



Sulia Yatra

Dr. Chitrasen Pasayat

This is a paper to understand the origin and persistence of Sulia Yatra. This yatra is based on a cruel and inhuman tradition of animal sacrifice. This is prevalent among the tribal people in some tribal dominated villages in Bolangir district of Orissa. It is commonly believed that the ritual and practice of Sulia Yatra is in vogue since time immemorial.

As per the prevailing tradition, Sulia Yatra is observed on first Tuesday of the bright fortnight (Sukla Paksa) in the Hindu month of Pousa (December-January). Sulia Baba (Mahadev with Sula) is worshipped along with the Aradhya (adored) Devi of the Kandha people in this Yatra. It would not be out of context to mention here that, previously the female members of the community were forbidden from going to the place of worship. They were prohibited from entering into the location for fear and apprehension that they would suffer infertility. They were not permitted to take the Prasad as well.

In the district of Bolangir, Sulia Yatra is being celebrated in six villages. Main festival is celebrated at Badkhala and Sankhala (Kumuria) of Khainguda village under Deogaon Panchayat Samiti. Khainguda comes under Tusura Tahasil. In addition, this is celebrated in the nearby villages like Chandrapur, Chantipadar near Tusura, Kharlikani and Mirdhapali near Balangir town.

As it has been mentioned above, Sulia Yatra is observed on the first Tuesday of Pousa Sukla Paksa. The first part of Sulia Yatra begins in the previous evening i.e., on Monday evening. Ritual starts with the worship of Lord Mahadev of the village Khainguda. Hundreds of devotees, both tribal as well as non-tribal people assemble near the temple on this occasion. A procession is organized to mark the occasion.

In the morning of Tuesday, the chief tribal priest known as Deheri or Dehuri brings the Shakti to the field (Badkhala) meant for animal sacrifice. The bhog or Prasad is cooked and kept in three bamboo poles. At first, the vegetarian bhog is offered to the Sulia Baba. The bhog is presented in the name of thirty three crore Gods and Goddesses (Tettis Koti Debta) by the Baruas, when they come under the spells of the Devatas.

There is a legend that in order to pacify these thirty crore deities (devatas), Bhog is being offered to them. In addition to the vegetarian items like milk and coconuts, the blood of the sacrificial animals is also offered to the Sulia Baba and the deity. In the past, only the Mahadev was worshipped in the nearby hill. Afterward, the people started the tradition of sacrificing the animals to satiate and quench the blood thirst of the Chandi and Chamunda living near Mahadev

Baba. Moreover, the celebration site was shifted to the foot of the hill.

As per the prevailing practice, generally the family members of the Deheris and Kuanrs act as the sacrificial killers. In other words, they are the "ritual killers" of innocent animals. The ritual of animal sacrifice continues amidst the high sounding beat of Dhol, Madal, Nisan, Ghant and Gini. These musical instruments are more than enough to suppress the yell and cry of the innocent animals. Beating of Dhol, pounding of Madal and banging of Nisan repress and contain the shriek and scream of innocent animals. Innumerable buffaloes, goats, sheep and chickens, pigeons, ducks and swans lost their heads. The ritual killers do not hesitate to cut off the heads of these animals and offer to the deity.

The axe used to slaughter the animals is understood to be "Devi-Swarupa" which means Goddess incarnate. There is no specialized Priest to chant and recite traditional *mantras* in this event. Significantly, there is no restriction and compulsion if the devotees want to offer their bhogs on their own. This is why, even though there are "Sacrificial Killers" or "Ritual Killers" to assist the devotees in the process of offering animals to the presiding deity of the site, some devotees are found slaughtering the animals themselves and offering the same to the deity on their own. This is also the prevailing tradition of Chhatar Yatra in Bhawanipatna. As a result, it has been difficult on the part of the district administration as well as the social workers to discontinue or bring to an end this practice.

Every year, the number of animals and birds facing cruel and unkind death in the name of religious ritual usually go up to thousands. Generally one ritual or sacrificial killer is involved

in slaughtering the birds like chicken. Besides, three to four persons are found occupied in slaughtering of big animals like buffaloes and he-goats. One to two persons are engaged in keeping the animal in a fix. One pierce a bamboo stick inside the tether, circled round the neck of the animal, while the ritual or sacrificial killer strikes with the axe and devours the sacrificial animal.

This appears to be an unending process, which continues till the late evening. Significantly, thousands of people assemble in the ritual site from the nearby districts like Sonapur, Boudh and Kalahandi and even from the neighbouring State of Chhattisgarh. Thanks to Pradhan Mantri Gramin Sadak Yojan (PMGSY) and other schemes to improve rural roads which have facilitated the people of all sections and all areas to have access to this sacred spot on the occasion of Sulia Yatra.

Sulia Yatra continues for a week more. Six other traditional deities of the Kandhas like Khaksa, Pahaduren, Tendudunguri, Telpalien, Pudhapat and Sikerpat are worshipped on next Tuesday. It would not be out of place to mention here that, in the Chhatar Yatra (Maa Manikeswari) of Bhawanipatna and Bael Yatra (Maa Sureswari) of Sonapur a large number of animals are being sacrificed amidst public gatherings and in public gaze. The tradition of animal sacrifice particularly in the month of Aswina and Chaitra is in vogue in almost all the Sakti Pithas like Samalei of Sambalpur, Pataneswari of Patnagarh, Cuttack Chandi of Cuttack, Bhagabati of Banpur, Charchika of Banki etc. of Orissa and in different parts of India as well.

Dr. Chitrasen Pasayat lives at 152-Vijay Vihar, Sishupalgarh Post Office, Bhubaneswar.