



Festival of Social Inclusion and Ending Taboo: The Raja Festival of Odisha, India

Apurva Das

Student, Department of Sociology, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India

Email - das.apurva1@gmail.com

Abstract: India is a land of festivals. These festivals have much cultural and social significance. Raja Parba or Raja Festival is a unique festival celebrated in the Indian state of Odisha. The term 'Raja' in Odia language translates into 'Menstruation'. Raja Parba is a three-day long festival that celebrates the menstruation cycle of females. This festival becomes more significant because menstruation or periods is believed to be impure. This is seen as a social taboo. There are many myths and social stigmas associated with menstruation not only in India but also in several other countries of the world. This festival breaks all the stigmas and end conservativeness and establishes menstruation as a symbol of fertility, rejuvenation and creativity. This festival is celebrated by all sections of society regardless of caste and social strata. The present article aims to understand the socio-cultural significance of the Raja festival. It also tries to establish the fact that social stigmas and taboos can be eradicated by associating them with culture and celebrating their socio-cultural significance. This paper emphasizes on identifying and celebrating folk, tribal festivals and traditions at a large scale and uses them as a tool for creating awareness about different social issues, taboos and stigmas. This paper follows a descriptive study approach based on available literature and personal observations by the author.

Key Words: Culture, Festival, Folk, Menstruation, Raja, Taboo, Womanhood.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Festivals are an integral part of different cultures. 'Festivals have always been present in people's lives for ages, they are a reflection of broadly understood human culture.' [1] India, being a multicultural country, is very rich in socio-religious festivals. Each religion, tribe, state and region have their own different festivals for different occasions which are celebrated in unique ways. The origin of these festivals find its roots in religions, mythologies and folklores. 'An invariable element of the celebration is the worship of God in one or another aspect.' [2]

The earth is considered as a mother in several cultures. In ancient Greek mythology, 'Gaia/Gaea' is the 'Personification of the Earth' [3] and is considered as the ancestral mother of all life. In Indian tradition also, Earth is considered as a mother and termed as 'Prithvi Devi' or 'Bhu Devi'. The Atharvaveda, one of the ancient Indian texts, has a dedicated hymn to earth called 'Prithvi Sukt' which attributes the earth as a mother by saying, '...I am the son of Earth, Earth is my Mother.' [4] Therefore, India celebrates many festivals related to mother earth and most of them celebrate the agrarian identity of the earth which is the key for sustaining human life.

One of such festivals, which is unique in itself, is 'Raja Parba' or the Raja festival which is celebrated in the Indian state of Odisha. This festival celebrates the womanhood or motherhood of mother earth. The essence of this festival breaks all the taboos and social stigma associated with menstruation in females. This festival is a medium for social change by making people aware of the menstrual cycle, an important trait offeminine identity, which is considered as a sign of impurity in various parts of India and several countries of the world.

2. THE FESTIVAL:

The term 'Raja' originates from the Sanskrit root word 'Rajaswala', which means menstruating. The Raja festival is the celebration of menstruation. The Raja festival is celebrated in the Indian month of Asadha, which falls basically in the second week of June month as per the Gregorian calendar. This is the beginning of the Solar month 'Mithuna' as per Odia Calendar and thus, it is also called 'Mithuna Sankranti'. Raja is also an agrarian festival and marks the beginning of the agriculture season. The eastern part of India, which is predominantly the rice-producing region, starts preparing the fields for rice cultivation. This is also the time when the monsoon hits the eastern part of the nation. The sun-dried soil receives the much-needed water for agro-production. This festival marks the first shower of



the monsoon. This first shower of monsoon rain is metaphorically seen as the menstruation or Raja of mother Earth. This festival is celebrated to show the significance and the symbolic relation of the first rain for crop production. As menstruation is the sign of fertility in women, rainfall is the sign of fertility of the land as it improves the crop production. The mother earth also undergoes menstruation as the women menstruate. This three-day long festival is considered to be the menstruating period of mother earth and is celebrated with zest and zeal. No agriculture-related work is done to give mother earth complete rest. The land is left untouched and given rest during this complete period. According to a belief of Odia tradition, 'Bhudevi' is considered as the wife of Lord Jagannath, who is revered as the 'Lord of the whole Universe'. During this period, Bhudevi, a form of Goddess Lakshmi, undergoes menstruation. Believing that the essence of Goddess is present in all the girls and women, therefore they are worshipped during this period.

The festival begins with the preparatory day known as 'Sajabaja' in the regional language Odia. On this day, houses are cleaned and all the preparatory works are done, which includes arranging food items, grinding spices, etc. The celebration begins with 'Pahili Raja' or the first day of the Raja festival which falls on the last day of 'Jyaistha' month. The next day, that is the first day of 'Asadha' month of Odia calendar, 'Raja Sankranti' or the 'Mithuna Sankranti' is celebrated. The third day of this festival is called 'Basi Raja' or the 'Bhudaaha'. The festival ends on the fourth day with 'Basumata Raja'. On this day, women and girls take bath using turmeric, clay, etc. to denote 'Bhumi' or the earth. This special bath is termed 'Basumata Snana'.

During this festival, women and girls are forbidden to work so that they get complete rest. They go out, play different traditional games and enjoy this festival in whatever way they want. Young girls wear new dresses and apply 'Alata', a red colour dye, on their feet. Married women wear jewellerys and apply 'Sindoor', the red vermilion. The most distinctive and charming part of Raja festival is Rope Swings, which are also called 'Raja Doli', are usually made up of natural things like tree leaves, jute, clothes, etc. and tied on big banyan trees. In this Raja Doli they swing merrily and sing folk songs. The females gather together to celebrate the festival by eating delectable treats such as sweets and 'Pithas'. The 'Pitha', a traditional cake, is prepared on this occasion. The most famous and cherished Pitha of Raja is 'Poda Pitha'. Other Odia Pithas such as Manda Pitha, 'Kakara Pitha', 'Arisha Pitha', 'Chakuli Pitha', 'Chandrakala Pitha', etc. are also served. 'Poda Pitha' is also served to Lord Jagannath everyday as it is believed to be the Lord's favourite food. 'Raja Pana', the sweetened beetle leaf, is inseparable part of the festival. Throughout this festival period, girls are not allowed to do any activity which can cause them pain or harm them and make them tired. Therefore, they are not allowed to do kitchen and household works such as cooking, sweeping floor, combing of hair, etc. Giving equal importance to mother earth, no one is allowed to walk barefoot because that may put a scratch on the earth surface causing pain to mother earth.

3. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RAJA FESTIVAL:

3.1 Ending Taboo: Menstruation is usually considered as impure. During menstruation, women and girls are considered as contaminated and impure. They are forbidden to do many activities. Not only in India, but in many countries across the globe, menstruation is considered as taboo and social stigma is associated with it. But Raja Festival approaches this natural female process in a very different way. This festival celebrates the unique characteristics of women that is fertility and she is regarded as the creator of this world and is given higher status in the society. Menstruation is so much stigmatized in Indian society that there is no discussion about this in open. Even young girls usually get to know about the menstruation from their mothers. Menstruation is kept secret even at the family level. The associated taboos, stigmas, social norms and misconceptions regarding menstruation creates a vicious cycle where females feel discriminated and alienated from the society and males regard females as impure and inferior, which give rise to the social anomaly. This impacts young girls' physical and psychological health and put them in a dominated position. But Raja Festival brings this important aspect of womanhood outside the fences of the houses and provides it a social acceptance. This festival creates awareness and initiates a social discussion about menstruation, which further strengthens the status of women in the society. It shatters the conservativeness of society, where menstruation is socially unacceptable and treated as a taboo. Raja festival gives an opportunity to educate young girls about menstruation. By celebrating this, menstruation gets normalized in the society and menstruation based discrimination ends.

3.2 Celebrating Womanhood: Indian society is a patriarchal society. It is highly male-dominated. There are very less instances where females are allowed to take their own decision and celebrate what they are. Females are deprived of several social, political and economic rights. They are considered at a lower level compared to males in families and societies. The Raja Festival gives females an opportunity to celebrate their womanhood. In this festival, their womanhood is promoted and special emphasis is paid to the fact that females are equal half of the society and



without their participation, no society can grow or prosper. This festival acts as a tool to celebrate the significance of females in all the social and cultural processes. During this festival, women are given their due respect and their superiority is established. This becomes a catalyst of social change. This festival also brings out the fact that how ancient and primitive societies were more women-oriented and women have always been the centre of the society. But with the passage of time, society gradually deviated from its true nature and the condition of women kept deteriorating. Therefore, society has to restore the lost glory of women by giving them equal rights in every aspect. Raja Festival is also a reminder to the mankind about the importance of females in the society and the future of society is uncertain without equal participation of females. Thus, this festival celebrates womanhood by giving them a centre stage in the society.

3.3 Strengthening Human Nature Relationship: There has always been a strong relationship between human and nature. Nature has been an important place in the life of the people. Nature also holds an important place in Indian culture and tradition. The relation between 'Purusha', the man and 'Prakriti', the nature has been discussed in many ancient Indian texts and philosophies. Many mountains, trees, rivers, etc. have been regarded as sacred and worshipped in different forms. They are personified and given the status of Gods and Goddesses. Similarly, the earth has also been personified and given the status of Goddess. The earth has been called 'Bhudevi', the mother earth. Bhudevi has all the characteristics which normal human beings have. As earth is considered as female, it also undergoes the same processes which a woman goes and menstruation is one of them. Therefore, it is believed that the mother earth also menstruates. The human-environment relationship is so embodied in Indian tradition that many natural processes have been directly linked with human activities. On one hand, the earth is personified and linked with human bodily processes and on the other hand, human processes have been linked with various natural phenomena. 'It is believed that the menstrual cycle in the female body, corresponds to, and represents the cyclic change in the season.' [5] The onset of the monsoon season is associated with the beginning of the menstruation. When the monsoon starts, the personified form of earth is believed to be menstruating. As the beginning of menstruation in females denotes the fertility of females, the menstruation of earth or the monsoon rain denotes the fertility of the earth as it improves the fertility for crop production. Therefore, this festival denotes a strong as connection between human and nature and the personification of nature.

3.4 Highlighting the significance of Agriculture: India is primarily an agrarian society. Agriculture has always been given the prime significance in Indian traditions. It is believed to be a divine activity and manifestation of the supreme power for fulfilling the need of food for human beings. Agricultural practices are celebrated in various forms in several parts of India. Baisakhi in Punjab, Pongal in Tamil Nadu, Bihu in Assam, etc. are some of the important agriculture-related festivals of India. Most of these festivals are celebrated to mark the harvest. But the Raja Festival is celebrated before the ploughing of field. The earth is worshipped and prayed for good grain production and surplus amount of food to feed all the children of mother earth.

3.5 Strengthening the Mother-Child relationship: The Raja festival is also a tool for strengthening mother children relationship. This festival gives children an opportunity to admire the efforts and pains that a mother undergoes to bring the child into the world and raise them. Raja festival honours all mothers by giving them a prominent position in the society and equal recognition for their hard work, struggle, and their endless service. They are given complete rest during this period and other members of the family take up all the works that the mothers usually do including cooking, house chores, etc. It develops a sense of gratitude towards mothers, whose daily activities go unnoticed. In this way, it establishes a strong bond between mothers and children.

4. FESTIVALS AS A MEDIUM OF SOCIAL AWARENESS

In ancient India, menstruation has never been associated with any stigma or taboo. We see few other festivals across India which celebrates the menstruation of goddesses, which are most respected and worshipped. The 'Ambubachi Mela' is equated to the Raja Festival of Odisha, which is celebrated in the state of Assam at Kamakhya Devi Temple. The annual menstruation cycle of Goddess Kamakhya is celebrated with great joy. The 'Keddaso/Keddasa' festival is celebrated in the Tulu region of South India to mark the menstruation of the mother earth. The 'Harachandi Festival' of Odisha is again a menstruation based festival, where the menstruation cycle of Goddess Harachandi is celebrated every year. This festival also revolves around the processes of the female body and its cosmic association. The common thing between all these festivals is that they celebrate the divine association of the female body and all the processes associated with it. All the efforts are made to keep goddesses, in the form of females, happy and let them take rest and play and enjoy in the way they want.

Gradually, society deviated from its true nature and it became more male dominant and male-centric. Females lost their importance and they were looked upon as sub-ordinates or inferior. They lost their equal status in the society.



This further gave rise to many social anomalies. These festivals also lost significance and they were started being celebrated as religious practice without understanding the significance and hidden causes behind the celebration. The religion association impacted the festival in two ways. First in the positive way that by associating it with religion, it got preserved. People started celebrating it in a very religious way and it kept on passing from one generation to another. On the other hand, it got impacted negatively also as it lost its real sense and it just became a religious and customary practice. The festival lost its real meaning. Now, when the society is developing, there is a need to bring females into the mainstream for sustainable social development. If these festivals are incorporated in policymaking, they can act as a tool for social awareness by mobilizing the masses.

Menstrual health and sexual well-being are the basic rights of the females, which have been denied across the globe over a long period of time. These festivals can also act as agents for assuring these rights to the females. It is, therefore, need of the hour to bring out these festivals in the mainstream. Government and policymakers should try to identify all these festivals and put efforts to promote them. The social norms can be changed by identifying the real meaning of such festivals and connecting them with their traditions and roots. If the government starts promoting such festivals, they can become an important point of discussion among the masses and social awareness can be created. The crime against women is also prevalent in our society. This issue can also be checked by creating more awareness on social issues. If the females are seen at par and they are given equal rights and equal opportunities, the crime against females can also be reduced. Therefore, it is important to preserve and glorify Raja festivals and other female centric festivals which can act as a medium of social change and social inclusion.

5. CONCLUSION:

In the growing world, the equal participation of females is a must for a prosperous society. Females are half the population of the society and they are an important asset of the society. We exploit the potential of females by stigmatizing their basic female identity. We keep chaining them into old conservative beliefs and mindset which impact their social, physical, moral, psychological and economic well-being and development. Females are shamed for being what they are. They are not allowed to talk about menstruation in open. This shows the conservative mindset of the people. But we see how several cultures celebrate the things which are unacceptable to many sections of society. These festivals are the age-old methods of sex-education in a country like India where there is no formal medium of sex-education. The rural and the older generation people with more conservative mindset can be approached by this means and be made aware. Not just menstruation, but also many other social anomalies and taboos, which are prevalent in the modern society but was normalized in the ancient times, can be ended by bringing them into the public domain and celebrating their importance. Thus, a holistic approach to development must recognize the cultural customs, festivals, traditions, norms and their social significance and include them in policy formation.

REFERENCES:

Journal Papers

1. Cudny, W. (2014). *The Phenomenon of Festivals: Their Origins, Evolution, and Classifications*. *Anthropos*, 109(2), 640–656.
2. Satprakashananda, S. (1956). *Folk Festivals in India*. *Midwest Folklore*, 6(4), 221–227.
3. Smith W. (1873). *A dictionary of greek and roman biography and mythology*
4. Griffith, R.T.H. (1895). *Hymns of the Atharva Veda: Book 12: Hymn 1*
5. Patel, K. C. (1994). *Women, Earth, and the Goddess: A Shākta-Hindu Interpretation of Embodied Religion*. *Hypatia*, 9(4), 69–87.

Web References

- <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/03/1034131>
- <https://www.indiatoday.in/information/story/raja-festival-in-odisha-2021-all-you-need-to-know-1814537-2021-06-14>
- <http://aitiha.com/raja-parba-going-beyond-the-taboo>
- <https://www.ibtimes.co.in/raja-parba-2016-this-4-day-odiya-festival-honours-womanhood-picture-greetings-682628>