

Bitlaha in Santal Society: A Study from Social and Anthropological Perspectives

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Abstract: *Santals Living Mainly In And Around Middle And Middle-Eastern India Have A Typical Form Of Tribal Administration. They Have Unique Tribal Agencies Of Social And Judicial System. Bitlaha Is One Of The Santal Agencies To Punish The Persons Committing Incest, Forming Relationship With Tabooed Persons And Persons Outside Community. Bitlaha With A Special Way Of Operation In The Society Has A Candid Effect Upon Its Tribesmen .The Present Paper Is Aimed At Making A Social And Anthropological Study On The Preparation And Execution Of Bitlaha. The Various Features Of Bitlaha And Its Impact Upon Society Are Discussed In Detail. The Changes Of The Execution Of Bitlaha In The Present Society Are Also Noted To Find Out The Changes In Tribal Administrative Structure. The Various Symbolic Features Of Bitlaha Are Studied Keeping In Mind Their Impact Upon Sense Of Defilement. A Feminist Study Of Bitlaha Is Also Done To Find Out The Patriarchal Mechanisms Working Through It.*

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I. Introduction:

Tribal Communities Have Socio-Political Functionaries Which Are Vastly Different From That Of The People Of Main Stream Culture. Their Social Agencies Are Born Out Of The Different Form Of Their Society. The Structure Of Their Society Is Born Out Of Their Sense Of Indigenusness. The Difference Between Their Social Construction And That Of Non Indigenus People Lies Mostly Upon The Way Indigenus People Treat Their Social Issues. Bitlaha Is One Such Example Of Santal Way Of Treating Crimes Graver In Nature. The Events Happening In The Ritual Reflect Upon Various Aspects Of Santal Consciousness. L O Skrefsrud In His Book Traditions And Institutions Of The Santals Gave A Description Of Bitlaha. It Is Described As A Ritual To Socially Announce Someone's Expulsion From Society. Though The Term Bitlaha Was Not Used By Kolean, Haram The Informant To L O Skrefsrud References To Bitlaha Are Found In The Books Of Other Eminent Writer Like W H Archer. In His Books Tribal Heritage And Hill Of Flutes, Archer Gave A Detailed And Informative Description Of The Various Aspects Of Bitlaha. Bitlaha Acted As Community Justice From Times Immemorial. It Was Found Operative In Santal Society By Eminent Ethnographers During The British Colonial Period In Areas Like Santal Pargana, Pakur, Rajmahal And Many Areas Of West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar And Assam. A Minute Analysis Of The Ritual May Help Us Realize The Various Facets Of Santal Society.

II. Reason Of Bitlaha:

Indigenus Communities All Over The World Follow A Strict Form Of Code And Conduct As They Fear The Gradual Extinction Of Their Community Under Outer Influence If They Do Not Have Rigid Control Over Their Society. Any Breach Of That Form Is Followed By Punishment. Santals Being Indigenus People Living Mainly In And Around Chhotonagpur Plateau Of Middle -Eastern India Try To Keep Their Society Intact By Following Rigidness In Such Matters. They Have Their Own Tribal Administration To Punish Any Such Breach. Crimes Graver In Nature Such As Clan And Kin Incest, Intercourse With People Outside The Community, Relation With Tabooed People And Attempts Of Forced Intercourse Are Treated As Serious In Nature And People Convicted In Such Crimes Are Excommunicated For Life And The Ritual Of Bitlaha Is Performed To Punish Him. There Is A Reference To Bitlaha In Traditions And Institutions Of Santals. It Is Described In The Following Way

.. .But If It Is Proved, They Order: We Shall Fix Used Leaves In The Ground For Them. The Young Men Of The Country Then Compose Songs, And Going To The Village They Sing Praising Them And Mentioning The Names And Sins Of Those Who Have Committed The Crime. All The People Of The Country Enter The Village Street, Blowing Flutes And Drumming Kettle Drums And In The Street Outside The House Of The Miscreants They Fix In The Ground A Post To Which Used Leaves, A Burnt Log Of Wood And A Worn Out Broom Have Been Tied. The People Of The Village Will Remain In The Pollution, Until They Give What Is Needed For Propitiation (*Bodding, P. O, 2013*).

Santals Do Not Allow Any Moral Laxity Among Their Community People In One Hand, And Anyone's Intrusion Into The Community On The Other. If A Santal Boy Marries Or Sets Up Relationship With A Non Santal Girl He Is Summoned By The Local Headman And Warned By Him About The Ill Consequences Of It. If He Continues His Relationship, He Along With His Family Is Pante Begared(Temporarily Excommunicated) Till He Regrets His Act And Rejoins The Society By Offering Community Feast. But If This Does Not Happen, The Family Is Treated Defiled And They Are Excommunicated For Life (Jonom Bitol). If A Woman Forms Relationship With A Deku (A Hindu) Or Muslim Person, The Santal Society Takes The Immediate Action Of Excommunicating Her For Life And Bitlaha Is Performed. Apart From This, Bitlaha Is Also Performed When A Santal Man Or Woman Is Engaged In Clan Or Kin Incest. Kin Incest Is Generally Regarded As An Unpardonable Crime And The Accused Are Immediately Bitlahad. The Accused Are Given No Chance Of Avoiding It Through Fine. Clan Incest Is Sometimes Treated As Pardonable And The Accused Are Given Chances Of Separating Themselves From Each Other. The Male Member Will Have To Find A Bridegroom For The Girl And Bear Expense Of Her Marriage. The Topics Like The Process Of Taking Decision Of Bitlaha, The Preparations Under Taken, The Actual Performance Of Bitlaha, Its Nature And Symbolic Meaning And Its Effect Upon The Guilty Persons Will Be Studied Separately.

Preparation Of Bitlaha: The Root Causes Of Bitlaha Have Already Been Mentioned. If Such A Major Crime Occurs The Village Headman (Manjhi) Calls The Village People To Assemble On The Village Street. In The Meeting, The Nature And Gravity Of The Crime Is Discussed. If The Crime Is Less Grave And The Matter Can Be Adjusted With Large Sum Of Money, The Tendency Of The Village People Is To Avoid Bitlaha And Fine Him A Large Sum Of Money. Generally The Accused And Its Family Are Always Eager To Avoid Bitlaha And Settle Matter With A Fine. Once The Accused Admits His /Her Crime And Agrees To Pay Fine, The Matter Ends There. The Fine May Be Taken Immediately In The Meeting Or A Limited Time May Be Given If He / She Requests For That. Generally Delays Are Avoided As The Village Bongas (Santal Gods And Goddesses) Remain Polluted Till The Fine Is Paid And Community Feast Is Arranged. If The Accused Fails To Pay The Money Within The Time Sanctioned To Him Or Denies Paying It, The Village Council Agrees To Bitlaha The Person And Consent Of Higher Authorities Are Sought For The Purpose.

Once The Decision To Perform Bitlaha Is Taken In The Village Meeting, The Manjhi Informs Pargana (A Superior Tribal Headman Of The Locality) Or Neighboring Manjhis Of Five Villages To Discuss Over The Issue. The Manjhi Has To Produce All The Details Related To The Case Before Pargana Or Five Manjhis To Convince Them About The Necessity Of Bitlaha. Pargana Or Five Manjhis Study The Issue In Detail And Take The Decision. If The Decision Of Performing Bitlaha Is Taken, A Person Is Appointed On Behalf Of The Authority To Take Necessary Preparations For It. Pargana Himself, Or The Five Manjhis Or The Manjhi Of The Concerned Village Takes The Responsibility Of Spreading News In The Locality. A Dharwak (A Small Sal Branch With Sal Leaves In It.) One Sal Leaf Is Coned To Form The Shape Of Penis And Another Sal Leaf Is Pinned At The Middle To Represent The Shape Of Vagina) Is Formed And It Is Shown Under The Instruction Of Authority In The Local Bazar Or At The Market Place On The Market Day. These Shapes Showing Sexual Organs Symbolize The Licentiousness And Animality Of The Accused. When The Bearer Enters The Market Place With The Dharwak On His Shoulder, People Begins To Ask About The Name Of The Person / Persons For Whom This Is Circulated. The News Of Bitlaha Spreads In This Way In The Locality. This Makes The Accused Infamous In The Locality And People Begin To Discuss About Their Licentious Behavior. This Is The Most Dreaded Thing For A Tribal Person. An Indigenous Person Always Seeks To Remain Anonymous. Publicity In The Wrong Way Affects His Peace. Once The Dharwak Is Circulated, The Whole Locality Begins To Take Preparation To Assemble On The Place Fixed For Bitlaha. The Assembly Consisting Of Large Surging Lines Of Santal Males With Their Traditional Weapons And Long Sticks In Hands, Roaring Voices Start Marching Towards The Village Where Bitlaha Is To Be Performed.

There Is Also Scope Of Recalling The Dharwak If It Is Found That The Decision Was Wrongly Taken Or Taken Without Following The Due Formality Of Informing The Local Headmen Like Pargana And Five Manjhis. In Such A Situation, The Authority Reissues Another Dharwak To Inform Local People About Dismissal Of The Proposed Bitlaha. If There Is Not Enough Time Or Market Days Left To Inform Local People About The Dismissal, The Authority Will Reach The Spot On The Day To Directly Speak With The People Assembled There. The Decision Of Performing Bitlaha Is Generally Taken By Pargana Or Council Of Five Manjhis. A Manjhi Alone Cannot Take Such Decisions. If A Manjhi Disobeys His Higher Authorities And Exercises His Power To Announce Bitlaha, He Is Fined With A Large Sum Of Money And The Proposed Bitlaha Outright Cancelled. The Accused May Approach The Local Authority To Claim Justice About His Wrong Treatment In The Hands Of The Complainant Or The Village Authority. If It Is Proved That The Accused Is Not Guilty And The Complainant Has Hatched The Plan To Defame Him In The Locality, People Decide To Bitlaha The Complainant Instead.

III. Ritual Of Bitlaha:

A Bitlaha Is Almost Always Attended By A Large Number Of People. The Basic Trait Of Bitlaha Is The Largeness Of Assembly. A Large Crowd Gathering At A Place, And Shouting Aloud About The Sexual Misbehavior Of The Accused, Makes Bitlaha A Thing Of Great Importance. Santals Assemble In Long Surging Lines At An Open Place, Just Outside The Village In Which The Accused Live. The Crowd Carries Big Drums Which They Play Loudly. Some Of Them Carry Branches Of Sal Tree In Which Sal Leaves Are Shaped Like Penis And Vagina Which Shows The Illicit Animal Like Relationship Of The Accused. They Also Carry Long Sticks. People Attending Bitlaha Always Shout Loudly Pronouncing The Names Of The Accused, Singing Vulgar Songs, Dancing In Acrobatic Way Making Various Sexual Postures, Clapping And Making Various Sounds To Celebrate The Sin In Public. Two Of Them Assume The Role Of Nude Jokers And Dance Making Various Sexual Postures. The Nude Jokers Generally Lead The Line. Various Vulgar Stories Are Circulated And The Participants Enjoy These Licentious Stories. According To The Accepted Norms Of Santal Society Licentious Stories Can Only Be Circulated During The Hunting Expedition.

This Crowd Is Welcomed By The Manjhi Or Headman Who Is Given Charge Of Executing Bitlaha. He Himself Or A Messenger From Him Will Appear Before The Gathering And Asks Them To Remain There Till The Procession Starts. The Reason Of Bitlaha Is Again Explained To The Gathering. It Is Just A Formality And The Whole Gathering Immediately Approves It. In Some Cases The Accused Are Summoned Before The Gathering To Argue For Their Side. In Almost All The Cases, The Accused Try To Exploit The Chance And Settle The Dispute By Paying A Heavy Fine. If The Plea Is Granted, The Gathering Will Disperse Without Doing Bitlaha. A Day Is Fixed Then On Which The Accused Will Entertain The Village People And Local Administration With A Feast. After That He Will Be Permitted To Rejoin The Community And He Will Be Acquitted Of His Sin. He Will Have To Pay Money To Village Officials Like Manjhi, Jogmanjhi, Godet, Other Local Officials Like Pargana, Five Manjhis Etc And Also The Village Women To Keep Their Mouth Shut And Ears Closed. After The Feast, It Is Accepted That No One Will Speak About The Matter. If Anyone Raises The Matter Or Discusses It With Someone, He Will Be Duly Punished. So, There Is A Chance Of Avoiding Bitlaha At The Nick Of The Moment. In Cases Where Chances Of Settling The Matter Is Not Given, The Whole Gathering Moves On To The Accused's House To Perform Bitlaha.

The Manjhi Directs The Whole Gathering To Start Marching And Wild Dancing, Lewd Singing And The Act Of Making Sexual Postures Resume With Renewed Spirit. The Two Nude Jokers And The Person Keeping The Dharwak March In Front Of The Procession. The Crowd Stops Before The Accused's House. There Dancing, Singing And Drumming Continue With Same Spirit. Then Almost All The Crowd Enter The Courtyard, Urinate All Over The House, Dance And Sing Vulgar Songs, Stools Here And There And Hangs On A Pole Of The Courtyard Brooms, Horn And Skulls Of A Cow To Show The Defiled Nature Of The House. The Whole Crowd Will Not Do Any Kind Of Violence. They Will Not Destroy Anything Provided They Are Not Interrupted From Doing Their Job. The Sole Aim Of Bitlaha Is To Expose The Defiled Nature Of The Household Arising Out Of The Carnal Sin Committed By The Accused And The Defiled Nature Of Their Bongas And Household As A Consequence. Bitlaha Itself Is Not A Punishment. It Is A Ceremonial Way Of Announcing The Punishment In Public. After Bitlaha The Crowd March Through The Village Street And Come To An Open Ground Where Naeke (The Village Priest) Sacrifices Two Hens To The Bongas As The People May Have Roused Bongas' Anger Through Vulgar Songs, Dances And Exposure Of Nudeness In Public. With This Sacrifice Bitlaha Comes To An End And The People Peacefully Return To Their Respective Houses. No Song, Dance Or Any Other Kind Of Vulgarity Is Permitted After That.

IV. Reaction Among Santals:

It Is Generally Noted That The Accused And Their Family Members Almost Always Accept The Proceedings Of Bitlaha Through Passive Acceptance. Santals Treat Bitlaha With Dread And No Attempt Is Made To Stop Or Resist It. The Overwhelming Sense Of Public Shame Engulfs Them In Such A Way That They Do Not Try To Put Up The Slight Of Resistance Against The Approaching Crowd And Leave The Scene Much Before The Arrival Of Crowd. In Most Cases They Do Not Return And Leave The Country For Good. The Dread Of Bitlaha Is Well Expressed In The Following Song Taken From W G Archer's Seminal Book On Santal Culture Entitled As The Hill Of Flutes.

In Shining Clothes
Come The Men Of The Country
In Clothes To Their Ankles
Swagger The Chiefs
Girl, It Was You
Who Brought Me To This Shame?
Father, When They Come
The Harm Will Be Ended

The World Is Big
To East And West
To North And South
Hide Us In A Corner. (*Archer W. G, 2013*)

The Song Clearly Expresses The Sense Of Shame In Santal Mind. The Father In The Song Accuses The Girl Of Having Dragged Him Into This Shameful Condition. The Arrival Of Countrymen In Shining Clothes Is Dreaded Heavily By Them. The Girl Requests Her Father To Leave The Country And Hide In Some Other Country Situated In Any Direction.

If Both The Persons Chosen For Bitlaha Belong To The Santal Community, It Remains A Matter Exclusively Of The Santals. But If One Of The Accused Is A Deku (Belonging To A Hindu Community) Or A Mohammedan And If The Cause Of Bitlaha Is Forming Illicit Relation With Persons Outside The Community, It Becomes A Sensation Of The Locality. Such A Relationship Is Abhorred By Santals And They Take It As An Insult Upon Their Community. In Such A Situation Bitlaha Is Imminent. The Process Is Almost Same. The Only Difference Is That The Accused Belonging To Some Other Community Is Not Summoned Before The Santal Village Council. The Decision Is Informed To Him Either Through The Circulation Of Dharwak Into The Locality Or Direct Sending Of Message To Him. The Local People Do Not Do Anything To Put Up Any Resistance. Rather, In Most Cases The People Belonging To The Accused's Community Help Santals Directly Or Indirectly To Perform Bitlaha Partly Because They Dread The Wrath Of Santals Or They Think It Proper To Punish Such Moral Laxity Through Bitlaha.

When Bitlaha Happens, No Resistance Is Found From The Accused To Stop It. In Most Cases, They Passively Submit To The Will Of The Community And Leave The Scene In An Ashamed State. Bitlaha Signifies Total Isolation Of Individual From His/Her Community. He/She Will Either Have To Live Among The Members Of Community In An Ashamed State Or Live The Country For Good Or Settle Somewhere Else. We Find A Similar Description In W. W Hunter's *The Annals Of Rural Bengal*

So Strong Is The Family Feeling, That Expulsion From The Clan Is The Only Form Of Banishment Known. Like The Roman *Aquae Et Ignis Interdictio*, To Which It Bears A Strong Resemblance, It Amounts To Loss Of Civil Rights, For Other Clans Will Not Receive The Out-Cast; And The Idea Of The Ties Of Kindred Being Destroyed Between The Individual And The Race, Is Insupportable To The Santal.... In More Heinous Cases, The Difficulty Of Reconciliation Is So Great, That The Unfortunate Man Yields To His Destiny, And, Taking With Him His Bows And Arrows, Departs Into The Jungle, Whence He Never Returns (*The Annals Of Rural Bengal, Page 140-141*).

V. Masculine Features:

It Might Be Noted That Bitlaha Has Some Patriarchal Characteristics Inherent In It. It Is Primarily A Male Act To Punish The Accused. Women Are Not Permitted To Take Any Active Part In It. They Are Debarred Even From Keeping Their Presence In The Village Meeting Where The Decision Of Bitlaha Is Taken. The Dances, Songs And Other Activities Used In A Bitlaha Are Masculine By Nature And Intended To Show Off The Male Power. The Fact That Bitlaha Has Some Features Similar To That Of Hunting Expedition Stresses Its Masculine Nature As Hunting Is Generally Considered By Santals As A Masculine Act. Bitlaha Might Be Considered A Form Of Imposing Male Authority Upon The Society.

VI. Bitlaha As A Symbol Of Defilement:

Bitlaha As The Principal Aim Of Bitlaha Is To Stress The Defiled Nature Of The Act. Santals Strongly Disapprove Sexual Union Between Tabooed Persons, Or Forming Relationship With Persons Outside The Community. Such Unions Are Deemed By Santals As Defiled And They Believe That Existence Of Such Defiled Relationships May Defile Whole Village Community Including The Village Bongas. They Feel It Their Duty To Expose The Guilty Persons In Public And Outcast Them For Life. Bitlaha Is Just An Agency To Do That. The Participants Try To Stress The Defiled And Animal Like Nature Of The Accused Through Various Acts And Symbols Having Sexual Overtones. The Dharwak Itself Is A Sexual Symbol Representing Both The Penis And Vagina Of The Accused Just To Stress The Demoralized Physicality Of The Accused And Their Shameful Nature. They Urinate And Leave Stools Over The Courtyard, Hearth And The Cooking Utensils. Such Actions Publicly Announce The Household As Defiled. As The House Is Defiled, It Cannot Produce Fire In Its Hearth Which Are Made Unholy With Urine And Stool. The Tattered Broom And Skull Of A Cow Are Hung From A Pole In The Courtyard Just To Increase The Sense Of Defilement.

VII. Bitlaha As Form Of Tribal Authority:

The Main Topic That Haunts The Scholars Is The Great Importance That Bitlaha Sways Over Santal Life. To Find The Reason Behind The Greatness Of Bitlaha We Need To Take Into Account The Nature Of The Structure Of Santal Society And Their Indigenous Attitude. Like All Other Indigenous Communities Santals

Maintain Rigidity Regarding Their Social Organization. The Control Of The Society Upon Its Individual Members Is Unavoidable And All Pervasive. The Society Intends To Decide Each And Everything Of Their Private Or Domestic Life Which May Have A Social Impact. The Individuals Are Liable To Answer For Anything He/She Does To Keep Himself/Herself In Good Humour With The Organizational Heads Of The Society. Bitlaha Is The Collective Expression Of Tribal Authority. Through The Ceremony Of Bitlaha The Tribal Society Shows Its Control Over Its Tribesmen And Demands Full Submission Of Its Tribesmen. Through Bitlaha The Society Creates A Sense Of Terror Among Its Tribesmen So That They May Not Ever Think Or Disobeying The Tribal Authority.

Bitlaha As Hunting Episode: Viewed From Another Perspective, Bitlaha Might Be Taken As A Form Of Hunting Episode. The Main Aim Of Bitlaha Is To Hunt Down The Persons Accused Of Carnal Sins. For That Purpose The Whole Tribal Population Surrounds The Accused's House. There Are Some Similarities Between Bitlaha And Hunting Episode. In Bitlaha, Santals Carry Bows, Arrows, Long Sticks And Drums. All These Weapons And Musical Instruments Are Generally Used By Santals In A Hunting Episode. Just Like In A Hunting Episode, In Bitlaha The Tribesmen Shout Aloud, Sing Vulgar Songs, Perform Dances Full Of Sexual Overtones, And Circulate Stories Full Of Sexual Overtones. The Spirit Expressed In Bitlaha Has A Nearness To That Of A Hunting Episode.

Bitlaha And The Present Santal Society: Bitlaha Was A Main Agency To Punish The Guilty Persons When The Tribal Society Was Completely Governed By The Administration Of Its Own. Tribal Society Was Then Totally Untouched By Outer Influence And Tribesmen Had Rigid Control Over Its Members. But With The Introduction Of The Colonial Administrative Structure And The Introduction Of Policing System In Tribal Areas Tribal Disputes Began To Be Solved By Non-Tribal Administrative Agencies. Tribal Justice System Has Now Lost Its Superior Control Over Its Members And If Any Such Sexual Misconduct Occurs To The Santal Society Outcaste The Persons Concerned But The Performance Of Bitlaha Upon Them Is Beyond The Power Of Present Tribal Authority. In Such Cases Criminal Cases Are Lodged And The Matter Is Left To Be Solved By Police. The Inability And Reluctance Of The Present Tribal Authority To Organize And Perform Bitlaha Signify The Declining Power Of Tribal Administration And A Gradual Shift Of Power From The Tribal Heads To The Heads Of Policing System Of State .So The Past History Of Tribesmen Using Bitlaha To Keep Their Society Under Control And The Present Absence Of Any Bitlaha From The Tribal Scenario Clearly Shows The Change Of The Condition Of Tribal Society And Its Way Of Dealing The Problems.

VIII. Conclusion:

A Detailed Study From Social And Anthropological Perspectives Unravels The Special Characteristics Of Bitlaha That Establish It As A Typical Tribal Agency Of Justice. The Engagement Of Tribal People In Large Numbers Makes It A Community Activity. The Ritual Provides A Space To The Tribal Administration To Make Its Presence Felt And Renew Its Authority Among Its Tribesmen. The Most Striking Feature Of Bitlaha Is That It Is Not A Forced Ritual Upon Santals. It Is The Spontaneous Reaction Of The Santals To Prevent Their Society From Pollution. Santals Engage In It With Great Enthusiasm. The Ritual Acts Both As Moral Police And Provider Of Mirth. The Tribesmen Feel It Mandatory To Join The Ritual To Keep Going Their Tribal Administration. The Well Organized Way Of The Preparation And Execution Of Bitlaha Establishes The Fact That Santals Had A Tribal Administrative System As Developed As That Of A Modern Civilized Society.

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