

Myth, Reality and Social Formation

Dr. Chitrasen Pasayat

Gaisama or Gaisima is a Kulta dominated village in Bargarh district, situated on the bank of the river Jira, 13 kms south-east of Bargarh town. Earlier, Bargarh was a part of Sambalpur *rajya* prior to 1849. In the sense of M.N. Srinivas (Srinivas, 1967) Kulta is the dominant caste of this area. Also, the village is famous for the temple of Balunkeswar Siva who is considered to be one of the *Asta-Sambhus* (eight *Sambhus* or *Sivas*) in the Sambalpur *rajya*. After independence as a district thirteen districts of Orissa and reorganisation of districts in the State of Orissa the historical Sambalpur *rajya* has been mainly divided into four districts namely Sambalpur, Bargarh, Jharsuguda and Deogarh. Nonetheless, the temple of Balunkeswar was built by Dakshin Rai, the Dewan of Chauhan Raja Ajit Singh although the tradition assigns it to his son Raja Abhaya Singh. The present paper seeks to understand the available oral literature which developed regarding the arrival of the Kultas, the origin of the village Gaisima, the cultural interaction of the Kultas the dominant caste of this area with the locals, emergence of the Kultas as a dominant caste in the area, the construction of the Siva temple, Sanskritisation of the deity and the role of the Kultas in the process of state formation in Sambalpur during medieval period.

The Kultas say that they migrated from the ex-State of Boudh which they regard as their ancestral home (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971 : 115). But the following story suggests that they migrated to Bargarh area from the ex-State of Balangir Patna. According to the story, there was a Kulta *gauntia* (village headman) in Patnagarh during the reign of Chauhan Raja Rai Singh. The *gauntia* had two sons named Kuvera Sahu and Amar Sahu, and a most beautiful daughter. An influential noble of the royal family of Patnagarh wanted the hands of his enchanted daughter. But the beauty and her family did not accept this proposal. Apprehending trouble, one night the *gauntia* left the territory of Patnagarh with his family and belongings loaded in one hundred carts. About a thousand cows and bullocks came with the party. They marched relentlessly through out the whole night. They crossed the river Ang or Ong early next morning and reached the territory of Sambalpur *rajya*. Standing on the northern bank of the river Ang on the soil of Sambalpur, the *gauntia* heaved a sigh of relief. Pointing his right hand towards the rising sun the *gauntia* took an oath that in future he or his descendants would never cross the river Ang. Thereafter, they proceeded further towards the north. They passed through Barpali and crossed the river Jira on the third day of

their journey. They spent the night on the northern bank of the river.

One night, the *gauntia* had a strange dream. A female deity appeared and told him not to proceed further. She told the *gauntia* to settle there with the lands as far as his cows and bullocks were then taking rest. As a result of that a new human settlement started at that place. Since the limits of this settlement were determined by the presence of the cows it was popularly called Gaisima. *Gai* means cow and *sim*a refers to boundary. Later on, Gaisima came to be known as Gaisama. Thus, Gaisima or Gaisama has been named. A year-long efforts and struggle brought in dramatic changes of that place. It was just a year since they arrived there, they excavated some thirteen tanks around their settlement. They cultivated the fertile land and lived peacefully.

After about a year, the *gauntia* received information from his attendants that a band of armed soldiers were approaching towards Gaisima. He could understand the purpose of the coming of the soldiers to his village. It was the wicked noble of Patnagarh who had sent the soldiers to forcibly take away his pretty daughter. A sudden fear came over him. He could not decide what to do in the midst of that danger. He prayed the village deity to safeguard the honour of the innocent girl and dignity of his family. By the time he lost all hope, an untouchable old woman of the Ganda caste rushed into the house of the *gauntia* through back door. She asked the *gauntia* to send his daughter to her small cottage where she could keep her concealed inside some big earthen pots. The soldiers rushed into the village. They made a thorough search for the young lady. But they did not find her. Finally, they left the village without finding any trace of the pretty

girl. The old Ganda woman had miraculously saved the life, honour and prestige of the *gauntia*. So, he and his family fell at the feet of the untouchable old woman expressing their gratitude. The Ganda old woman was so overwhelmed with joy because of her performance that she fell down dead before all the villagers. The inhabitants of Gaisama cherish till today the memory of the old Ganda woman who has been deified and receives *puja* from them on ceremonial occasions (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971:522-23).

The above story which resulted in deification of an untouchable woman suggests to believe that the mutual interactions of insiders and outsiders like Kultas and their culture have led to the absorption of local deity into the fold of outsiders. This way the culture of outsiders has been indebted to the local culture. Also the outsiders being in minority at that time were being given protection and shelter by the natives of that place. In other words, we can not ignore the fact that outsiders have been indebted to the locals who were most probably leading an isolated and segregated life. Understandably, the outsiders are the cultivating caste with higher agricultural technology and knowledge. In his Settlement Report, Hamid writes that the Kultas remain the most steady and industrious cultivators of this area. They are really the backbone of the cultivating classes. The Kultas strongly appreciate the advantage of irrigation and show considerable public spirit in constructing tanks for the benefit of their lands. Kultas are very hard-working and they are seldom poor. As a class, their most prominent characteristics are frugality, industry, hunger for land, and readiness to resort to fight rather than relinquish a supposed right to it (quoted in Senapati and Mahanti, 1971:115).

Most probably, the immigrants(Kultas) had taken the advantage of vast uncultivated and fertile lands of this area. They brought new knowledge and techniques which improved cultivation. As usual, they have pushed themselves to go on doing hard work and constructed tanks for irrigation and cultivated the lands. They have settled there and prospered. The local inhabitants either being ignorant of settled cultivation or backward in the skill of cultivation have gradually accepted the socio-economic dominance of the outsiders (Kultas) who inculcated in the aborigines or local people a sense of loyalty to the established order upheld by them. Apparently, the Kultas could cultivate their lands with the help of these local people.

In the context, it may be pointed out that Gandas are the untouchable caste in the social hierarchy of this area. They have close affinity with the other untouchable castes namely Pan and Pantantis of this area as well as of the state of Orissa. They weave coarse cloth and generally act as village watchman till very recently. They also work as professional pipers and drummers and are employed as musicians in marriage and other social ceremonies. Economically they are very backward and also lack in the skill of cultivation (Senapati and Mahanati, 1971 : 110). Thus natives of the area have never pushed themselves forward; rather they have to push themselves to go on doing such works which are economically not beneficial to them. They also work as agricultural labourers.

Prior to the arrival of the immigrants (Kultas), Gaisama region was a strong hold of natives who were most probably not an agriculturist class. They were primarily dependent on nature and jungles for their livelihood. Gradually there developed

harmony amongst the Kultas and these forest dwellers which led to the interaction of their respective cultures. The Kultas accepted the faith of the locality although they brought their own faith with them. They did this to please the natives of this area. In other words, the outsiders (Kultas) who settled amidst the local people in course of time adopted and worshipped the local deities in order to enjoy the confidence and seek the co-operation of the latter in their settlements. A myth was manufactured with the help of which they extolled the Ganda old woman as a deity and held her in great esteem. This step was essentially required because this made the Kultas very popular among the natives and aided to a great extent to the success of their socio-economic dominance in the area.

Economically and socially the Kultas became the dominant caste in this part of Sambalpur *rajya*. They became politically more powerful and acted as a strong pressure group in the area. As noted earlier, previously they held many villages as *gauntias*. There is no denying the fact that the *Kultas* are a cultivating class. Most probably, they are an offshoot of the *Chasa* caste, the principal cultivating caste of Orissa for several of their family names are identical with those of the *Chasas*. Notably, they have a sub-caste called *Kulta-chasa*. It has also been considered that the Kultas might have derived their name in Sambalpur area from growing *Kulthi* (Horse Gram), a favourite pulse of Sambalpur (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971 : 115). Thus, the Kultas basically belong to the *Vaisya* category of *Varna* hierarchical system prescribed by the Hindu great tradition.

In order to establish their higher social status Kultas claimed their association with

Ramachandra of Satya Yuga. A myth was also created to justify their stand. According to this story, their ancestors were employed in the royal household of Ramachandra in Ayodhya. The Kultas accompanied Ramachandra, Lakshmana and Sita when they went into exile (*banabasa*) and arrived the Gaisama area. In other words, Gaisama area was one of the places of exile. The local priestly class of this area wanted them as cultivators and Ramachandra allowed the Kultas to settle there (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971:116). The local priestly class having obscure origin became known as Raghunathia brahmins. They also claimed to be originally the brahmins of royal household of Ramachandra in Ayodhya and they had been named after Raghunath ie. Ramachandra.

Nonetheless, in the local caste hierarchy, the Oriya (Utkaliya) brahmins, the migrants from the coastal Orissa and the Jharua (Aranyaka) brahmins, the migrants from the north India are taken as brahmins of high order. The Raghunathias are also known as *Bhimgurias*. A Raghunathia can take cooked food in the houses of both Oriya and Jharua brahmins. In principle, inter-marriage between these three classes of brahmins is forbidden, although several cases of inter-marriage have taken place in recent years (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971:111-12).

The Gaisama area might be said to be much older than the time of Kultas' arrival. Most probably, this area had thick and inaccessible forests and inhabited by aboriginal people. In other words, it was an obscure village when the Kultas arrived here. Subsequently, the earlier name of this human habitation was obscured by the new name of Gaisama. Economically and politically, this area was long under the control of Kultas who

were also numerically dominant and spread to other places. But peaceful co-existence with other communities was essentially required not only to prosper and flourish but also to maintain their dominance. They established good social relationships with other castes and communities of this area. As mentioned earlier, myth involving Ramachandra, Kultas and Raghunathia brahmins was created to maintain their peaceful co-existence in the area.

Myth was also manufactured to establish their close social affinity with some of the other communities of the area which helped them to establish as a dominant caste in the area. This might be attested by the following story. According to this story, while wandering in the forest of this area, Rama, Lakshmana and Sita came across three brothers and asked them to draw water for them. The first brought water in a clean brass pot and was called *sudh* (well mannered). The second made a *danaa* (cup of leaves) and draw water from a well with a rope, he was called *Dumal* (from dori-mal, a coil of rope). The third brought water only in a hollow ground and was named *Kulta*. This story serves to show that the Kultas, the Sudhs and the Dumals acknowledge some social connections. In this area they take and share food together at festivals (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971:115).

In view of the above analysis, it may be said that myth serves certain social functions. It establishes social relationships between different social groups and communities, and accommodates them in the larger society. It provides a platform for peaceful co-existence and thus social formations. In the subsequent period, myth has also played significant role in the process of state formation in Sambalpur during medieval period. The following myth attests this fact.

One day Raja Abhaya Singh of Sambalpur had his camp near the village Gaisama on his way to Patnagarh. After his bath he visited the shrine of Siva which was close to his camp. The non-brahmin *thanapati* priest became nervous. Because he did not expect the Raja at that hour in the shrine. Then there was no flowers near at hand. He took the flower which he had on his ear and presented it to the Raja. The Raja noticed a hair in the flower. He asked the priest what it meant. Out of fear the priest told him that it was the hair of Lord Siva. Raja Abhaya Singh became furious at the explanation of the priest. He told the priest that he would see the image of the deity early next morning before leaving the village. Further, he warned him that if no hair would be found, the priest would be severely punished. The poor priest was angry with himself for having made such a foolish mistake. He prayed to Lord Siva the whole night to save him from the wrath of the Raja. Next morning when the Raja came to the shrine he actually found hair growing on the *Linga*. Suspecting it to be false hair kept by the shrewd priest he pulled one with *Linga*. Suddenly there came out a stream of milk from the root of the *bala*. The Raja was astonished at the miraculous power of the deity. Immediately he ordered to build a temple in honour of the deity who was named as *Balunkeswar* from that day. It would not be out of place to mention here that identical story is associated with the *Baladhupa* ritual of Lord Jagannath at Puri.

The Chauhan rulers settled amidst the local people who were most probably worshipping in deity originally. The deity has undergone the process of Hinduisation consequent upon the interaction between the brahminical (Great Tradition) and local culture (Little Tradition). The deity was given royal

patronage. A temple was built by the king and lands were granted for the regular performance of rituals inside the temple. The diety was named as *Balunkeswar Siva*. The deity has played an important role in the folk religion and the regional cultural tradition of Bargarh, nay of the Sambalpur *rajya* in the medieval period. But, the traditional non-brahmin priests of this religious shrine known as *thanapatris* were not replaced by the brahmin priests. Thus, the Chauhan rulers adopted and worshipped the deity in order to enjoy the confidence and to seek the co-operation of the local people in their settlements. In other words, the deity was Hinduised or Aryanised. The local religious shrine was transformed into a well developed Siva temple. Accordingly, the deity was worshipped both by the Hindus and non-Hindus. In this gradual process of Aryanisation or Hinduisation and royal patronage extended to this deity the myth was manufactured which associated the king with the religious shrine. The duties of the non-brahmin priests were defined, the brahminical rituals were introduced in the shrine. The shrine was donated rent free lands in the remote areas and the priests had to perform the duty of propagating this ideal for the sake of themselves as well as their kings. Thus, the significance of land grants to the religious shrines and priests is not difficult to appreciate. Thus, the social formation is a unique blend of myth and reality.

A large number of Siva temples were built in the reigns of Chauhan rulers in Sambalpur *rajya*. The most important among them are those of the *Asta-Sambhus* (eight *Sambhus* or *Sivas*) namely Bimaleswara at Huma, Kedarnath at Ambabhona, Biswanath at Deogaon, Maneswara at Maneswar, Swapneswara at Sorna, Bisweswara at

Soranda, Nilakantheswara at Niljee and Balunkeswara at Gaisama. Learned scholar Sasanka Sekhar Panda has identified that the original temple of Bimaleswara at Huma was built during the later Somavamsi period (circa 11th century A.D.). It was in a dilapidated condition and the Ganga king Anangabhimadeva III (1211-1239 A.D.) repaired this temple. Similarly, the temple was in complete ruins in the 17th century A.D., on which site the 5th Chauhan *raja* of Sambalpur Baliar Singh Deva (circa 1650-1689 A.D.) built a new temple for the Lord Bimaleswara Siva (Panda, 1996:35). The rest of the temples were constructed by Dewan Dakshin Rai and Dewan Akbar Rai during the reigns of Ajit Singh (1725-1766 A.D.) and his son Abhaya Singh (1766-1778 A.D.). In fact, the administration of the *rajya* was completely under the control of Dewan Dakshin Rai who rose to power and influence when Ajit Singh was the king of Sambalpur. Subsequently, Dewan Akbar Rai usurped the throne of Sambalpur and became the *defacto* ruler when Raja Abhaya Singh was the king of Sambalpur (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971 : 63-66). Most probably, these religious shrines apparently located in the jungle areas of different parts of Sambalpur *rajya* were adopted and given royal patronage by Dewan Dakshin Rai and Dewan Akbar Rai in order to enjoy the confidence and to seek the co-operation of the local people so that they could consolidate their position against the royal household in Sambalpur.

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Temples were built and rent-free lands were granted for the regular performance of rituals in the temples. The local deities were Sanskritised and given new names like Kedarnath, Viswanath, Maneswar, Swapneswar, Visweswar, Nilakantheswar and Balunkeswar. These deities have played most significant role in the folk religious cultural tradition of Sambalpur *rajya* in the medieval period.

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Dr. Chitrasen Pasayat is the Assistant Temple Administrator of Sri Sri Jagannath Temple Office, Puri.

