, Palamau and Ranchi. The members of their caste domiciled in Bengal are preserved by High class Hindus. Nesfield considers the caste to have sprung from fishing tribes, such as the Gond, Dhuria and the Dhimar. According to Sir Graves Haughton they belong to a coolie caste and suggest that the name is a corruption of 'Khand' and 'bhar' meaning a man who bears burdens on shoulders. Among the Chota Nagpur kahars, there is the divorce system and their widows re-marry by the aboriginal Sagal form. They are very lax in their diet, and according to Sherring they, although it does not appear to be true now eat portk. Risley states that proper Kahars are rare in Chota Nagpur and that in consequence some Kahars had to be manufactured out of Bhuiyas and Rajwars. Socially they rank with Kurmis and Gowalas. As to the Kahars of Palamau, O 'Malley' remarks: "the men have acquired an evil reputation for stealing and the women for immorality, it is a local saying that a Kahar with one daughter only works half a day, and with two daughters not at rules they approach more to the Semi-Hinduised non-Aryans than the Aryan. Yet the convention in Bihar and Chota Nagpur is to raise them to a caste so that water and food may be taken when served by them. The kahars are only an instance of how owing to the social necessity some tribes, probably of aboriginal extraction are being gradually promoted to the rank of a caste for employment in domestic services by the high class caste Hindus. A similar tendency in Chota Nagpur is to raise the Mahatos, Kurmis, Gowalas (Ahirs) and Kuiris to a social grade in order to supply the growing demand for domestic servants, while, it is a pity that the aborigines having lost their former power and importance, are found living among the Hindus in a very servile condition and are engaged generally as coolies, as hewers of wood or drawers of wate, or malis (gardeners).

There are however certain grades among the tribes who are professing castes, according to the degree of their adoption of the Hindu customs and rituals and habits of life. The next lower grade of castes may be said to be the semi-hinduised aboriginals. In this class the following may be included: Bagadi, Banjara, Bari, Bediya, Bhuiya, Buid, Chamar, Chandal, Chik, Dom, Turi, Dosadh, Ghasi, Ghatwal, Hari, Kaora, karanga, kharia, kharwar, Bhogta, Ganju, Mahato, Manjhi, Mahali, Mal, Mihtar, Musahar, Pasi, Rajwar, Shikar etc. They are still considered helots by the Aryans, but they themselves profess to be Aryans and Hindus. They have adopted Aryan languages of their respective localities and are gradually being transformed into full blown castes. The only objection to their being recognized as Hindus

has been their unclean habits. They observe no restriction about food and eat all sorts of flesh, beef, fowls, pork etc., and are addicted to spirituous liquor. For want of education and culture they are allotted the lowest place in the Hindu social scale, and, in consequence they have not yet attained to the dignity of employing Brahmans, and are branded as "untouchables".

Inconsistence in the census reports: the census returns to which we generally look up for authentic information furnishes us with no indication as to the process of the formation of castes among the semi-Hinduised aboriginals. The names of castes, in the Topographical Survey, undertaken by Capt. Depree [4] in 1868, were taken from the number of emigrants from Chota Nagpur to Assam and Cachar, obtained from the office of the Deputy Commissioners of the division. In the list of castes, it is curious that the names of Musalmans and Christians were included; whereas we know that they ordinarily recognize no caste distinction. The first complete census of 1871 enumerated 96 castes or tribes in Chota Nagpur; and in the census report of 1931 the same number of castes occurs [4]. This would naturally lead us to suppose that during these four decades there was no absorption into Hinduism of the aboriginals who were shown as semi-Hindus in the census of 1871. The writer of the District Gazetteer of Ranchi truly remarks: "the practical difficulty is to draw the dividing line between Hinduism, though Hindus scorn their pretensions and in the Ranchi District the entries in the census schedules depended largely on the caste of the enumerator. In the case of the purely aboriginal tribes, such as Mundas, Oraons, Kharias, Asurs, nearly all who were not converts to Christianity were recorded as Animists, but members of the semi-aboriginal tribes, such as Ghasi, Turi, Lohar, Dom, Gond, who worship some Hindu gods and have adopted some Hindu customs, were entered as Animists if the enumerator was a Hindu, but as Hindus if the enumerator was a Christian or an educated aboriginal."

Besides, the classification of castes seems to have been very arbitrary and no notice of the many castes that have branched from them appears to have at all been taken. Again, the entry under the head, caste shows no fixed principles. Thus Dr. Buchanan Hamilton and Sir George Campbell would like to class the Rajwars as aboriginals while others would say that Doms, Dosads and Bhogtas have been erroneously included and entered under this head as semi-Hinduised aboriginals. Indeed new castes are being constantly formed, like the European trades union. Really it is often difficult to decide what should be entered as caste, when, as it sometimes happens, a tribe or family, having recently changed or relinquished the primitive customs, has assumed a new caste. The real test of determining its caste in that case is to examine whether for all practical purposes it is looked upon and treated as such by the people of the locality.

Fourthly, therefore come the cases of those aboriginals who have not been converted to Christianity or have not adopted Hindu practices. They seem to show signs of a large scale adherence to the customs of their Hindu brethren, although still retaining unimpaired the primitive foundation of their original institutions. Their tribal groups have been characterized by totemism, which arose according to Sir John Lubbock, from the habit of the primitive people of naming persons or families after some animals, or from a "misinterpretation of nicknames", according to Herbert Spencer. The origin of totemism among the Non-Aryan people of Chota Nagpur takes us back to the tradition of Sutia Pahan, after whom Chutia Nagpur, has often been supposed to have been named. The tradition says that when the necessity arose for marrying his son to a girl of an endogamous group,

as he would not marry in the same gotra, or exogamous group, Sutia Pahan said to have called in all the twenty one heads of the parhas and asked each of them to choose an animal or plant for his totem. Thus for purpose of marriage twenty one kilis or totemistic septs were formed, and it was decided that no Munda could marry within his sept. Each kili or totem bore the distinctive name of an animal, or a tree, a plant or some material object; and the members of that sept were prohibited from killing, eating, cutting, or burning or using those things. Thus out of the fissiparous tendency sept organization has fostered there came out killis or septs among the original 21 Munda killis, and 73 killis of the Oraons, 91 of the Santhals and an almost equal number of the Bhumij. It is hard to decide whether the totem system of the aboriginals or the caste hierarchy of the Indo-Aryans came first. Of totemism, in the sense of belief in an animal ancestor and treatment of that animal as sacred and divine the Rigveda shows not a trace. It, however, seems certain that the process of "reciprocal evaluation" gradually resulted in the general domination of Aryan culture over the non-aryan. It may therefore be suggested, what is otherwise probable, that in the later attempt to preserve the purity of blood, the Aryans must have consciously or unconsciously introduced the sept institution of the non-Aryans. Under new denominations. The law of hypergamy or law of superior marriage the Kulinism, the prohibition of widow remarriage, and the idea of touchables and untouchables may be supposed to be the latter development of the indo Aryans, in order to maintain their aristocratic pride of socio political superiority over the conquered races.

In the present stage of our knowledge it is extremely difficult to identify the names of small castes, of religious sects, of sections or septs, titles, family names, names of occupations, trades etc. nevertheless, with regard to purity and Guna they are essentially of the Hindu and Rajput ways of living. Superstitious belief in witchcraft, ghosts, or evil spirits have vanished away, nor do the Rajput families of Chota Nagpur worship any of the aboriginal 'bongas' or gods, but like the twice born wear the 'upabit' (sacred cord) and have the same gods as the caste Hindus. It has always been a characteristic custom among the Rajputs of Chota Nagpur to keep strictly within the rules of the Hindu shastras. To all intents and purposes, therefore, the chiefs and their collaterals may be called Rajputs. Lastly the opening of communications, the increase in the facility for travel, the rapid spread of education, the growth of practical intelligence, the anti-untouchability or Harijan movement, the Sudhi Movement of re-conversion to Hinduism- all these are the remarkable characteristic features of the present age, which have led to the abandonment of many practices which are of special interest to ethnologists. They are also tending, in no small measure, to obliterate all land- marks of the Hindu faith, to slacken the bonds of caste and to provide occupations unknown to the ancient Hindu polity. Finally, fallen through the Rajputs. The picture drawn by G.R.Aberigh-Mackey [5] applies in general to the petty Rajputs chiefs of Chota Nagpur. Instead of receiving inspiration from the great Rajput heroes like Rana Sanga of Mewar, the life-long enemy of the Mughals; Jai Singh of Jaipur; the scholar, statesman and soldier; Sur Singh; Gaja Singh; Jaswant Singh, the glorious paladins of Marwar- the names to conjure with, ordinary Rajputs of this plateau, as in other places, "have sunk into a state of slothful ignorance and debauchery that mournfully contrast with the chivalrous heroism, the judicious and active patriotism, the refined culture, and the generous virtue of their ancestors. Extremely extravagant, insanely jealous of national pride and dignity, a Rajput will often run irrevocably into debt so long as he has an acre of land to mortgage, and, though hardly able to read or write, would never hold

the plough, or carry a load on his head and thus live a miserable life but still as a Rajput". The Thakurs, the Lalls, the Tikayets and other sections of the Chiefs of Chota Nagpur possess at least all the above characteristics defects of the so called Rajputs, if not some of their ancient qualities.

Conclusion

As per these discussion it is clear that tribals are not the backward Hindus, as said by Prof. G.S.Ghurye in his doctoral book caste and races in India. But basically these communities has been converted through the continuous process, a large number of aborigines have been absorbed in Hinduism by following the doctrines of some Hindu religious sect that does not recognize castes among people. Buddhism, Jainism, Saivism afforded the greatest opportunities in the past to casteless people to become converts to Hinduism. The saraks of Singhbhum and Manbhum became Jains; the Bhagats of Central Chota Nagpur originally Oraons, became Hindu by following the tenants of Vaisnavism. They themselves say that their ancestors were traders and revered Parashnath, but they are Hindu. In the district of Ranchi many

Oraons call themselves Bhagats, a corruption of Bhakat. Those who belong to this Bhagat fraternity of the Oraons generally abstain from animal food and liquor. And without completely abandoning their old religious observances, they have adopted the worship of Lord Shiva, one of the most proselytizing gods of the Hindus. In their external ways of life they appear to be Vaishnava's. So it shows that tribals are not the backward hindus but they are the follower of Adi Dharam.

References

1. Sir Lyall A - Asiatic Studies. List of ancient monuments in Bengal, prepared in the Bengal government secretariat. Revised and corrected up to 31st August 1895 (Cal. 1896).
2. Dalton ET (1872) Descriptive ethnology of Bengal. Office of the Superintendent of government printing, India.
3. Sherring MA (1872) Hindu tribes and castes. Thacker, Spink & co., India.
4. Census Report of 1931, Vol. VII, Part II, Table XVII, pp. 136-139.
5. Aberigh-Mackey GR (1879) The chiefs of central India. Thacker, Spink and Co., India.