

Socio-Cultural Life of Didayee Tribes of Malkangiri

(An Evening in Kondakamberu)

Dr. Debashis Patra

The silvery moon went up after her tender touch of the summit of the hills of Kondakamberu. The cold evening of Pousha (December-January) was gradually descending down at the foot of the village of Oringi. The villages appeared mysterious with creeping darkness of the twilight. The Kondakamberu hills are a separate segment of the Eastern ghat mountains, whose feet are perpetually washed by the river Machhakund. On both the sides of the river valley were there the habitations of the primitive tribes like the Bondas and the Didayees. The issue is how to connect the Bonda tribe of Mudulipada with Didayee tribe on the Kondakamberu hills who are far away from each other.

The Didayee tribe dwells in thirty seven villages of Rasabeda and Antrapalli gram panchayats under Kudumulugumma Block in the district of Malkangiri. The total population of this tribe included in the Bonda community of the Austro-Asiatic family will not be more than five thousand. That they were once upon a time in the same community of primitive Bondas exists in the Bonda folktales. According to the folktale the native place of the Didayee tribe is very old like that of the Bondas. And this habitation has been possible only because of the basin of the Machhakund river. Originating from the Mudgal mountain of Visakhapatnam, the river Machhakund

passing through the Duduma waterfall has entered the district of Malkangiri with its gradual rapid flow. At first the river flowing through a stony and pebbled path is narrow and reaches the Kondakamberu after covering a distance of 47 miles. And here the flow of the river is at a height of 1400 ft from the sea-level and it is not more than 7/8 ft wide. Passing through a terribly dangerous rocky bed, Machhakund becomes Sileru and flows towards Motu. This is the boundary line at Malkangiri of Odisha and East Godavari district of Andhra. The total length of both Machhakund and Sileru is 184 miles. The whole of its bank filled with bamboo woods is amazingly beautiful and captivating.

Like the history of Machhakund and Sileru, Kondakamberu has also its own history. Once it flourished as the principal area of the state of Kambudri. In the year 1443, the king of Nandapur Vinayak Dev of Surya dynasty had established two big villages after killing the king of Kambudri. One village was called Konda Kambirajpur named after his father Kambiraj and another one called Leela Kambirajpur named after his wife Leelavati. Five hundred years after the names of the villages were changed to Neelakamberu and Kondakamberu. At present Neelakamberu is identified as Balimela, Kondakamberu is known as the village of the Didayees.

There was the rule of Matsya dynasty here before the Surya dynasty. Now the history of Kondakamberu without any significance has become useless for the modern man like the history of the Didayees. It was about 7 o'clock in the evening we reached the Oringi village at the foot of the mountains. This was a Didayee village at a lower height. Many researchers camp here in order to study the life of the Didayees. It's because the Didayees at Oringi are relatively modern but are not opposed to tradition.

Sania was an important person in the village of Angra. After he came to know about the purpose of our visit, he arranged our stay in the community centre. The villagers gathered around in large number to see their guests. Solar light was arranged. So the folktales that I collected earlier during my study of the life of Bondas had in fact augmented my interest to know about the Didayees who are closely connected to the Bondas.

The folktales of the Bondas and Didayees reveal that 12 Gadaba brothers were born of the first man and woman on the bank of the river Godavari. They later on settled in the regions of Koraput and Malkangiri. The eldest of them was Bhoi Gadaba and next to him was Asura Gadaba. The other ten were Kandha, Bonda, Didayee, Jhadia, Parenga, Dora, Holar, Pengu, Chileri and Maria. It's because the Didayee was immediately next to Bonda, there is close resemblance between them. During my earlier trips to Mudulipada I had really enjoyed the amazing beauty of the lowlying areas viewed from Bondaguda mountaineous region. There is the habitation of the Didayees on the Machhkund valley. So leaving aside the twelve main Bonda villages, the Bondas living at other places are greatly influenced by the culture of Didayees and are known as 'Didayee Bonda' for the

researchers. Hence the culture and living of the Didayees appear more influential than those of the Gadabas. Like Oringi there are at least thirty three Didayee villages like Bayapada, Naringjhol, Tikiripada, Khadiguda, Gangapada, Damodar Beda, and Nindapari under 5 gram panchyats. The banks of Machhakund, Saptadhara and Sileru have provided the basic necessities for their habitation. According to their language the Didayees are known as 'Gatah-re' and their language is called 'Gatah-sa'. The language of the Didayees belonging to the Munda community has directly originated from the Munda language of the Koraput. Aita Kirsani discussed in detail before me the history of this language in a very simple way; and he said the medium of their writing is Odia scripts which have been used for writing a lot of banter and badinage, folktales and folksongs. He threw also some new light on the Bondas and Didayees. As the Bonda community is divided into two sects like Snake clan and Tiger clan, the Didayees also belong to two sects named Bear and Monkey clans. Besides this, whereas both Didayee men and women accept food from the Bonda families, only the Bonda men accept food from the Didayee families. The Bonda women are forbidden to take food in the Didayee houses. In the mean time some people had assembled there. We called some Didayee young men educated in the block sadar headquarters Gumma to our midst. Based on the book published by the Academy of Aborigine Language and Culture meant for learning the Didayee language, I asked a young man, "Nam mini mene?" (What's your name?) I am Balabhadra Angra, studied up to class seven. Now his occupation is cultivation, his favourite hobby is singing songs. When he came to the village during his student career on holidays, he sometimes went to the forest for guarding the cattle grazing; and sitting on the bank of the river Sileru, he sang

the native songs freely to his heart's content. There he sang a song on our request. It was a song related to marriage because it was quite natural for a boy of 12/15 years at his marriageable age to sing a wedding song. As per practice a boy of 12/15 years ordinarily marries a girl of 15/17 years in the Didayee community. The song is as follows:

*Na nene abna rasam nene nembra banarasam
Nalurana banaras en bhai bandhu banalu,
Jhi, baini kata sangre min lam
Duhkha pili, duhkha sangara butikuli
sadabele
Bandhu sangara bandhure mana maa sangc
mare mana.*

(Oh girl ! I will treat your parents as superiors. I will feed you by working as a labourer and uphold my dharma.)

It was already nine o'clock in the night. After the villagers returned to their own houses, I called Balabhadra and shared my feelings with him. Balabhadra informed that he had selected the daughter of the Nayak (the village chief) and as per the customs he sends rice regularly to the girl's house on the days of village fair. This practice will continue until the girl does not refuse to accept. If the daughter agrees, he will marry her by offering the bride-money and holding a feast in the village. He is preparing himself to offer goats, hen, rice, vegetables and salapa drinks as bride money. A feeling of self- satisfaction glittered on the face of Balabhadra.

Besides the marriage functions, the births and deaths in the life of the Didyaees are also celebrated with pomp and pleasure. On the 21st day of the birth of a baby, the naming ceremony is performed by Dishari. After the death of a person, the dead body is cremated, but in certain circumstances, if the person had expressed his desire earlier to be buried, the burial takes place

after the death. During the funeral rites on the ninth day of the death of the person an arrow is stuck deep into the ground in his house and food items, eggs and the boiled rice are offered to it as a token of affection. The bows and arrows are so intimately connected with the life of Didayees that the arrow used by person represents him after death. On the tenth day of death the departed is invoked by uttering his name before that symbolic arrow and several food items are offered.

At that time light was visible at a distance. The moon in the sky looked dim shrouded by fog. The middle- aged Aaita Kissani with a 'gamcha' (a small bathing towel) around the head and holding a hatchet in one hand and an old lantern on the other arrived at the place. He had come to give us company and to look after us. While narrating the sorrows of their life, he mentioned that the only day of happiness for them was the festival day. So, as the evening set in, a draught of 'salapa' made them forget the day's sorrows and exhaustion.

When the sound of 'Dungadunga' was heard, we turned our ears towards the dense forest in deep darkness. The festival of Pousa will be there after two days for which the dhangdas are making rehearsals of dance and music. Besides the dance and singing on this occasion, the cows are painted with turmeric and vermilion and they are given 'kechdi' to eat. But the fun and frolicking of Chaiti festival is not there in this festival.

The community- hunting of Chaiti festival has a different feel and thrill. All men go for community hunting armed with bows and arrows beating the 'Singha' (a drum- like instrument). If someone doesn't go for hunting or if someone returns without any kill, empty- handed, the dhangdis insult them by throwing cowdung water at them. Whatever they get from hunting, they eat together by making a feast.

In the 'asha' festival, a sheaf of corn is brought from the paddy field and is placed on the thatched roof and then worshipped. Besides this, different festivals prevailing among other tribes like Mango festival, 'Simba' (a kind of beans) festival and Maize- eating festival are also celebrated.

It was quite late in the night. We stopped our discussion and went to bed. When Aaita Kirsani marked us shivering in cold, he collected a few pieces of wood and lighted them. We all sat around the fire. As soon as the day broke, Dubek Pujari came to invite us to go round the village. He is the chief priest of goddess Mauli. We started towards the village, the whole village was basking in the morning sun. Whatever appeared enigmatic in the darkness of the last night, now are they quite clear, calm and composed. The walls of the mud houses were plastered with colours of white, red or yellow soil. At some places on the wall was the picture of a 'Saura' on hunting which represents the primitive tradition. The earthen pots were hung from the tops of 'salapa' trees. Most of the fields were lying vacant after the harvest of paddy, ragi, 'alasi', etc. A few persons were busily engaged in making baskets or containers of bamboos. Some Didayee women were making broomsticks in the courtyard of a house which was a source of earning their livelihood. When we arrived in the middle of the village, we saw villagers assembled around a 'mandap' (a platform). One of them sat still and motionless. The village dishari chanted the mantras as usual and was sweeping over his body with peacock feathers. He uttered the mantra "You are the man to kill, you are the man to make someone alive. I will offer you coconut, I will offer you bananas, I will offer you puffed rice, offer you sacrifices like pigeon, goat and also wine. You go back by the same way you came... go... go ... get lost."

We moved forward. But one thing baffled me: Notwithstanding the rich culture of the aborigines, how is it that the simple- minded primitive man has accepted the superstitions enforced by the dishari ? And lots of his simple and plain consciousness are being sacrificed on the altar of progress and development. We decided to return from there.

We urged the village priest to bring about a radical change in the mindset of the primitives in the wake of the shift of the cultural paradigm. Let him give importance on their education, health and welfare dispelling the darkness of superstitions. Our words instilled hope and faith in him. He gave his consent for the valuable suggestions by nodding his head. He said –"My son is now in service, after being educated. And some others also have got employment at different places. The Didayee Development Project is also doing a lot for us. We need only some more time." We appreciated the rational and judicious statement of Dubek Pujari. It was going to be 2p.m. We took farewell from Oringi village. We left behind the deep dense forests of Kondakamberu mountains and the rocky bed of the river Sileru. The vehicle moved ahead. We went on watching on our way back the recorded video cassettes and photographs. That picture which had the background of Kondakamberu smeared with the sandal paste of silvery moon was amazingly beautiful. We were really transported to a different world altogether. We felt as though the evening was setting in on the Kondakamberu even amidst the bright light of the sun.

Dr. Debashis Patra, Asst. Professor in Odia, Rajdhani College, Bhubaneswar-751003, E-mail : dr.debashispatra@gmail.com.