



## Kandhen Budhi

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Kandhen Budhi Yatra is a popular festival celebrated in Kantamal of Boudh district in the state of Orissa in honour of the deity named Kandhen Budhi. Kandhen Budhi means 'an old woman belonging to Kandha community'. On the official record, Kandha is recognized as a major tribal group in Orissa. Kandhen Budhi is a tribal deity widely worshipped by the Kandha people. She is believed to be the *Ista-Devi* or presiding deity of Kandha people. She is represented in the natural form of stone under the tree or on the side of the serpentine road of the village or on the bank of the river and pond. The main attraction of Kandhen Budhi Yatra in Kantamal is Ghusuri-Puja.

In many parts of this area, Kandha people live in physical and social isolation. The reasons are geographical, historical and cultural. Even today, it is difficult to reach them. Many of them still manage to survive in primitive economy. The ritual performance of

Kandhen Budhi Jatra appears to be a symbolic system that ties the community of Kandhas to each other and with the rest of the village. This Jatra renews social contacts and bonds among Kandha people of this area. To understand this Jatra, it is imperative to know the geographical and cultural milieu of the Kandhas who practice this ritual performance.

Etymologically, *Yatra* refers to travelling. The annual festival of Kandhen Budhi in Kantamal is known as *Yatra* because, Kandhen Budhi travels or moves from door to door of the village, meets her subjects, listens their grievances, opines remedial measures on this occasion. Villagers offer rituals to her. On many occasions, she ascends through human beings known as *Barua*. Though the *Barua* is generally a male being, he is addressed as *Maa*. In fact, the common people address the mother deity as *Maa*, who is in the body of the male *Barua*. The deity speaks to the



*Kandhenbudhi Pitha at Lather village  
(Mohangiri G.P.), Dist. Kalahandi*



people through the *Barua*. Usually, the female members are prohibited from visiting the place of worship of the deity i.e. *Devi Pitha* in the village. So, this yearly *Yatra* provides an opportunity particularly to the female members of the village to worship the village deity.

Kantamal is a big village situated on the bank of the river Tel. Sonepur district is situated on the other side of the river. In other words, Tel is the natural boundary, which divides Boudh and Sonepur districts. Kandhen Budhi is the reigning deity of this village. She is placed under a tree in the form of a stone. The spot is green and well wooded with fine old mango and other trees and forms a pleasing sight. It is, however, always liable to be flooded by the Tel River in the height of the rainy season. She is also established in the courtyard of the *Gauntia* (village head-man) in the name of *Paruan Khunt*. Every year, this *Yatra* is performed on *Pousa Purnima Tithi* i.e. full moon day in the Hindu month of *Pousa* (December-January).

This *Yatra* begins at the residence of *Gauntia*. The deity appears in the human body called *Barua*, who is well decorated with *Sindur* (vermilion), Mandara flowers and Dahana. *Barua* may also be called a non-Brahmin priest, who carries the deity on his body. The role of *Barua* is normally performed by a male member. The deity i.e. the *Barua* starts dancing to the tune of Dhol, Muhuri, Nishan and Changur. The village priest known as *Jhankar* offers puja to the deity with *Sindur*, *Dhupa*, *Nadia* (coconut) and *Arua Chaul* (sun-dried rice). *Jhankar* is the conventional non-Brahmin priest of the village. Previously, he was enjoying rent-free land in the village in order to perform his ritual duties.

After that, the deity travels around the village and proceeds in the evening to her seat (*Pitha*) situated on the river bank as mentioned

earlier. There the deity is placed under a *Buro* tree (*Zizyphus jujube*) in the form of a stone. The deity moves with a captivating procession of dancing and singing. On the river bank, people offer her ritual of animal sacrifice at his *Pitha*. A good number of *Kukuda*, *Bataka*, *Mendha*, *Para*, *Boda* (he-goat), *Anda* (egg) are offered to Kandhen Budhi. *Jhankar* worship the deity with local made liquor. The meat of the animals and birds sacrificed on this occasion is considered as *Prasad*, which is shared by all. The whole night is celebrated. Everyone present and participate in this festival enjoys dancing, singing, drinking and eating.

Kandhen Budhi *Yatra* is an agricultural festival. This is celebrated by the *Gauntia* of the village with a hope of abundance crop and good rain in the year; the *Gauntia* performs this annual *Puja* to keep the village free from diseases, misfortunes and tragedies. This indicates that the festival is observed with social and collective interest. If the village passes through natural calamities frequently then the *Gauntia* makes arrangement for a special *Yatra* of Kandhen Budhi. This special *Yatra* is organized on *Baisakh Purnima* i.e. on the full moon day of *Baisakh* (April-May). This is called *Ghusuri Puja Yatra*. A small child pig (*Ghusuri*) is arranged for sacrifice during this special ritual. Oil and *Haldi* are applied properly on the body of the child pig. Then he is bathed. He is decorated with *Sindur* and *Mandar* flowers. A small piece is cut off from his ears and tail with a sharp knife. But he is not sacrificed that year.

After three years, the pig is ritually offered to the deity. However, on that day he is taken round the village. Villagers perform the ritual of *Bandapana* to the pig with *Haldi* and vermilion. They apply oil and *Sindur* on his body. It means that the pig meant for sacrifice is introduced to



the villagers so that villagers will not harm him. Since then the pig is left scot-free in the village. He is regarded as the *Pratika* (symbol) of Kandhen Budhi. Even people call him Kandhen Budhi. Even if the pig harms anybody, it is not taken seriously rather people ask him what fault they have committed. Villagers feed the pig properly. *Jhankar* takes precautionary measures through *Mantra* for the protection of the pig from evil influences of black magic by others. Thus, the pig is protected from all respects for three years.

After three years, before the special *Puja*, the *Gauntia* of the village invites the villagers. They sit together and discuss how to arrange and celebrate the special *Puja*. Relatives and friends are invited from outside as usual to attend the special *Puja*. In addition, other deities of the village namely Chhidki-Mundi, Mauli, Bauti, Grampati and Panthei are invited on this occasion. These deities are traditionally tribal deities of Kandha people. If the monthly period of *Jhankar's* wife coincides with the special *Puja*, then other *Jhankar* is assigned the ritual duty. Thus, ritual purity is maintained. Everybody sends the ritual items called *Akta-Patri* to the house of the *Gauntia*.

In the morning of Ghusuri Puja, *Jhankar* prepares himself ritually pure, takes bath, wears new clothes, cleanse the place of worship. Various Puja items like *Biri*, *Kandul*, *Mandia*, *Mahu* (honey), *Mada* (liquor), *Mandar* flowers, *Sindur*, *Dahana*, *Dipa* (lamp), *Arua Chaul*, *Haldi* (turmeric powder) etc. are arranged. On the previous day, the invited Kandha, Deheri, *Jhankar* and other guests arrive in the village with their traditional musical instruments and weapons. On the day of *Puja*, the pig is brought, treated with oil and *Haldi* and bathed. Then the pig is decorated with the *Mandara* flowers and *Sindur*.

They the Ghusuri and visit round the village with dancing and singing from door to door. Every household performs the *niti* of *Bandapana* to Ghusuri. The female members of the household also remain in *Kastha* (ritual purity) and perform Puja to Ghusuri with oil, *Haldi*, *Sindur* and *Arua Chaul*. People take liquor, sing traditional songs and dance on the village streets carelessly during procession.

Then the Ghusuri is taken to the place of worship. The final ritual is sacrifice of Ghusuri. Before sacrifice, the Ghusuri is given *Charu-Anna* for eating. If the Ghusuri eats the *Charu-Anna* gladly and with pleasure then it is believed to be a good sign for the village and villagers. The village is believed to be free from natural calamities and other tragedies. But if the Ghusuri does not take *Charu-Anna* willingly, then it is considered that the deity is not eager and keen to accept *Bali* or sacrifice. It indicates that adversities and misfortunes are looming around the village. Obviously, it frightens and upset the villagers.

They call and request the deity to forgive them for their mistakes if any committed unknowingly. Subsequently, the Ghusuri is sacrificed and offered to the deity. Above and beyond, other animals and birds are also sacrificed. Other invited deities on this occasion are also treated appropriately. The meat of *Bali* Ghusuri is regarded as *Prasad* and distributed to one and all. Some celebrate it as feast. Those who do not eat meat, they take it to their house and cover under earth in their courtyards. By doing so, it is believed that no disaster can trouble their households; no calamity can bother them. Thus, the Ghusuri Puja is completed.

Sacrifice is as old as humankind. The essence and real meaning of sacrifice appears from the etymology of the word itself; Latin '*sacer-facere*', meaning 'to make sacred'. Through



sacrifice, the sacrificing community believes that it is made sacred by the purging of sins and renewed relation with the Divine. What is sacrificed loses itself by being poured out, burnt or slain. The loss of the sacrificed victim is somehow seen as bringing gain to the community and sacrificers.

After the Ghusuri Puja, the guests, visitors and relatives return to their respective villages and houses, because, for the following seven days the villagers of Kantamal observe mourning as per the tradition. No pious and religious work is done. No one uses oil and ghee in cooking. The house is not cleansed and washed. Hair cutting is forbidden, nail cutting is not allowed and cloth washing is prohibited. No one goes out of the village during this week-long period of mourning. People from other villages are also not permitted to enter into the village. In other words, people from the village do not go out of their village. In fact, people of Kantamal and its neighbouring villages are well aware of this practice. In case of any violation or deviation, people believe that misfortunes will arrive in the village. Though time has changed and some relaxations are observed still the villagers try to follow this ritual practice strictly.

The faith on the deity is the base of this *Yatra*. Though Ghusuri is worshipped or offered *Puja*, in reality this Ghusuri is sacrificed in honour of the deity. This tradition appears to be the transformed version of *Meriah* sacrifice or human sacrifice prevalent among Kandhas of Boudh-Kondhmal Agency during British period. It may be said that, once upon a time human sacrifice was prevalent during the Special Puja of Kandhen Budhi Yatra in this Kandha dominated Kantamal village.

As per the *Meriah* custom, the Kandhas never sacrificed a Kandha. They used to kidnap

a non-Kandha boy from the plains. The boy lived in the Kandha village as a very respected and honoured guest. He used to get plenty of wine and whatever food he wanted. Moreover, he used to have the company of any Kandha girl he wanted. Obviously, he did not try to run away. On the day of the sacrifice he was completely drunk. He was so intoxicated that he was totally anaesthetized. Portions of his body could be cut away without feeling any pain. Subsequently, instead of the *Meriah*, as the sacrificial boy was called, they started sacrificing a Ghusuri which they purchase from outside. This Ghusuri is treated as *Meriah*.

Thus, time has changed. In due course of time, severe form of blood sacrifice called *Meriah Bali* i.e. human sacrifice has been stopped and Ghusuri sacrifice has been substituted. It may be said that this transformation has come during the British Raj when the practice of *Meriah* sacrifice was ruthlessly suppressed and curbed by John Campbell during December 1837 and January 1842. In order to expedite the suppression of human sacrifice, the Governor General in Council also decided to establish a cohesive agency including all Kandha areas under an agent directly responsible to the Central Government. It was known as Meriah Agency, which was established in July 1845. Captain S. C. Macpherson was the first Agent for the Meriah Agency, who took over the charges in December 1845 (1).

Today, Kantamal is no more a backward village. To some extent, it is transformed into a small town. One finds Block Office, Tahasil Office, Court Building, Sub-Registrar Office, Sub-Treasury Office, Section Offices of R&B, PHD, RD and other Government offices in Kantamal. There are also a number of educational institutions like schools and college. Kantamal is well connected with Boudh and Sonepur towns



by road. The other side of the river Tel is Sargaj, a village and Gram Panchayat under Tarva Block of Sonapur district. Tarva is just 11 kilometers from Kantamal by this road. On the way one has to cross the river Tel by ferry-boat. If a bridge is constructed here then the distance between Kantamal and Bolangir will be reduced to about 60 kilometers. The village *Gauntia* is very much active in politics of the area. Earlier, his father was a Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) of Orissa. In such changed circumstances, people are surprised to see the prevalence of this tradition and superstitions. Many people raise questions as well. It is interesting how the elite of the society ridicule and demonize this tradition and value system, because it falls outside their acceptance parameters.

Though this is mainly a tribal festival of Kandha people, other villagers irrespective of their caste and creed participate in this annual *Yatra* of Kandhen Budhi. So, this is regarded as the Tihar *Yatra* of the village. It is believed that this *Yatra* is to appease Kandhen Budhi, who takes care of the village and think about its inhabitants. All the happenings throughout the year in the village are considered to be her wish and desire. On this occasion, the *Jhankar* performs the ritual of purity strictly. He wears new clothes and offers *Puja* with devotion. If this annual *Yatra* coincides with the monthly or period of menstruation of *Jhankar's* wife, then he is not eligible to perform *Puja* that year. In that case, other *Jhankar* of the village is called to perform the *Puja*.

Taking me on a walk around the Kantamal village during my first visit in 1989, some people of the village wondered why I should know about this *Yatra*. Though forget their names, I am thankful to them for their cooperation in my research work in Kantamal village. Then one old woman told me, "Previously, we lived in

somewhat different conditions. It was a nice place. With the deep jungles around, we never faced the threat of poverty. There were no many health issues either". Certainly, time has changed. She was correct.

#### Note:

1. Superstitious beliefs are still prevalent. One 10-year-old girl was beheaded by her grandfather in the village Adhaphar, about 48 kilometers from Sambalpur. After that, he took a steel pot and collected the blood coming out of the headless torso. Villagers termed this ghastly incident as human sacrifice (*The Times of India*, Bhubaneswar, dated 28-04-2009). It is really a matter of great surprise that, in this age of computers superstition still reigns supreme in some hinterlands of the State. In this shocking incident reminiscent of pre-historic times, a tribal man decapitated his grand daughter to propitiate mother earth for a bumper crop in the village Adhaphar under Kulundi Gram Panchayat in Jamankira Block in Sambalpur district. The incident happened in the afternoon of 26.04.2009, a day before *Akshaya Trutiya* considered as an auspicious day for sowing seeds. It is said that the man committed the act to appease the mother earth hoping for a bumper crop. Reports said that he had planned to mix the blood with seeds so that he can sow them on *Akshaya Trutiya* (*The New Indian Express*, April 28, 2009, P.5). In another incident, over 200 residents, mostly tribal people of Siadimal village under Nilagiri Police Station in Balasore district, have abandoned their village since last couple of days in search of a "tantrik" (*The New Indian Express*, 28-04-2009, p.5).

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