

Kherwal Tukou: a Confluence of Indigenous Artistic Traditions in Bankura

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Introduction

In Indian society cultural festivals hold immense importance, they create opportunity for people to exchange their cultural heritage and showcase their talent in front of others. India is a country where multi-ethnic groups are living together possessing diverse cultural traditions for ages. Each state of India in terms of cultural attributes differs greatly from other states. Indian culture is like a mosaic and represents the coexistence of unity in diversity of cultural traditions among the ethnic groups of India. Tribal ethnic groups are the autochthones of this country and have been carrying on their age old cultural legacy even today, in the age of globalization.

The festival of *Kherwal Tukou* at Siulibona

Bankura of West Bengal, one of the districts of *Jangal Mahal*, is a cradle of multi-cultural heritage. Tribal cultural heritage has been wielding at the central part of this district. Tribals of this district have been continuing with plural cultural traditions through their day-to-day ritualistic cultural activities. In the era of globalization this indigenous cultural tradition is no more limited within the ritual performances of the tribals only. Siulibona village of Bankura is one such example of a global village where



Photo 1: Main gate of the *Kherwal Tukou* festival

tribal cultural tradition is thriving under the sponsorship of Geetha Ashram¹, a Hindu religious organization. This organization has been playing a nodal role in terms of organizing a tribal cultural festival at Siulibona village under the name of *Kherwal Tukou*. This uncommon name of the festival was derived from the Santali language,

which means the 'nest of *Kherwal* ethnic group'. For the last twenty years on 1st January this tribal cultural festival has been organizing by the Geetha Ashram authority in this village. Gradually the festival has increased its size and glory. Now the festival has reached the stature of national festival where various traditional folk cultural dances of India are performed including Bankura's own cultural arts. Many spectators and performers have been coming from all over India and even sometimes outside the India. On the occasion of that day many eminent guests like district administrative officers and reputed folk poets are invited to chair the opening ceremony of the festival.



Photo 2: Main stage of the *Kherwal Tukou* festival

Therefore, the Siulibona village gets the prime importance to perform their traditional cultural performances in front of the spectators of diverse origin. Thus, the villagers get enthusiasm for flourishing their cultural beauty. Moreover, they get invitations for performing their cultural dances from many eminent guests at their own place. Thus a process of cultural exchange has been spontaneously exercising at the Siulibona village through the festival of *Kherwal Tukou*.

The village Siulibona

The geographical location of the Siulibona village is 23°24'224" North in latitudes and 86°59'826" East in longitudes. The Siulibona village is inhabited by Santals (a Scheduled Tribe of India) comprising 374 individuals living in 67 households. It comes under the Susunia Gram Panchayat and Block Chhatna of the Bankura district of West Bengal. The Siulibona village is very close to Susunia hill, a well known tourist spot in Bankura district for rock climbers in winter season. The Siulibona village is



Photo 3: Sacred hut of the Prabhuji in the festival

accessible from the district town Bankura (the administrative Headquarters of the district) through two different routes. The most hectic but economic route is to board on

a Bankura-Durgapur bus from Gobindanagar bus stand and getting down at Hapania bus stop and then walking down to about one and half kilometer of rural, non-metal, serpentine, dusty road across the undulating agricultural land. It took us about one and half hours of journey. The other less hectic and expensive route is to make a train journey from Bankura railway station on the Howrah-Adra South Eastern Railway track to Chhatna railway station and then one has to hire a private car from Masjidgarha bus stop to reach Siulibona village by covering about fourteen kilometers which takes only forty-five minutes.

The making of *Kherwal Tukou*: a brief history

If we look back at the history of this village, it will be convenient to understand the background story behind the initiation of the *Kherwal Tukou* festival. The Siulibona village is located almost on the bank of Gandheswari river. According to the local villagers, the village was established by felling the forest on the slope of Susunia hill. The villagers narrated that about hundred years ago, two Santal brothers Ram and Raghu came to this place as land grantees of the Raja of Kashipur of the adjoining Purulia district. The descendants of Ram and Raghu are regarded as the founder of the village. The founders of the village are called 'Ram Haram' and 'Raghu Haram'. In Santali language, the word 'Haram' is used as a suffix to show reverence to a particular person. Subsequently, the heirs of Ram Haram and Raghu Haram have been using their surname as 'Hembram'. During the time of one Kamal Kanta Hembram, a direct descendant of Ram Haram at Siulibona, the community had come in touch with a Hindu religious organization, named Geetha Ashram about 20 years ago. The founder of the aforesaid religious organization named Prabhuji (a devotee of Lord *Shiva*) was a resident of Bankura district who established a charitable homeopathy clinic in a village named Rajamela about five kilometers from Siulibona. The villagers of Siulibona used to visit the free clinic for the treatment of their ailments. Gradually, a cordial and friendly relation developed between the voluntary workers and the villagers and the former used to visit Siulibona to render medical services to the villagers. At a later stage, the health workers of Geetha Ashram built up a health and social service centre at Siulibona village and a free health clinic began to function in the village primary school. A few years after this event, Prabhuji came to Siulibona on 1st January, 1995 and organized a communal feast with the villagers. Though he has been coming in this festival for six consecutive times since 1995, thereafter the festival has been organizing in absence of the Prabhuji by the Geetha Ashram activists and the Siulibona youth association named Atwadeep Foundation. A day-long programme took place in which the villagers performed tribal dances and songs. Since then the feast and the tribal cultural performance are being observed every year on the same day and the participation of the villagers of the region as well as the variety of cultural performances have been expanding every year.

The festival has now become a great cultural event for the villagers, particularly, the Santals, and they call it *Kherwal Tukou*. More interestingly, Prabhuji, the spiritual guru of Geetha Ashram is being called by the Santals of Siulibona as *Dharti Baba* (Father of earth) and the name has become very popular among the inhabitants of the region. About ten years ago, Kamal Kanta Hembram donated about 1.5 acres of agricultural land for holding the aforesaid communal feast and festival organized by Geetha Ashram. The organization has built up a permanent building on 0.5 acres and the rest area is being used for holding the communal feast and festival in January. The Geetha Ashram has developed its own infrastructure on this land, which is named as Milan Mela. In a more recent period, the Geetha Ashram expanded its activities in various developmental works of the village in collaboration with the governmental bodies, like statutory panchayat. Geetha Ashram has been providing various other developmental inputs for the Siulibona villagers in different sectors like development of infrastructure, agriculture, human resource, income generation, women empowerment, entrepreneurship and so on. At present, the opening ceremony of this festival is inaugurated by Rshiriddha Anahata Maa, the spiritual mother of Shamayita Math, on behalf of Prabhuji. Shamayita Math is a women's spiritual and religious centre of Geetha Ashram.

A brief description of the Festival

Every year on 1st January this festival has been taking place at Siulibona village although; the preparation for the festival starts prior to 1st January. Because events like tribal sports, for example tribal indigenous archery competition, shot put, sprinter, stick fighting is held earlier. On the eve of 1st January all the tribal dancing competitions are completed. On the festive day, name of the winners of different competitions are announced and rewarded with trophy. The following description is based on my personal observation made on 1st January, 2009 and interviews of the organizers and the performers of the festival.

For the purpose of this festival a welcome gate was prepared on the village entry road with the material of bamboo slice and paddy straw like a Hindu temple gate. The gate was decorated with thermocol inscribed with the



Photo 4: Village procession organized during the festival

Santali words *Jahar Dharti Baba* (meaning in Santali 'respect to *Dharti Baba*') in Bengali script and the gate is festooned with the welcome address in Bengali, i.e. *Swagatam*. The main stage of the festival was structured on an arable land given by Kamal Kanta Hembram. The main stage was also prepared with bamboo slices and paddy straws making a marvelous structure of Hindu temple with *Shikhara* (the rising crown roof) and both sides of the main stage were prepared for the spectators. Another temporary shrine structure in the boundary of the Milan Mela was made just like a rural hut with the same materials used for making the temple structure and a *Trishul* (a traditional trident weapon used by the Hindu Lord Shiva) shape, made up of the same raw material, embedded on the roof of the hut. This hut structure is exclusively kept for the spiritual guru Prabhuji.

Village procession

The festival started with the village procession which is known as *Gram Pradhakhin* by the villagers and the Geetha ashram activists. In the procession they carried a garlanded standing portrait of the Prabhuji on their shoulders, which symbolizes the presence of the Prabhuji. The procession was guarded by the village youths wearing their traditional attire and holding ancestral swords, spears and fire torch. They were followed by the village girls and women wearing red bordered white *Sharee*. After them rest of the other devotees of neighbouring villages joined them. At the time of procession women chanted a devotional song in the name of the Prabhuji which is generally chanted at the time of morning and evening worship of the Prabhuji at the Geetha ashram. The entire event was quite symbolic in nature which repeatedly tries to establish the fact that in spite the absence of the Prabhuji, he was all the time from beginning to the end of the festival present there with them. After the completion of the village procession the portrait of the Prabhuji was taken to shrine hut and enshrined on an altar. Then everybody who present there bowed one by one in front of the hurt by bending their head, some of them lay with the face and body downwards. This gesture is known in Bengali *Astanga Pranam*. Then a big cake was cut



Photo 5: Opening ceremony of the festival

by Rshiriddha Anahata Maa on behalf of the Prabhuji at the central part of the Milan Mela by surrounding all the devotees. During then exultation was expressed by the participants chanting the name of the Prabhuji. Then the cake was distributed among all

as a grace of the Prabhuji. The whole event was depicted in such a way that an impression is created among the villagers about the Prabhuji as incarnated living God.

Opening ceremony

Thereafter the auspicious festival was inaugurated by Rshiriddha Anahata Maa igniting a lamp surrounded by tribal girls in front of the main stage. The inaugural song was sung by Amarnath Murmu, a Santal resident of the Siulibona village. After that the inaugural speech was presented by Rshiriddha Anahata Maa appealing in front of the epicurean sensual society to stand beside the tribal community to restore and preserve the tribal cultural heritage.

The inaugural song was followed by the performance of the Siulibona dancers. They performed a traditional Santali dance known as *Dansai*². When performers performed their performances one by one a section of festival volunteers, mainly the Siulibona villagers, headed by the Geetha Ashram activists were engaged in reception of the guest like administrative officers and spectators who came from others part of Bankura and Kolkata.



Photo 7: *Baha* dance performed during the festival



Photo 6: *Dang* dance performed during the festival

Among the distinct eminent guests like the Zilla Parishad Sabhadhipati, the Additional District Magistrate and the Sub-division Officer of Bankura are presented their speeches on the rich traditional tribal cultural heritages and they emphasized upon the necessity of festivals like the *Kherwal Tukou* so that these ancient Indian cultural heritages can be preserved.

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Tribal performances

The Santal traditional dance like *Dansai* was not only performed by the local Santal communities but also by the Santal performers who had come from distant places like Dumka of Jharkhand district. A clear difference in the way of presentation of *Dansai* was seen between two groups of Santal dancers mainly because of their discrete geographical differences. This highly rich variety of dance performances increased the opportunity to the interior villagers like Siulibona villagers to share their own cultural nuances through their first hand contact. Apart from Santal traditional dance like *Dansai*



Photo 8: Performance by the school children in the festival

many other Santal traditional dances (which are generally performed in diverse occasions of the Santal cultural rituals) were performed one by one. Santal dances like *Baha*³, *Saharai*⁴, *Langre*⁵, *Natua*⁶, *Karam*⁷, *Dang*⁸, *Rinza*⁹ etc were presented by the Bankura and Dumaka performers in the festival. The presentation of these different Santal dance



Photo 9: Ranpa dance performed in the festival

forms on a single platform not only makes the spectators from non-tribal community to get the idea about tribal culture but also makes the opportunity to extract the charms of the highly energetic group dances. The performances were not only limited to the experienced mature performers, a group of Santal school children aged within ten years from Marang Buru Chanch Marshal Ashram performed traditional Santal dances with Santali songs. This kind of traditional performances from the younger performers encourages the younger generation of their own community to carry out their cultural bequest.

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Non-tribal performances

Apart from traditional Santal dances some local traditional indigenous dance forms and songs were presented by a group of artists. They came from Purulia district and performed *Ranpa*¹⁰ dance, *Chhou*¹¹ dance and *Jumur*¹² songs. All these dances and songs are the identity of Purulia district for their unique art forms and styles.

Folk performances from out-side West Bengal

The festival not only creates chances to the spectators of Bankura to be familiar with their own indigenous cultural heritage but also creates opportunity to be acquainted with classical and traditional dance forms of others states of India. Performers from Assam and Orissa performed *Bihu*¹³ and *Gutipoa*¹⁴ dances respectively. These two dance forms are quite popular art forms of both the states of India. The Bihu dancers of Assam performed in a group in which girls were dressed with their traditional red *Sharee* and propped with caps and bronze plates. They were accompanied by the boys dressed with *Dhoti*, *Kurta* and scurf and equipped with drum, flute and cymbals. On the other hand girl dancers from Orissa performed the act



Photo 10: *Bihu* dance performed in the festival

Dasavatar. The girls were dressed with yellow *Sharee* in a unique way and hair-plaited with white flowers. They were accompanied by a group of male singers and musicians, who explained the act of *Dasavatar* through singing in Oriya and playing percussion instruments.



Photo 11: *Gutipoa* dance performed in the festival

The festival organizers made an arrangement of providing a lunch meal for all the devotee-cum-spectators as a grace of Prabhuji. In that meal they provided *Khichuri* (a popular Indian vegetarian cuisine prepared with rice and cereal) and a mixed curry. Peoples sat on the

Blessed meal

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post-harvested agricultural land and they were served *Khichuri* by the festival volunteers on leaf plates. While taking their meals with cheer the devotees chanted the name of Prabhuji with respect as '*Dharti Baba ki, jai*'.



Photo 12: Devotees taken blessed meal during the festival

Stalls at the festive ground

On the occasion of the festival many local artisans set up stalls for exhibition and sale. These artisans brought different interior decorative items like flowers, basket, mat prepared from natural ingredients like palm leaves, and also statues prepared with baked pottery. Many itinerant traders came to sell their items. Apart from these, many food stalls were also there. Therefore, the festival not only had the cultural values but economic values as well. Peoples purchase their necessary items besides having the entertaining flavour of the festival.



Photo 13: Necessary items prepared with bamboo slice on sale



Photo 14: Decorative items prepared with palm leaves on sale

Stage performances

At the end of the day after sunset two stage performances were organized. The first performance was a social awareness drama in Santali by the Siulibona villagers. The drama was titled *Aven Sankoa* (the literal meaning of the words is 'conches of prosperity'), in which an endeavour was made to revamp the tribal cultural heritage by means of not blindly following the non-tribal cultural traits, which will ultimately supersede the tribal cultural richness and put them into oblivion. The Santali drama

was followed by another stage performance which was a puppetry to spread a message of social harmony. The puppetry was presented by the puppetry artists of Bankura who are internationally famous for their art. They scripted the act where the performance was being acted by the puppetry of wild animals to extend the message that if wild animals can show the way of harmony then why can't the human walk on the way of communal harmony.



Photo 15: Aven Sankoa, the Santal drama performed during the festival

Closing ceremony

The festival ended with the display of fireworks through the hand of local manufacturers and presenters of those fireworks crackers. Different forms of fireworks illuminated the darkness of the night sky. Some of those were sound makers and some of them were light makers. This entire fireworks presentation was transformed into happiness in the mind of the tribal villagers, because few of them probably were watched this kind of fireworks for the first time in their life. At the end of the fireworks the heart of the villagers were brewed up with grief and with the expectation of another *Kherwal Tukou* in the next year.

Conclusion

Depending upon the religious and spiritual consciousness cultural rituals and practices have evolved in our society. Folk dances and arts are the part of such cultural rituals and practices as an expression of ecstasy, melancholy and so on. Cultural festivals have emerged and developed as a platform of cultural milieu of various cultural practices. Here is the necessity of folk festivals in the rural villages of India as a platform of folk arts to thrive in the era of globalization. This is a single shed under which vibrant pluralistic indigenous cultural talents can be demonstrated and shared with rest of the outer world. The indigenous culture of Bankura is the amalgamation of folk art since the period of ancient India. In Bankura the heritages of such indigenous folk culture are being cultured during diverse occasion. The *Kherwal Tukou* is one such occasion when the effervescent indigenous culture is exhibited. The *Kherwal Tukou* has been advancing with the endeavour of preservation and prosperity of indigenous culture of India. Though, this endeavour may have religious flavour which in turn has been influencing material and religious life of indigenous tribal culture. However, in

spite of that the importance of indigenous festivals like *Kherwal Tukou* is inevitable. Therefore, more and more initiatives should be taken from either side of state and civil society to encourage those folk people to engage themselves actively in the preservation and perpetuation of the heritage of folk culture with urban way of behaviour simultaneously.

Notes

¹ Geetha Ashram is being operated from Ranbahal of Bankura District, headed and founded by Prabhuji for the downtrodden poor people, for more than 20 years in Bankura and many other districts of West Bengal. This non-governmental organization is especially working among the tribals for the betterment of their society, economic empowerment, educational and infrastructural development. The Geetha ashram has its other sub-branches in the form of devoted temples at Howrah and Burdwan districts. In Jhargram, Paschim Medinipur, the organization has a publication centre which distributes mainly the devotional books. Geetha Ashram has one branch, in the name of the Shamayita Math for women only. The Geetha Ashram provides vocational training for agriculture and helps the farmers by providing the service of soil test, good high yielding seeds and sapling of different fruit trees. It has its own infrastructure for the accommodation and canteen for the daily visitors and devotees of Prabhuji in lieu of a nominal charge. Geetha Ashram has also established a convent school for girl children from nursery to higher secondary standards by keeping them in a hostel at Ranbahal, the Headquarter of the organization. Recently, it has taken an upcoming project for the schooling of physically challenged children.

² *Dansai* is a kind of Santal dance form in which only male dancers perform in the disguise of women during the month of *Aswin* (September-October) in the Bengali calendar. It is known among the Santal society that Santals were the descendants of Rav ana (non-*Ariya* leader), who was attacked by Rama (*Ariya* leader). So, *Dansai* is a symbolic hide and seek dance of the descendants of Ravana to escape from Rama.

³ *Baha* is a traditional religious festival of Santal community. It is held during the month of *Falgun* (February-March) in the Bengali calendar. It is performed both by the male and female dancers. The purpose of this festival is to offer the newly grown flowers, leaves and trees in

front of the God *Marang Buru*. Santals never use any newly grown natural products without offering them to the God *Marang Buru* through *Baha*.

⁴ *Saharai* is a big traditional Santal festival held during the month of *Kartik* (October-November) in the Bengali calendar. In few places it is held during the month of *Poush* (December-January). This festival is celebrated during the post-harvesting period with hope of better agricultural prosperity for the coming season.

⁵ *Langre* is a popular dance form among the Santal community performs any time of a year for the celebration of merrymaking at the *Majhi Than* (a place of Santal traditional village council meeting). Generally women dance in a group forming a row by interlocking their hands and male counterparts accompany them with traditional musical instruments.

⁶ *Natua* is also a popular Santal dance form performed as a symbolic representation of warfare during the period of traditional Santal marriage. It is believed in the Santal society that at the time of Santal marriage when groom's party reaches at the door of the bride's home they confront each other through this dance form to obtain the bride. This dance is performed only by the male dancers with swords and shields.

⁷ *Karam* is a traditional Santal festival celebrated on the eighth day of the month of *Aswin* (September-October) in the Bengali calendar. The purpose of this festival is to pray for ameliorating the future life of the community. During the *Karam* festival *Karam* tree (*Nauclea parvifolia*) is worshiped and the *Karam guru* chants for the whole night about the origin of earth as per the Santal mythology with traditional *Karam* songs. At that time *Karam* dance is also performed

⁸ *Dang* is a kind of Santal dance form which is performs during traditional marriage ceremony both by the men and women.

⁹ *Rinza* is also a kind of Santali dance form performed during the *Karam* festival.

¹⁰ *Ranpa* is a kind of exhaustive dance form performed by the rural people in which performers ride on two bamboo poles and dance with the rhythm of drums, flutes, cymbals. It is known that previously it was an art of dacoits of Bengal to run quickly. Now it has become a folk dance observed in the districts like Purulia of West Bengal.

¹¹ *Chhou* is another dance form popular in Eastern part of India. In this dance form performers take indigenous mask of many Hindu God, Goddesses and animals to act on mythological tales. *Chhou* performers dance with the rhythm of indigenous musical instruments like *dhamasa*, *madal*, *sanai*, *kansi* etc. This dance is performed mainly by the members of Kurmi and Mahato communities. The Purulia district of West Bengal is characterized by the popularity of this dance form.

¹² *Jhumur* is also a dance form of rural folk of eastern India. This dance is performed by young girls and accompanied by their male counterparts. In *Jhumur* dance girls dance in a group by holding their own hands and waist. Whereas male dancers play musical instruments like drum, flute, etc. During this dance performance duet *Jhumur* songs are sung.

¹³ *Bihu* is a grand festival of Assam. The festival is performed to offer their first yielded crops in the name of their God *Brai Shibrail* or Father *Shibrail* for the prosperity and peace. During this festival both young male and female perform *Bihu* dance. This dance is characterized by typical dance movement of waist and hands rapidly.

¹⁴ *Gutipoa* is a traditional dance form of Orissa in which adolescent boy dancers, dressed like girls, perform critical acrobatic steps on Hindu mythological themes. Here in the *Kherwal Tukou* festival this dance was performed by adolescent girls.

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