Reading Bruhat Tapoyi (Khudurukuni Osa)

A Representation of the Socio-cultural Ethos of the Odia Community

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Abstract

Among the several components that support towards enriching the cultural heritage of a place, folklore is one such important parameter. It communicates the moral codes and ethics of a bygone society, and provides the present social order a window into the past that is no longer in existence. It is like an important web link, for succeeding generations, which opens the site of wisdom of our ancestors; our traditions, and culture. Through folklore we can learn much about our culture, tradition, and our values and beliefs. The present paper aims at analysing a widely known folk story that has formed a base for one of the popular religious festivals of the Odia community practiced by unmarried women since a long time. The paper also seeks to highlight how with modernisation and urbanisation, the changing societal mores is no longer encouraging the Odia women to engage in such festivities. These practices are being perceived as frivolous and a waste of time. This particular folk story is accepted and respected in every Odia family as a religious book, especially in the coastal part of Odisha. The text targets unmarried women who keep a brata (fasting) on specific Sundays, for the well-being of their brothers. The story talks about the socio-cultural and socio-religious ethos of the Odia people which includes the joint family system, the maritime activities that formed a crucial part of their livelihood, the sacred relationship between brothers and sisters, the sacrifice of a sister for her brother and vice versa, the love and affection to the younger ones in the family, sibling love, triumph of good over evil, the concept of fasting, religious beliefs
of women etc. Originally the story existed only in the oral form but subsequently has been
written down anonymously into book form in the Odia language.

Keywords: Folklore, Socio-cultural ethos, Odia community, fasting, religious beliefs

Introduction

Folklore constitutes one of the important parameters towards enriching the cultural heritage
of a place. Through folklore we can learn much about our culture, tradition, and our values
and beliefs. The term folklore was coined in 1846 by an Englishman William John Thomas.
When he first coined the word, he defined Folklore as the lore (or learning) of the folk.
(Misro 35). The definition given by Mac Edward Leach in funk and Wagnall’s Standard
Definition of Folklore (1949-50) “Folklore is the generic term to designate the customs
beliefs, traditions, tales, magical practices, proverbs songs etc., in short the accumulated
knowledge of a homogeneous unsophisticated people.(5) Trilochan Pande in his article
“Folklore as Mass Media: an Introduction, says “folklore in India today is regarded as one of
the most important and effective instruments of social engineering. For developing societies
like ours, with extremely low levels of literacy, the significance and relevance of folklore can
hardly be overemphasized. It provides aid in educating the young, promotes group solidarity,
serves as an outlet to suppressed emotions and provides a means of escape from
disappointment and frustration”.(15)

Understanding Folklore: the Odisha Context

The traditional folk forms of Orissa, have always provided popular entertainment and
education for the common folk. The cultural heritage of Orissa beautifully comes out in the
form of wonderful folk performances. The people of Odisha have a rich and varied tradition
or art, folk dances and oral literature, and they celebrate throughout the year many fairs and
festivals. Folklore in Odisha brings a great deal of cultural uniformity among the people.
People gather together on several occasions in order to celebrate festivals. And more over these people have a strong belief on folklore.

**A brief Summary of the Tapoi Lore**

This particular folklore *BruhatTapoi* is one of the most popular folklores of eastern Odisha which gives a broader picture of the maritime activities and the cultural-religious practices in Odisha. It talks about a *Sadhava* (merchant) family. The merchant of Kalinga or Odisha were known as *Sadhavas*. The story goes like this. A wealthy trading merchant who owned seven ships had seven sons and a daughter. The sons were all married and helped their father in his trade. The trader, his wife, their sons and daughters-in-law, and their little daughter, all lived happily together in a large house. Tapoi, being the youngest among them, was always the centre of attraction and received affection from everybody. Everyone, her father, in particular, took care to fulfil all of her desires.

One day, *Tapoi* was playing with her friend with a bamboo made utensil. An old woman came and asked her why she is playing with a bamboo utensil when her father has enough to get for her even a golden moon. Then *Tapoi* asked her father to get her a golden moon. Listening to her demand everybody became happy and her father promised her to give her the same within fifteen days. Then both the merchant parents started making the golden moon. Sadly, before it was ready, the merchant passed away due to sudden illness, and by the time it was handed over, *Tapoi*’s mother too died. She did not have any more interest in playing with the golden moon when the whole family was plunged in grief. She was herself left with nagging fear whether her desire to won a golden moon had taken away her parents from her.

Once the funeral rites were over, the seven brothers began loading their father’s ship with merchandise. A day before they were to set sail, they called their wives together and told them:
The gist is that all the sisters-in-law should be more affectionate to their little sister in law since she is an orphan and now her brothers were away. Then all their wives asked their husbands not to have any apprehension about their sister, they assured and promised their husbands to take care of her properly. They did take care of Tapoyi for a month or two like the way their husbands have told them to. One day, that old woman comes again and asks for alms in front of their house and nobody paid attention to her as everybody was busy with Tapoyi’s treatment. All the women folk asked her to wait since they are busy. Seeing Tapoyi on the swing the old woman became jealous and asked them why they all are toiling to keep the little girl happy. She badmouthed against Tapoyi in front of her sisters-in-law and persuaded them to put her to work because Tapoyi will be dangerous for them in future. Somehow it appealed the mind of all the sisters-in-law except the youngest one. The old woman asked them to send Tapoyi to graze the goats in the forest. So that in course of time she might be eaten by tigers or lions in the forest before her brothers are back at home. From that day, Tapoyi’s fate took a U-turn. She was given all sorts of chores; she could not satisfy her sisters-in-law who only found fault in whatever she did. They denied her jewellery good clothes even proper food. She often went to sleep on a half-empty stomach and a prayer on her lips, ‘O Mangaladevi! Please bring my brothers back soon!’
One day, her eldest sister-in-law called her and asked her to take the goats to the forest for grazing. She gave her a lunch packet. After letting the goats free, when Tapoi opened the packet she found a handful of rice and some Musamati (soil balls from the rat hole) and some ash in the place of salt. She threw the packet away. In the evening she returned home hungry.

It was a similar case for the next six days when the lunch was packed by the sisters-in-law in turn. All the six days, Tapoi came home hungry. However, on the seventh day, it was Neelendri, who prepares the packet and Tapoi had enough to eat. Days passed by. Except on days when Neelendri, prepared the lunch pack, all the other days Tapoi had to starve. Thus, years after years passed by. One evening, she found one lamb missing from the herd. She looked for the little one everywhere. Since it was raining Tapoi abandoned her search and came home with the rest of the herd. Her eldest sister-in-law was very angry with her and threatened her to beat with a tamarind stick. Tapoi got scared and ran out of the house and headed for the forest. It was pitch dark. On her way she found some unmarried girls worshipping Mangaladevi. She went there and asked them the significance of that Puja (worship) and they told her that if somebody worships this goddess with pure heart and keeps a Manasika (vows for the fulfilment of the desire) then Devi Mangala fulfils that. This Osafalls on every year in the month of Bhadrav (English month August) and is observed all the five Sundays in that month. They told her the osabidhi (procedure). After listening to this Tapoi followed the procedure of the Osa and kept a Manasika. After the Osa, on her way home she found that goat. Then in the next turn Tapoi did that Osa with the Manasika for her brother’s home coming. Tapoi’s suffering increased day by day. One day she decides to die in the forest. Sitting under a tree in the midnight she started crying loudly. Fortunately for her, the ship which was bringing back the seven brothers was passing by the forest. Her brothers heard the cries of a girl. Who could it be crying at this hour and in the dark forest, they wondered. The youngest of the brothers left the ship and went into the forest from where
he has heard the cries. He saw the girl but took some time to recognize her as their dear sister. He was shocked to know that it’s their little sister Tapoyi. She then narrated her plight. He consoled her and took her to their ship, where the other six brothers were there. They too, received her with great affection. They realized how their wives, except Neelendri, had been unkind to their sister. They decided to punish their wives.

The news of the arrival of the ship the next morning was greeted with excitement. All the seven women gathered at the seashore to welcome their husbands. The eldest had already directed the others what to say if the brothers were to enquire about Tapoyi. The womenfolk were greeted by their husbands with an angry countenance. They were, however, surprised to see the girl inside the Ship when they went to worship the ship deity. The brothers had already told their loving sister to cut the nose of those sisters in law who have tortured her and to leave the one who loves her. Tapoyi did the same with all her sisters-in-law except the youngest one. The brothers punished their wives severely for torturing their one and only loving sister. After some years everybody got united after Tapoyi’s marriage.

**Joint Family System**

This present folklore talks about the culture of strong joint family system that was prevalent in the ancient Odisha. In the rural areas, joint family system is still prevalent. However, in urban areas, there is a shift in the trend and joint families are being replaced by nuclear families. Orissa is predominantly a rural society where traditional values are still intact. In the race of modern times Odias have still been able to keep their relationship alive with humanity and nature. People from Orissa firmly believe in the family life and joint family system is still there in rural as well as to some extent in urban areas. But with the change of time and also with the arrival of westernization and modernization things have started to change. People prefer to live with their wives and children abandoning their old
parents, brothers and sisters. This folklore reminds us of the past glory we had regarding the form of family system.

**Strong Familial Bond**

The story emphasises on the strong familial bond between the siblings specially the love and sacrifice between brothers and sister. It shows how all the six brothers deserted their wives as a punishment since they had tortured their little sister. At the same time the sister was also ready to sacrifice her life praying for them in the forest. Every now and then she was praying desperately for their brothers to come back because for a sister her brothers are her *Rakshyakarta* (saviour). Therefore, to celebrate this sacred relationship there is a special occasion called *Rakshya Bandhan* which is celebrated in many parts of India and especially in a very grand manner in Odisha. It also shows how the youngest one in a family is given utmost care. It is evident in this story when Tapoyi asks for a Golden Moon to her father and without a sign of hesitation her parents agree to give that to her.

**Maritime activities**

The lore not only talks about the family and relationship but also gives a clear picture regarding medium of trade and commerce in the Ancient Odisha. Nature has endowed Odisha with many rivers. The entire coastal region of Odisha is enriched by her river’s annual deposition of fresh soil. As a result, not only agriculture prospered in the past but also trade. Almost all the river at their mouth afforded enough and safe navigational passage to boats and small vessels. The ports of Odisha attracted many Europeans and the Asian merchant for trade and commerce. Now no such trade and commerce is in practice except a few. This particular folklore reminds us of the bygone days when the merchants of Odisha and their merchandise was famous worldwide. They were exporting different types of spices to other countries and importing several types of costly metals and jewelleries. It is marked in the
story when the womenfolk ask their respective husbands to get them different types of costly jewellery when they come back from the trade and Tapoyi asks her brothers to get a doll made up of Diamond.

“Jaucha jebe banijyare anithibati alankare
Ke bole mora suna chudi anithibati ratna jhadi
Ke bole hirara basani mohara pain thiba ani
Ke bole subarna kankana aniba moha nimantena
Ke bole asthara tara ke bole khanja moti hira
Ke bole hira malli kadhi uttama rupe thiba ghadi
Bhainki bole Tapoyi Mo pain hirara kandhai”

Religious Beliefs and Fasting

Religion has been the basis of Odisha’s thought and life and the guiding principle of the cultural heritage. In fact the Odishan culture is religious oriented. It has been a veritable home of observing upabasa, osa and brata which basically constitute the word “fasting”. Fasting is to keep oneself hungry for a period of the day or portion thereof to worship and pray for the fulfilment of certain desires. Osa is one of the types of fasting. It is to remain without food till the deity to be worshipped presented with offerings. So many rituals are associated with osa. It is mingled with the vows or manasika for the fulfilment of the desire. Generally Osas are better observed by the women and unmarried girls of Odisha. And this folklore presents a clear picture of the religious rites and rituals practiced by the people here. Odisha is originally a traditional state. In times of crises it has clanged to its traditions. Currently a belief has emerged that the infrastructure of modernisation can only be built on the grave yard of tradition. However, tradition is not an anti-thesis to modernization. It has to
be born in mind that no society can make into the future without some attention to what it inherited in the past.

In contemporary society tradition has become a puppet in the hands of the people. They are no more god-fearing rather have become materialistic. Their life styles have been changed. Their behavioural patterns, attitudes, values and beliefs have been reduced to a great extent. They are observing “fasting” not for the sake of religious practices or for performing religious rites and rituals but for “dieting” purposes. The women and unmarried girls are observing “fasting” not for the observance of Osa and brata but to maintain a slim figure. So “fasting” now-a-days has become a fashion.

**Conclusion:**

The social culture and history of Odisha can be enriched with the utilization of folklore traditions as a source material as it is embedded within the social systems, practices, lifestyles etc. If properly collected and analysed folklore provides unique and effective source of information for the better understanding of the social and cultural history of the non-elite and the unsophisticated section of the society. Thus, this particular folklore represents evidently the socio-cultural ethos of the Odia community.

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