



The Still Sad Music of Dangara Field

(Essay on Bonda agriculture system.)

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The whole world was wonder-struck by the research findings of Sir George Watt. His new theory made the researchers rush towards India. He boldly propounded in 1892 that the paddy first originated in India. The Indians cultivated paddy ten thousand years ago. Four thousand years after Indians produced paddy, the Chinese started cultivating it.

The Indians were also amazed. When we were quite ignorant of our own history and tradition, our antiquity and also of our contribution to the entire world, it was a foreigner who brought us to limelight in the global sphere. Moreover, he observed that as the valleys of southern India have a conducive climate, it is mostly favourable for paddy cultivation. Hence the southern part may be the originating place of paddy cultivation.

On the basis of the findings of George Watt, after a deep study for a long time, two Indian rice researchers, Ghose and Ramia, declared in the year 1951 that the Koraput region of Odisha is the place of origin of paddy.

The ancient Gondwana land - this ancient land constituted of igneous rocks. This one was the only land surface where the fun and activities of the primitive man were carried on. Their fossils provided the modern researcher with a new stimulus to think and analyse. In the form of

evolution it gave us the idea of the quest of the Man of the Stone Age.

Fifty thousand years ago it was the period of the Old Stone Age. The greenery of the forests brought about a tremendous change in the hard grey bedrocks. Life of the man of the mountain caves took a revolutionary turn away from the hunting- based mindset. Consequent upon the division of the vast land surface, the quest of the Man of the New Stone Age for pasture land gave rise to the successful beginning of the agrarian civilization. The primitive man in course of his nomadic life learnt to grow grass- like plants and gave to the world a new zeal for living, and turned the earth rich and prosperous as a result, a planet of plenty.

In the dense forests of Eastern Ghat mountains are found many ups and downs on its rocky bed like the zigzag alphabet of a school-going beginner. It's an unending scene like the drawings of the primitive man. In the sky appeared the silvery moon of the fourteenth day of the full moon fortnight; the fragrance of mahua flowers spread all over like the overflowing melted wax. On both the sides of the serpentine road stood the matted hills amidst their intermittent light and shade like a stoic. From the remote corner of Padagam, the lamp of sorrow was burning dimly.



Such nameless unknown villages were scattered here and there in search of some peaceful slumber. There was the revelry of an evening during the 'chaiti' festival, with the accompaniment of a 'madala' (a cylindrical musical instrument whose both sides are covered with hides to be beaten by hands). The driver applied the brake. It was clearly visible in the headlight of the vehicle that some bears were on their way back from the Mahua forests with their kith and kin. After they crossed the road, the vehicle moved ahead.

A lot would be happening here in the deep darkness of the night. The dance of the festival with the rhythmic beat of the 'madala' would resonate all around. The 'salapa' juice oozing out must be filling the pot hung from a tree. A young 'dhangda' would hug a sixteen year- old 'dhangdi' tightly to his chest and would be gradually lost in the loneliness of the dense forest. As soon as the night is over, the summit of the sky- high hill would be clearer. The cock would be hopping onto the roof and crowing co ... ck ... ca .. caw with the advent of the morning, the man of the soil with the bow on the shoulder would sharpen his arrow rubbing against a stone. Looking at the field of 'suan' and 'ragi' he would pick up baskets of dreams and go on singing vernal songs with his glances on the green fields of 'dangara'.

The vehicle stopped near a village on the road side. Khairaput was half an hour's distance from there. We reached here after passing through the dense forests of Koraput. It has been the original habitation of many an ancient tribe like Bonda, Paraja, Didayee, Koya since time antiquity. The 'dangara' fields extend over thousands of kilometers. The guard scarecrow with a turban around the head was armed with primitive arms and ammunitions. The raised platform meant for guarding the fields stood in a corner. Ears of golden corns tossing their heads

with the vernal breeze. It is the 'dangara' of the primitive man, his only source of income that has sustained his life of wants and distress. His own hand- made tobacco field was as though under the spell of intoxication.

Once upon a time it was a barren land of hard stones, now the mother earth is in cheers. The primitive man has demonstrated his potency of diligent hands that he has inherited from his ancestors. This soil, these trees, shrubs and creepers are all his gods. He feels the divine presence in every thing and gets a nectar like feeling.

What is your name?

Lachama Seesa O Lord!

Where is your house?

This dangara is our village, this forest is our mother, Lord!

Where are you going?

To fetch wood from the forest.

Is there tiger in the forest?

Yes! tiger is there.

Are you not afraid of it?

Let it eat, if it is so destined, Lord; what shall we do about it?

It is also your creation, Lord.

With these words Lachhama Seesa moved forward. The grip of his hand became stronger on the hatchet hung on the shoulder. We drove ahead. Khairaput was close by. It has a separate identity of its own for it has given shelter to primitive tribes like the Bondas. After that there was Kudumulugumma. It is also no less important; it is the habitation of rare tribes like Didayee. The Bondas and the Didayees have the same origin which is mentioned in the Bonda myths. Even



though their descendants have been tied with the bond of brotherhood since time immemorial, they maintain boastfully a separate and distinct identity of their own, and have conferred a special status to this land as the ancient land of the aborigines.

If the land is not primitive, what else is it? Today Odisha erects her head high with pride but for these people. The identity of Odisha also originates from this soil. The rice that is the staple food of almost half of the world and that saves the larger humanity from hunger and starvation was first produced in this soil. It is scientifically valid and logically true.

In the opinion of the Japanese scientist Hamda, an Austro-Asiatic tribe of the New Stone Age had first started paddy cultivation. In the very ancient times the civilization of 'Nishad's (a hilly tribe) had grown on the Eastern Ghat mountains. As the wet climate was suitable and conducive for the cultivation of paddy (a species of grass family), they procured paddy grains from nature and started its cultivation and became agriculture experts.

Those Nishads were no other than the Sauras, Gadabas and Bonda Parajas who primarily belonged to the Austro-Asiatic family. It is evident from one thousand and twenty five varieties of paddy collected so far from Koraput, Jeypore and the Machhakunda valley of Malkangiri.

This stream of ancient civilization belonged to a country once upon a time known as 'Udradesha' in the world and the botanical name of the paddy grains collected from Udradesha was 'Oraise Sativa'. From the etymological point of view also, that the word 'Oraise' perhaps originated from 'Udraja' or 'Udrajat' (born of Udra) is quite convincing and acceptable. From the phonetics point of view even, the two words: English word 'Orissa' and

'Oraise' are almost similar; the culture of this civilization is the culture of Odisha, Jagannath culture. And the population of aborigines in Odisha consisting of sixty two clans is the second highest in India and the culture of Bonda tribe is the oldest and the greatest among all primitive cultures of Odisha.

It was seven o'clock in the morning. We had already arrived in Khairaput since long. As one cottage tea stall opened, we stood in front of it by placing an order for five cups of tea. A man of more than sixty attired differently reached there with a hatchet in his hand. On his shoulder was there a 'kaudi' (a means of carriage, made of bamboo whose both the ends are suspended with baskets with ropes hanging from the bamboo) carrying bundles of fuel wood on both the sides. After giving the bundles of wood to the tea stall, he sat on the bench.

I asked, "Where is your village?"

Mudulipada

Your name?

Gopa Muduli.

He got up after the tea. We asked whether he would return to Mudulipada; and after having a positive reply from him, we turned the vehicle towards Mudulipada, accompanied by Gopa Muduli.

The fields of 'dangara' in Mudulipada we saw long back have now turned grey. There were no crops. Some uncared for scarecrows were as though lamenting over the past. What for the scarecrows when the fields had no crops?

I asked Gopa Muduli, "Do you know, your ancestors had taught the entire world the technique of paddy cultivation?" He gave a sad look at me and narrated the folktale how Lord Bhima cultivated the paddy for the first time in the Bonda hills. And Lord Bhima was no other



than the same second Pandava Bhima. He began - "Thousands of years ago, while Bhima was working he sat in Mudulipada, completely exhausted. He was very hungry, and wanted to eat something. He was a devoted disciple of Lord Shiva. Remembering Him he looked towards the sky and saw varieties of paddy flying in the sky. He stopped them and asked them their names. When the paddies gave three hundred different names, Bhima became furious and frowned at them: 'How is it that you have a number of names when I have only one?' Then Bhima clipped their wings and ate them. From that day onwards the practice of paddy cultivation started in Bonda hills. That's why as per this folktale, the Bondas worship the mother earth along with Lord Bhima before starting their cultivation."

After listening to this folktale, I enquired whether there was any other folktale relating to agriculture as the other tribes have their own tales. Gopa Muduli tried to recollect some of them that were forgotten and lost in the whirlpool of time. Very dramatically, he presented a tale that he had heard about Lord Patakhanda from his priest Mandora; this tale is incorporated in the Lord's 'mantras'.

The festival of Magha (the month of January - February) had arrived. The whole Mudulipada resonated with the sound of different musical instruments : drums, 'badya, 'turee' (trumpet), etc. All the people of 'Barajangara' assembled under the banyan tree. The 'Patakhanda' (a sword) was brought out of the hollow of a tree, it was bathed and sanctified; then the seeds that were customarily offered to it (Patakhanda) were distributed among all from Barajangara. The priest had already received the instructions in the dream as regards cultivation. Remembering the name of the Lord in the dream, the priest brought a tiger and a bear in chains.

Tying the golden yoke with a cobra on the golden plough, he tilled after sowing the seeds on a big boulder. Four months after the harvesting was done, and those seeds were distributed among the inhabitants of Barajangara. Hence as per the instructions in the dream, the function of initiating the sowing of seeds is celebrated in Patakhanda festival.

There is a layer of red laterite soil on the rocky bed of this mountaneous region, which is at a height of 3500 ft. from the sea level. The average annual rainfall is 2400 milimeters, as if it was the home of clouds, like Meghalaya or Cherapunji. The rainfall during 'Shravan' (July-August) is 500 milimeters.

With a population of 5565, the Bonda villages of Mudulipada extend over a total area of 130 sq. kms. out of which the land for habitation is 38 hectares, agricultural land 268 hectares, reserved land 7279 hectares, common land 91091 hectares, productive land 1741 hectares and the rest unproductive land. From the agricultural land, the highland here is more, middle land and low land are very less.

In summer paddy, black gram and 'alasi' are cultivated over an area of 11718 hectares and 'rabi' crops over 1741 hectares. When agriculture was carried on in Mudulipada at this rate before 2005, it is really a mystery to think about cultivation on the hard bed of rocks.

This is the same land, where a few thousand years ago the Bondas might have started cultivation by using a special divided branch of a tree as a plough. In the process of evolution he might have used stone-made implements and then the axe and plough in the field. With the roll of time he might have learnt to adopt various techniques.



On the way from Mudulipada to Kirsanipada it was noticed that some cultivations were done layer by layer on a hill.

Is it not a paddy field?

No, babu! It is a tobacco field.

It is really a wonderful method of cultivation which most of the men of hills and mountains adopt. At some places on the hill was noticed layer by layer cultivation, at some other place on the stiff slope of the mountain was there the 'burnt cultivation' (in this kind of cultivation, first the trees and bushes in the forest are burnt, the land surface with ashes is used for growing hilly crops). And somewhere beside a stream or a natural reservoir on a plain area was the crops bounty.

As we moved on we marked two to four Bonda young men working in a field near the 'jhola' (natural reservoir of water). It was the end of March. But when we saw the agricultural activities of man depending on Nature, we were simply amazed. "The summer paddy here yields a rich produce on account of high land and moist atmosphere," said Budei Kirsani. He has a rich experience in cultivation. He replied to most of our enquiries.

Every Bonda family has plenty of cultivable land, lying scattered at different places; one piece of land may be at the end of the village and another at the foot of the hill at a greater distance. At the time of cultivation, one field is ploughed and used for growing crops, whereas another field is simply left out unused by rotation. This kind of rotation system of growing crops is scientifically very important.

We came across a number of such fields in Kirsanipada which have been lying vacant after the harvest for the last two to three years. At that time the Bonda men have grown crops in other

fields. Meanwhile the uncultivated unused lands are filled with grass and other wild bushes. For preparing them as fields ready for cultivation those weeds and wild bushes are cut from roots and are set on fire. The fertility of the land increases with the layer of ashes and heat of the fire and the land becomes more suitable for a high yield. Moreover, black gram, 'kolatha', 'til', 'alasi', maize are grown in the first phase, and then the same field proves more fertile and useful for the cultivation of paddy and vegetables. So the purely natural methods and agricultural techniques of the Bondas without the use of any chemical fertilizers are very impressive and scientific. It was evident from all such observations and analysis that it is the primitive Bondas who are the father of the shifting agriculture.

It is not merely an agriculture-oriented life; here also are plentifully available mango, jackfruit and tamarind trees. These are also the food of these primitive men, and also the source of their income. If they are not available, they manage with the soil bamboo stems near the root, mushroom and other edible roots. They depend also on 'suan' 'ragi' and paddy to quench their hunger and have salapa and mahul wine for drink. "As the Lord has given birth, He has also made provisions for food and drink - Babu", said Gopa Muduli.

The birds and animals also cater to their needs. Cows, oxen, pigs, goats, hen are there in everyone's house. After the animals and birds are sacrificed and offered to gods, they are also taken as food. Besides this, community hunting also provides the pleasure of feast.

After hearing all these details, it was felt that the agricultural life of the Bondas was a systematic one. It's because it is more devoted to agriculture than hunting. As an Odia farmer follows certain methods and timings in agriculture,



the Bondas also think similarly in matters of cultivation. Based on the experience of Budei Kirsani, we prepared an agricultural calendar of the Bondas for the modern man which will definitely be a matter of surprise for him.

January - the harvesting time. Grass is cut, the branches of 'keranga' tree are brought to the house. Celebration of Sumogelic festival.

February - ploughing of the fields where water is available, preparation of fields and sowing of seeds. Celebration of Gunam festival, the month for weaving the clothes by women.

March - uprooting of the saplings and their transplantation starts, building of new houses.

April - in the routine of agricultural activities, summer cultivation is over. The beginning of Chaiti festival and the end of community hunting after fifteen days. The festival of eating of mangoes; cleaning of the forests and burning of the weeds and wild bushes.

May - the end of the cleaning of the forest, sowing of ragi begins, making of charcoals and their collection before the rains. Completion of the thatching of house with the bamboos and grassy plants collected from the jungle.

June - ploughing of the fields with the fall of the first rain and sowing of the seeds for rainy season paddy.

July - unweeding of the fields begins. Celebration of 'Tanku' (the hard substance inside the mango from which the sapling germinates) festival, community feasts with rice water and chapati made of ground mango 'tanku's.

August - celebration of the festival of maize-eating. The job of guarding the crops in the fields begins. Dhangda's begging for love in Dhangdis' house.

September - collection of soft bamboo roots by women - marriage sason begins.

October - the harvesting of crops from the fields that were cultivated In April. Celebration of Dussehra. Festival of Nuakhai begins.

November - guarding of the crops - Deepavali festival.

December - harvest of paddy, 'suan' and ragi.

This unwritten calendar of the Bondas who live in the lap of Nature synchronizing with her cyclic changes has been etched in their memory from generation to generation.

Government records reveal that the summer paddy cultivation in the Bonda hills has been there since 1870. However, it goes without saying that this summer cultivation of the Bondas is as old as his life of agriculture. As for the 'burnt cultivation' on the stiff hills ploughs are not suitable to be used, the fields are prepared here by howes and crowbars. When 'Osha gathiali' (a species of paddy) is harvested in 98 days in high lands, 'sikra' (another species) paddy takes minimum 109 days for harvesting on middle- lands whereas in low lands' Gadaba' variety is harvested in 107 days, 'mugudi' paddy takes 155 days. Thus the production of a rich variety of paddies is a glory and glamour for the Bondas.

Budei Kirsani explained to us different methods of preservation of grains. After the harvest, only paddy is stored in a container made of bamboo or in a container made of braids of hay. If it is preserved for the purpose of seeds, the paddy is treated with ashes for keeping it safe from the insects. Suan, ragi, kolatha (horse grams)



are kept in baskets plastered with cow dung and suspended by a 'sika' (an enclosed container made of ropes hung from the roof). Sometimes at specific places the grains are kept in earthen pots or gourd container treated with 'neem' leaves. Similarly gourds are preserved for months together in a natural surrounding on the thatched roofs or raised wooden platforms, even after its creeper dries up.

But now all these practices have changed with the roll of time, only as a matter of ritual certain agriculture- based festivals like mango festival, beans festival are celebrated along with cultivation. The seeds are all formally kept near the 'hundi house' or 'nishani munda' (the village goddess) for increasing their yielding capacity. At the time of celebration of Patakhanda festival, the tradition of worshipping all the crops before Patakhanda is still alive.

When the conventional methods of procurement and storing of seeds have ceased to exist, the Bonda man now depends on the Govt. supplied seeds or the seeds sold in the fair or the market. Restrictions have been imposed on the forest land. The Bondas have to give up also the practice of setting the jungle on fire for the sake of the needs and restrictions of the larger society around. His economy has crumbled. Some self-reliant aborigines have opted for labour with wages in advance (like bonded labour) and some of the them have turned away from agriculture by getting BPL rice under the government BPL card system. The practice of husking rice from the paddy with the help of a 'Dhinki' or a 'Mushala' (a wooden pounding device for separating husks from the paddy and getting rice) has now become an effete with the facility of the rice mill being plentifully available. Some of them also resort to 'tobacco cultivation' for more income. Only a few old traditionalists have kept the primitive practice really alive. Tears rolled down on the cheeks of Gopa Muduli with these words.

We recorded in pen and paper the fruits of our experience gained from Gopa and Budei to prepare our research-oriented thesis on the agriculture-tradition of the primitive man. We got ready to return. We marked a Bonda's hand - made cradle hanging from the roof in the verandah. In it was lying a baby and an old woman while swinging the cradle was singing a lullaby.

Dikrala ningna ... paran ... dhan ...
Sagna yang... behta ... nana ...
Sunara bata Drikal.. .. Ningna ...
Kukum pakshi ... rung ... ta ... perna ...

(It means: My dear, you go to sleep, do not be obstinate, as your mother returns from the field, she will breast-feed you; your father will present you a peacock feather after he returns from the field.)

We came back and left behind the Barajangara country of the Bondas. We were dismayed and disturbed a lot by the dismal picture of a crumbling tradition and a decayed agriculture-oriented civilization. We were moving towards Koraput piercing through darkness along the serpentine road of hills and forest. 'Dangara' fields were all lying vacant. The man of the field has deplorably become a 'dadana' (bonded labour). The wooden scaffolds raised for guarding the crops in the field had almost collapsed. The disfigured scarecrows were striking a note of ruin and disaster. The 'dangara' fields looked grey and barren through the green hills and forests. The rain drops dripping from the leaves of 'saragi' tree drenched the ground below. It was not shedding of tears but trickling of the blood of the primitive men; and the tragic song of the 'dangara' field was ringing in the ears for quite a long time.

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