

Performing Adivasiyat through Sarhul Festival in Jharkhand

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ABSTRACT

This article arises from my academic research, 'Moving the Centre: Performing Sarhul and Becoming Adivasi in Contemporary Jharkhand' completed at Jawaharlal Nehru University in July 2015. The paper examines Sarhul festival celebration as a cultural performance in the contemporary Adivasi (indigenous) discourse in Jharkhand, India. The article discusses the mobilization of memory, rights and discourse through ritual performances. It explains how enactment of a ritual brings back the history, memory and imagination of indigenous struggles in the context of Jharkhand region. The Sarhul performance shows that the issue of indigeneity is a current issue demanding certain cultural and political claims.

Keywords: Sarhul; Adivasi; Ritual; Performance; Mobilization; Jharkhand

INTRODUCTION

There exists a large corpus of material on the formation of Jharkhand state and on adivasi identity [1-4]. Most of these works deal with the questions of adivasi identity around the issues of land, forest and displacement. The questions of land, river and forest are constantly evoked both by scholars and activists to speak for adivasi rights. In the development discourses, it is believed that by compensating for land and providing home, the displacement issues can be resolved. While a section takes adivasis as an extension of land, forest and past, for others adivasi's historical identity and memory just becomes any other kind of identity without any historicity. Both these discourses tend to subsume the importance of memory, imagination and culture to discuss the political. They ignore the fact that culture and performance remain the mode of all kind of thinking including politics. Not surprisingly, performance remains central to all kinds of social and political mobilization in Jharkhand. During the Santhal movement (1855-1856) and Munda rebellion (1899-1900) and even in the recent Jharkhand Movement, performance has emerged as a language of protest and mode of articulation. Whether there has been a historical link or constructed, performance becomes a language that gets deployed in most of the indigenous movements across the world.

Indigeneity (or adivasiyat) has emerged as a major discourse, a contested field of study, claim, negotiation and network but the relationship between indigeneity and performance has not been discussed as such in Indian context. In this regard, [5] examines the social networks, forms of political representation, and economic structures that produce and subvert indigeneity as both an idea and

a lived experience in Jharkhand and how this idea of indigeneity gets mediated through different actors, including urban elites, activists and villagers. Shah gives an interesting example of *Parha Mela* (Parha Festival) as an assertion of the separation of the *parha* system and the *sarkari* State. She rightly remarks how the festival allows the adivasis who participated in the festival to display their power, dispense patronage and mobilize supporters. This paper studies how this connection becomes more explicit in the Sarhul festival in which cultural symbols are organized and reorganized to assert certain political and cultural claims [6,7] have also discussed the articulation of memory and landscape of adivasi in Jharkhand through Sarhul festival briefly. Damodaran discusses the ways in which different ethnic and national groups living on and impinging on the Chotanagpur plateau, perceived and used the landscape as a symbolic terrain for definitions of Chotanagpuri identity. In passing reference, they pointed the various ways in which landscape was reclaimed and reconstituted. This paper is going to discuss how the Sarhul festival celebration and its ritual performance in Ranchi city of Jharkhand perform a creation of memory, imagination and a new landscape in Jharkhand.

SARHUL FESTIVAL

Sarhul (literally, *sar-* New Year, *hul-* commencement, basically commencement of the New Year) is one of the most popular cultural festivals among the adivasi communities in Jharkhand. The festival which is known by different names in different adivasi communities such as *Khaddi* in Oraon, *Ba* in Munda and *Ho*, *Baha* in Santhal and *Jonkar* in Khadiya community is now celebrated in the month *chait-baisakh* and projected as an adivasis' *prakriti parv*

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(festival of nature, or celebrating the nature) and the festival of flowers.

It is also an important character to note that in the past every village used to celebrate the festival separately on different dates. There was no particular fixed date for the celebration of Sarhul in the entire area. In some villages it was considered that the first Tuesday after Holi festival would be the Sarhul celebration day, where as in some other villages the date used to be different. However, since 1964, instead of dancing at the *akhra sthal*, adivasis from villages and of Ranchi city go to the heart of the city where they dance, perform on the streets and roads of Ranchi city - the capital of Jharkhand state and make political claims. Since then, organizations such as *Akhil Bhartiya Adivasi Vikas Parishad*, *Kendriya Sama Samiti*, *Adivasi Mahasabha* and all other village (*tolis* and *mohalla*) level *samitis* (committees) and members gather and decide a day for celebration of Sarhul festival.

Considering ritual as a field of contestation, I would like to describe the ritual process of Sarhul in brief here and will study it in relation to the mobilization of ritual symbols, contestation in ritual elements and practices in next sections. This very briefing of ritual process is based on my participation, observation and interaction with the people in Sarhul festival in Ranchi city for three years (2013 to 2015). However, I am not describing the ritual processes in detail here in this study.

Sarhul consists of three days of ritual process. On the first day *Pahil Upvass* (first day of fasting) is observed. On this day, generally the elder members of the family observe fast. On the same day the young men go to catch crabs and fishes in nearby village ponds, rivers, or fields. It is believed that it is only for this crab-catching that the earth may be dug on the Sarhul day; it means that the new agricultural season can start after this ritual process. Later, in the evening, the *Pahan* (village priest) with some of his associates such as *Pujjar* (associates of the village priest *Pahan*) go to *sama sthal* and keep two new earthen pots (*gharas*) with water near the Sal tree for the next day to measure the water layer. Sal tree is also swathed with cotton thread. The place from where the water is taken is called *samadari*. In some places the water for the pots is taken from the *Pahan's* land.

The next day, which is the second day, the main ritual process and the procession is observed. On the day, during sunrise, the *Pahan*, his associates and other elders of the village go to the *saran sthal* to examine the water layer of the earthen pots. They read the forecast of the weather or rainy season after examining the water level of the pots.

On the same day in the morning, around 10 - 11 AM, the *Pahan* with his associates and villagers go to the *sama sthal* with all the ritual elements: arwa rice, urid dal, the Sal buds, vermilion, oil, rice beer, *agarbatti* (joss stick) *dhup-dhuvan*, three cocks (fowls), knife and *sama sup*. Songs and music are played with musical instruments such as: *nagara*, *mandar*, *ghaal* and flute. After placing the ritual elements on the *saran sthal*, *Pahan* asks his people (associates) to bring all the ritual elements and offer it to the Sal tree. After completion of the ritual, the three fowls are sacrificed to various deities at *Sama Sthal*. Before the sacrificial offering, he sits down facing eastward and marks three lines with the help of *arwa* rice for Dharmes, goddess of earth and *jaldevta* (god of water) or *Pahadi devta* (god of mountain). In some places, the *Pahan* marks five vertical lines for the *panchpurvaj* (five ancestors). After that, the ritual of ceremonial bath and marriage of *pahan* and *pahnian* (*pahan's* wife) is observed

symbolically every year.

Then food is cooked at home and after having food and finishing all the ritual process, all the people of the village gather at *akhra sthal*. There, dance and music begins at *akhra sthal* or at *sama sthal*. This dance and music go on for hours at *sama sthal* near the Sal tree. As I mentioned above, earlier this celebration through dance and music at *akhra sthal* used to mark the end of the rituals of the festival but now a days this consecution of dance and music culminates in the form of procession in heart of the city, the capital of the state.

On the third day *Phoolkhonsi* (the visit of village priest- *Pahan* to every household of the village process) process is observed. This day is also called the *basi* day (stale day). In *Phoolkhonsi* ritual, the *Pahan* and his wife *Pahnian* visit each and every house in the village and place *sal* flowers on every roof above the door. The woman of the house welcomes the *Pahan* and *Pahnian* inside, and washes their legs with respect, and puts a *tika* (mark) of oil and vermilion on their foreheads. The *Pahan* wishes them prosperity and happiness for life.

SARHUL RITUAL AS MEMORY AND BELONGING

Rituals provide a space where past memory is invoked, a mythical past is created and the sense of belongingness is strengthened. In the following incident we see how the past memories and ritual practice are breaking the taboo of physical evidence and archeology. Through the following act it would be clear that the old/customary memory and behavioral acts deny the modern concept of physical evidence.

It was the day of Sarhul *Purv Sandhya* (first day fasting of Sarhul) in the year of 2014, when the ritual practice of catching crabs, fish etc. from the ponds, rivers, and wells are performed during the day. But as Ranchi has developed as a city area, the situation is different from rural areas. The Adivasis went to perform the ritual at the ponds in Ranchi within the area of Department of Animal Husbandry and Fisheries, Government of Jharkhand. The police, security, and the government officials stopped them and forced them to go back. As a response, hundreds of adivasi people from various villages gathered and protested against it. There were clashes and skirmish between the police and the people. The Police even ordered a *lathi-charge* as the situation was getting out of hand. At the end, the leaders and ministers intervened and solved the predicament. Finally people were allowed to perform the ritual at the 'restricted' ponds of the Department of Animal Husbandry and Fisheries, Jharkhand. The incident had an impact on the celebration of Sarhul, and on the next day, banners and posters against the police were also demonstrated in the Sarhul festival procession in Ranchi city of the state. Voices of protest against the police action were raised through these banners, which also mentioned that action taken by police is an act to terminate the Adivasis. In other words, of course it is a question of memory and imagination but more significantly, it becomes a question of assertion of the imagination and memory in order to mobilize communities for their land, water and forests (*Jal*, *Jangal* and *Zameen*).

The above mentioned incident provides the politics around ritual performance and how the enactment of ritual can create a field of tension and conflict. One may say that it is the power of a religious sentiment while it may also be seen as the power of a shared history of exploitation - the exploitation of adivasi people in the name of "development"; the internal colonization of adivasi people by the

Indian state [8], but more importantly, it is power of praxis of past memories, knowledge and identity. Performance theorists imply that an effective or successful ritual performance is one in which a certain transformation is achieved. Some have described it as a transformation of being and consciousness achieved through an intensity of “flow” or concentration [9]. In Karel Arnaut’s words, “People, who perform, relate to each other and to their society at large in terms of power” [10]. Nevertheless, the effect of the incident of 2014 was observed clearly in the next year (in 2015) when Department of Animal Husbandry and Fisheries Ranchi, Jharkhand announced that the department would provide fish and crab to local people to observe their ritual process.

Adivasi as a displaced community [11,12] performs its ritual enactments in these new spaces so that the sense of landscape in their memories can be revisited. It gives a confidence that the community will recapture such lands through this process. The attachment to cultural practices makes them safeguard some of the core values of the rituals. It is a desire to collect and bring their past and memory of the whole cultural-geographical landscape in the form of ritual enactment. When music and dance begin at *Sarna Sthal* after completion of all the ritual process, the music and dance is continued and transformed into a procession in Ranchi city. The procession in the city as a continuation of the ritual process generates a feeling of shared beliefs among different adivasi communities. Sarhul ritual as a performance and as a part of their culture becomes a site for producing knowledge and discourse in adivasi communities; as [13] says that adivasi communities articulate their discourse as custom and ritual practice. An attachment with the festival motivates the displaced community to find related emotions attached with its landscapes that can produce a meaning for the community. It is also a fact that ritual practices and offerings may differ in different localities but the act and process share the same feelings and inherit the same categories of imagination. It is also because of an understanding of its purpose and its content which is at the core of the ritual which has both an effect and affect upon adivasi people. Ritual efficacy stimulates the community members, its viewers, and tries to tie them in a single thread. For example, beating the drum at the time of ritual enactment creates music which sets the mood for participation. It increases their attachment with the content of rituals rather than the ritual objects. It is a part of the core common beliefs and values of rituals that enables a connection within the Adivasis community. For instance, the practice of sacrifice of fowls and catching of crab and fish – the crab and fish are also a part of their creation myth and the creation myth is getting enacted in Sarhul ritual performance. Hence, these ritual enactments in city spaces are also a kind of reordering of the world, as Catherine Bell argues that rituals as a performative medium for social change emphasizes human creativity and physicality, rituals do not mould people, rather people fashion rituals that mould their world [9].

THE RITUAL SPACE - SARNA STHALS (THE SACRED GROVES): AN ENACTMENT OF SYMBOLIC CAPITAL

The *sarna sthals*, also called the sacred groves, are considered the main ritual space in adivasi communities of Jharkhand. The space is also considered as a symbol of their religious belief. This space consists of a tree or a grove/clump of trees. The tree can be *Sal*, *Karam* or *Mahuwa*. This space is a common religious place for the whole village as most of the socio-religious ceremonies

and performances of the village take place here. These rituals and ceremonies are performed by the whole village community at a public gathering with the active participation of village *Pahan* and his associates. *Sarna sthals* as a ritual space becomes a form of symbolic capital which is in the centre of the whole Sarhul ritual process and is also linked to their myths, gods and deities [14,15] reason *Sarna Sthal* as a symbol of self assertion, a separate religious identity and beliefs of adivasis in India. *Sarna sthal* (sacred grove), as a symbol, is also embedded with a set of extraordinary values relating to ecology and biodiversity [16]. The sacred groves have, in fact, been used symbolically by indigenous peoples in various parts of the world to reinforce their social-cultural solidarity and give direction to their movements for autonomy and to assert their right to self-determination [17].

One can see that how these *sarna sthals* are seen as an important expression for adivasi identity as Pradeep Munda describes, “*Sarna Sthal* is not only a ritual place where rituals of Sarhul is enacted, it is a representation of an adivasi identity. if we do not understand our belief system, it will simply become like a monument. Our belief system needs rivers and fields where crabs and fish are found; our belief system needs forest where *Sal* tree and its flower are found.” What Pradeep Munda is saying can be seen in these two following of Jharkhand state. The first one is the movement against the Koel Karo Dam project for generating electricity by building dams across the Koel and Karo river of the state, which is still going on since the 1970s, in which the *sarna sthals* were seen as a medium of assertion of their sense of history, geography and socio-cultural life styles [18].

Another example is the issue of land encroachment of the Harmu area in Ranchi Housing Board where the *Kendriya Sarna Samiti* Harmu and other displaced people of Argora and Ashoknagar area in Ranchi city stressed that under no circumstances they would allow religious places like *sarna sthals* to be acquired and handed over to builders which has otherwise been handed over to a private company by the housing board through joint venture [19]. The Adivasis asserted that they would not shift if their ancestral spirits residing in the *sarna sthal* were removed. Assertion of their bonding with the *sarna sthals* represents an alternative symbol different from other’s symbols, values and beliefs. The existence of *sarna sthals* symbolizes the relation of Adivasis with their discourse that is based on land, forest, river and the question of displacement.

The framing of *sarna sthals* can be seen here as a part of consciousness of adivasi people and a process of bonding with the daily life of people, as Ravi Tigga – a member of Central *Sarna* Committee says “as part of our religious assertion and awareness, we have revived our ancestors’ ritualistic concept of a day (- which is called *Befeday* - Thursday). The reviving of *Befe day* which means - on Thursday, all villagers gather at *sarnas sthals* or at *akhara sthal* to discuss social, religious and other problems of the community or of any individual, and they try to solve it” The connections and interpretations provided by Pradeep Munda and Ravi Tigga show how they connect to their *sarna sthals* – their ritual space.

SARHUL RITUAL SUBSUMED

Ritual creates a powerful effect that can influence the understanding of people as Catherine Bell also states that “ritual is approached as a means to create and renew a community, transform human identity, and remake our most existential sense of being in the cosmos.” On part of the performative claim, Adivasis claim several ritual symbols to be the original one, but the ritual as a process, as

an action is not static or singular. Intermingling of symbols and the exchange of ritual symbols with other groups has been taking place throughout history; but my interest lies in the contemporary political location of the rituals. I would like to explicate the aspects of politics of claim on ritual symbols, ritual practices and cultural objects and what direction the ritual process is rendering to within indigenous politics. Using ritual as a medium of an 'ideological power' [9], adivasi communities have projected some ritual elements and processes and concealed some of them as part of their strategy to assert their cultural identity. The act of projecting and concealing lies in the dynamics of framing of ritual elements, processes and symbols, though this question is affected by the surroundings and by the contemporary socio-political situation. In the following examples we find that in order to get recognition, the adivasi community takes certain elements of dominant section of society and in that process they also get appropriated in certain ways by the dominant community. Following examples of ritual enactment will clarify these contradictions.

The first example can be cited from the sacrifice ritual in which sacrifice of cocks (fowls) is offered to the deities and gods. The offering of sacrifice of fowls is the main part of Sarhul ritual performance. Now days, there is a view which opposes the ritual of sacrificing fowls and considers it as an inhuman and uncivilized act, even [20] study states this fact. On the contrary to this, Sharan Oraon is of the opinions that "if people think that their hearts cannot allow this, do not offer sacrifice." He expresses that "the problem is the intention of some people becoming the manager/owner (*the kedar*) of adivasi culture, its rituals and customs and giving orders to eliminate the ancestral ritual practices without taking any cognizance of adivasi people, which is wrong. He further asserts that in their society there are Tana Bhagats who do not eat meat-fish and do not take rice beer, but are nonetheless part of the adivasi society. [21] also mentions that Tana Bhagats as part of adivasi community abhorred sacrifices, violence and non-vegetarianism. According to Sharan Oraon, "We do not order them or anyone to do anything. However, the ritual of offering sacrifice of fowls cannot be removed." This web of complex characteristics raise the question- in which direction is the imagination and collective consciousness of the Adivasis moving, because ritual practices are the sites to imply and pass knowledge and meaning from a group/generation to next. In Paul Connerton's theorization it is a 'method of organized forgetting' when a large power wants to deprive a small country of its national consciousness [22]. The studies such as [23-26] also have argued about how adivasi or tribal people are being assimilated into the hegemonic Caste-Hindu culture and are being made part of it. I see these issues and complexities as a challenge to the unity of the adivasi communities and as a factor that provides an alternative space against the dominant Hindu caste's cultural hegemony and their assimilation process.

The second example is the offering and consuming of *hadiya* (rice beer) in Sarhul ritual. It is important to note that *hadiya* is offered to the supreme deity and is consumed by the Adivasis. The ritual process of offering and consuming *hadiya* by adivasi people differentiate them from the mainstream Indian Hindu society as in the latter it is not considered righteous to drink in this kind of community space, especially for women. So it can be considered as one of the important symbols and processes of adivasi communities. However there has been a debate and discussion on the use of *hadiya* among adivasis. There have been anti-drinking campaigns too in recent years. The consumption of rice beer is being considered a bigger

threat to development of adivasi young men and women in the area. It is considered as a degrading act as after consumption, men get drunk and beat women. This stereotypical notion regarding *hadiya* by the non-adivasi communities and the imagination of non-adivasi communities' regarding adivasi as drunkards became strong when adivasi women carried out anti-drinking campaigns and roamed in local areas and markets breaking pots of *hadiya* and *mahua pani*. A question then arises- is this really in favor of the adivasi's culture? Or is this to alienate them from their customs? Ravi Tigga says that these were *kurities* (malpractices) that were brought by others to mislead the adivasi people but now people are becoming aware and conscious regarding their culture and ritual practices. The anti-drinking campaigns are a part of this awareness and consciousness. Ravi Tigga, and Sharan Oraon say,

If you take *prasad* (offerings to *Dharmes*) as *Prasad* (rice beer as offerings only), it is okay, but if anyone takes this as a means of intoxication, it is wrong and at the same time it is also dishonoring the *Prasad*.

Can this anti-drinking campaign be equated (to some extent) with the concept of Birsa Munda's campaign of anti drinking? Or can it be linked to the anti-drinking campaign of Tana Bhagat movement in the 20th century in Chotanagpur region? Or are these a part of the process of Sanskritization? In this context, [27] analyzes the giving up of fish, meat, and alcohol under the command of a new goddess in western India in 1920s as an assertion and challenge against the upper castes and the social structure. It argues that such movement should not be reduced to M.N. Srinivas's concept of 'sanskritisation', the process by which lower castes or tribals change their customs, rituals, ideology and way of life to emulate higher and 'twice born castes' in order to claim a higher position in the caste hierarchy [27]. Rather, the campaigns against liquor consumption in these movements and struggles have historically been a part of adivasis' consciousness.

But what is apparent and problematic here in the context of Jharkhand is that the campaign is like a "purifying project" in reaction to the stereotypical "mainstream" notion of adivasi people as drunkards. This anti-drinking campaign is not a campaign against the rural elite as Birsa Munda's campaign was. The women wings destroy the selling of local form of alcohols such as *hadiya* and *mahuwa* in the villages and towns but there is very less news of this kind of agitation against the big, government licensed wine-liquor shops. Though there are strong customary norms on alcohol consumption among adivasi society and as Ravi Tigga also says that the people of village do not include the highly intoxicated (drunk) men in the ritual procession. It can be said in this context that the women are reacting to the marketing of the traditional rice beer; they are also affected by the lifestyle and values of the upper caste people. These issues produce a complex situation where the idea of 'Hinduisation' and the idea of assertion get blurred. It appears to me that the present anti-drinking campaign is not directly a part of the project of 'Hinduisation' but it is providing the space for it.

The above details and descriptions provide an account of how these constructions through the ritual process and symbols play a role on the broad discourse of adivasi society, ritual processes and culture. Ritual as an event, a set of activity that does not simply express cultural values or enacts symbolic script but actually affects people's perspective and interpretation [9]. Behind the political aspects and success of the dominant Hindutva ideology, a long dormant sense of becoming Hindu appears to be a growing factor across Jharkhandi adivasi and non-adivasi people and the

dominant groups are becoming active in invading it through a schism and assimilating the symbols and rituals of adivasi society. For instance, [28] observes how the Hindutva organizations publish magazines and distribute them among the tribals to warn them about other religions and mention the great adivasi leader such as Birsa Munda of Jharkhand alongside the Indian Hindutva leaders such as Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar also observes such considerable presence of Hindu nationalist groups like the Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad (VKP), Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) in Jharkhand. Here in the case of Sarhul festival, the ritual process and symbols appear as the main site through which the concepts such as concept of “purification,” controversy on sacrifice ritual process is occurring. The above examples address how ritual constitutes a form of social control which frequently overlaps with other theories concerning the role of ritual in effecting social change or social conformity. Ritual practices serve both social control and social change in a fitting conundrum [9], as it has been discussed here.

CONCLUSION

The ritual practices have its own kind of contextualization which keeps changing according to time, space and society. The ritual performance has been one of the most basic strategy and survival tactics for the marginalized communities. Cultural performances like Sarhul creates a space for recollecting and reasserting memories and symbols, and the enactment of ritual brings back certain memory, imagination and landscape and transforms it in to a mobilization process for a larger political movement in the present globalized context. In the present circumstances, the ritual of Sarhul is going through some challenging phases. On the one side, a strong cultural process of Hinduisation is taking place. On the other hand, the ritual performances is trying to revive the collective consciousness of the communities, mobilizing the adivasi identity and the sense of loss of culture. Sarhul becomes a site of struggle and appropriation to establish cultural and political claims for both the groups - adivasi people and other dominant Hindutva forces. As the adivasi communities in central India are getting displaced from their land and being denied basic resources, the performance of Sarhul becomes a reminder of their memories of social, political and cultural struggles.

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