



LIVING WITH THE HILLS: “BURU-BONGA” OR “PAHAR PUJA” OF BELPAHARI

Abhishek Roy 

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Author Details:

Assistant Professor in English
Government General Degree College,
Narayangarh, Rathipur, Paschim
Medinipur, West Bengal, India

Corresponding Author:

Abhishek Roy

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.250304068>

Abstract

Jhargram district, thanks to its geo-political position, is the home of diverse race, culture and beliefs. The part which I particularly highlight in this paper is the outskirts areas of Belpahari, a Block-town of the newly formed Jhargram district of West Bengal, mainly the areas covered by shaal jungle and surrounded by small hills and dungris. This part of the said Block-town is popularly known as ‘Bontola’(forest-land) among the local inhabitants. The census report (2011) confirms that save from the semi-urban Belpahari town which is primarily equipped by the Hindus and Muslims, it is the Adivasis-Mulvasis who dominate ‘Bontola’. Santhals, along with Munda, Ho, Kol, Bhumij tribes are the chief dwellers of the jungle-based villages. Sari-Sarna is the religion they follow. The religion, even after heavy religious syncretism (mainly from Hinduism) and continual attempt of proselytizing by Christian Missionaries, has retained its basic philosophy of bio-centric living. All the rituals reflect the importance of their immediate natural surroundings in their life and living, and their conscious attempt to acknowledge that debt through observations of certain rituals and festivals associated with the ‘dharam’. I have particularly zoomed in here on the practice of ‘Hill-Worship’ known amongst the adivasi-mulvasis as “Buru-Bonga” or “pahar-puja” (the Bengali equivalent of the term) and tried to highlight the importance of this local festival among the populace of the surrounding localities.

Keywords: *Bontola (forest-land), Adivasi-mulvasis, Hill worship, “Sari-sarna dharam”*

Introduction

The advent of monsoon period (Ashar-Shraban as per Bengali Calendar) brings with it a unique local festival in Belpahari belt known as Pahar-Puja (Hill-Worship). One by one quite a few hills become a site of carnival among the local inhabitants – adivasi or non-adivasi. The geo-cultural setting of this “Bontola” quite unsurprisingly invites people from neighbouring Jharkhand and Orissa to be a part of this fiesta. Kanahaiswara or Kanaishor, Gadrasi, Gotashila, Chatan Buri Pahar, one by one all these hills receive homage from the local inhabitants whom they have surrounded for years. The second saturday of Ashar kick-starts the frenzy, and it is the turn of Gadrasi or Gurrasi hill. Next comes Kanahaiswara or Kanaishor (Chakulia Belt: the hill bifurcates Jharkhand and Bengal forming a natural geographical Border) which is popular as “Boro-Pahar” among the locals for its height (it is the tallest among all the hills surrounding Belpahari), and it is celebrated on the 3rd saturday of Ashar each year (See Fig. 1). The subsequent tuesday is kept for Gotashila Hill (Dhalbhumgarh Belt of Jharkhand) followed by Khari Pahar Buru Bonga (Near Chakulia, Jharkhand adjacent to Bengal Border) celebrated on the immediate next Saturday. Apart from these auspicious and popular Buru Bonga celebrations, there are other important “dungris” (mainly hillocks) in and around Belpahari belt that draw many faithful devotees and other zealous observers. This almost two months long juggernaut finally moves towards its closure at the end of Shrabana (Mid August). Hatimara Dungri (Close to Belpahari, West Bengal) and Chatan Buri Pahar (Bengal-Jharkhand Border) receive homage on the 2nd Saturday and 3rd Sunday of Shrabana respectively. What is very prominent here is the fact that all these “Hill-Worships” take place in rainy season during the time of paddy-cultivation and local inhabitants, irrespective of class, caste and religion, do consider these Hills and the Hill-Worships important for adequate rain and subsequent good harvest. A look into these carnival sites does reflect the fact that there are presences of both Adivasi culture and religion, and Hinduism. But far from encroaching each other or attempting to marginalize one, these presences have only enriched the tradition and helped the locals to transcend any discourse of religious extremism. At best these sites have become a site of religious-cultural syncretism and synthesis.



Fig. 1 “Boro-Pahar” Kanaisor Hill during the annual fiesta. Roy, Abhishek. “Kanaisor Hill”.2018. JPEG.

The origin of the cult of “Hill-Worship” in this particular belt is shrouded in mystery as local oral anecdotes are all that we have got to bank upon. But few Anthropological texts do help us in presuming the possible reasons of the evolution and thrive of such a cult. A majority among the local populace are Adivasis and Mulvasis as per the Census report of 2011. The very religion that they follow is Sari/Sarna Dharam. Hansda Sovendra Sekhar in an article opines: “The religion that we animist Santhals and other Adivasis of the Chhota Nagpur Plateau region – like, Ho, Munda, Oraon, etc. – follow is called Sarna. We worship in the jaher, a grove of sal tress. Marang-Buru and his consort, Jaher-Ayo, are our most revered deities (96).” It has to be kept in mind that in no way the Adivasi-Mulvasis of the Chhota Nagpur Plateau region is a homogenous group. They are in different economic and socio-cultural stages. Hence the rites, rituals very much emerged as the direct offshoot of the immediate socio-economic and geographical conditions of the area where they exist. Anthropologist Ajit K. Singh has observed that nomadic tribes like Korwa, Birhors, Pahari-kheria who still mostly live in forests and hill areas give more importance to the worship of forest and hill and stream. Whereas the settled Santhal, Munda, Ho, Gond, Bhumij, Oraon, Kurmi who are more or less have become agriculturalist, hold Sing-Bonga (Sun-God) or Dharmes or Dharam Thakur as their supreme deity. But the Adivasis not only believe in the existence of a supreme deity or God. They also have firm belief in the existence of Spirits or Bongas:

Spirits are usually below gods in rank... the gods are the creators, the upholders of the universal order. Spirits are usually created by the gods. However, the power of creation is of less social importance than the power to intervene in everyday human affairs, the growing of crops, health and other matters directly concerning human well-fare. When spirits are believed to be responsible for common aspect of daily life, they loom larger in man’s consciousness, and rituals in their honour are more frequent. (Singh 46)

Spirits or Bongas, as per the Adivasi world-view, are both benevolent and malevolent in nature. N. Patnaik in his essay “The Santhal World of Supernatural Beings” identifies Buru-Bongas (Spirits residing in hills) as malevolent spirits causing damage to the crop (146). No wonder then that all the Adivasi-Mulvasis – be it Santhals, Mundas, Birhors, Gonds, Kherias, Kisans, Hos, Bhumis have great respect for these spirits who they believe pervades their immediate surroundings, formless and reside in houses, trees, groves, streams, hills, rocks, animals etc. It can safely be surmised then, that their dependence in their immediate natural surroundings – the groves and hills and trees and streams – has cast an indelible impression in their minds of the hosts of benevolent and malevolent spirits: “The fear of the unknown and the unknowable is constantly in their minds and for their safety and security for an assured and better food supply, these tribes must remember the denizens of the spirits residing on the hills, trees, water sources and others (Singh 46).” It is clear from the above discussion that either gratitude or fear, or both, acts as the driving force for the popularity of such Nature-Worshipping Cults like Pahar-Puja. Thanking and acknowledging the benevolent roles of the “Bongas” or seeking forgiveness or appeasing the malevolent spirits occupy the cultural psyche of the Adivasis. In case of Kanhaishwara or Kanaishor the first account holds true for the hill is known also as “Marang-Buru” (Great Mountain), and Marang-Buru is considered as the chief of the Santhal Bonga pantheon and is also worshipped by the Bhumij, Birhor, Ho and Munda (Singh 49). On the other hand Chatan Buri Pahar is associated with malevolent force who is to be appeased once in a year. So the reasons of the popularity of the “Hill Worship” among the Adivasis are pretty clear. But why is it so popular even among the non-adivasis of the area mostly consists of the Hindus? In his article Hansda Sovendra Sekhar has attributed the Marh community of the adjacent Kanhaishwara hill for the emergence of the cult of Pahar Puja. From the same article we come to know that the Marh was not Adivasis and that the Malla Raja of the Jhargram area was also known as the

Marh Raja and they used to identify themselves as Kshatriyas, second in the Hindu caste hierarchy (96). These Marhs started the worship of Hindu deity possibly Shiva on the top of the hill. If anyone visits the top of the hill, they would indeed find stones arranged in the form of a shrine and a Marh priest performing puja using tel, sindoor, dhup, flowers, and fruits offerings.

The adivasi Laya or Pahan worships the Spirits in the lower part of the hill where two large rocks have formed the opening of a cave (See Fig.2).



Fig. 2. The Pahan performing the rituals in the lower part of the Kanaisor Hill. Roy, Abhishek. "Lower Part of Kanaisor Hill". 2018. JPEG.

In anyway, both here as well as in Gotashila (where there is a Shiva Temple) and Gadrasini (Shiva Temple on the top of the hill as well as on the ground), clear presence of Hindu religious practices can be inferred (See Fig.3). Devotees of both Adivasi and Non-Adivasi local inhabitants throng to these sites and offer their homage or simply soak in the experience of celebrating the physical reality of hills and hillocks (part of Chhotonagpur Plateau) that surrounds this border area.



Fig. 3: Dhup (Incense Sticks), Alta, Sindoor, fruits and sweets for "Puja" in the upper part of Kanaisor Hill following a more Hindu tradition. Roy, Abhishek. "Upper Part of Kanaisor Hill". 2018. JPEG.

But far from being engulfed in any religious dogmas and discourses, this co-existence of two different religious systems has only resulted in religio-cultural syncretism where practitioners of both religions freely borrow, assimilate or retain their own beliefs, values and rites without feeling threatened. Few people gather here for offering “puja” and sacrificing fowls or goats on fulfilment of some of their wishes; few gather, visit the shrine (both in the lower part and the top of the hill) make prayer; few just come to mount the hill and enjoys the scenic beauty from the top; and few turn up just to soak up the carnival spirit of the place where a Mela (Fair) is going on. This then has both retained and lost its purely religious nature. But one thing that this Buru-Bonga festival has retained is that it does invite people whose lives are permeated with the presence of hill. From our basic geo-graphical knowledge we do know that hills do help in bringing more rain which in turn helps in agriculture. Hills are important then, and auspicious too. Adivasi or non-ativasi, the presence of this hill range is a visible reality to all the local inhabitants. Moreover, the very name Belpahari has in it the presence of hill (“pahari”). And together all these factors have perhaps entered into the local psyche. Pahar Puja, then, to the local Belpaharians, is a way of connecting with the immediate physical reality of Nature and a celebration of the same. Transcending the confinement and fixity of religion and caste, people celebrate a more local, sub-national identity which is far more connected with their immediate geo-cultural surroundings.

Acknowledgment: No

Author's Contribution: *Abhishek Roy:* Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing

Funding: No

Declaration: Not Applicable

Competing Interest: No

References

1. Patnaik, N. (2001). The Santhal world of supernatural beings. In N. Mathur (Ed.), *Santhal Worldview*. Concept Publication Company.
2. Singh, A. K. (1982). *Tribal festivals of Bihar: A functional analysis*. Concept Publication Company.
3. Hansda, S. S. (2017). Sarna-Hindu theology: A study of some cults, gods and worship in Jharkhand. *The Apollonian*, 4(1-2), 94-106.

Publisher's Note

The Social Science Review A Multidisciplinary Journal remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published data, map and institutional affiliations.

©The Author(s) 2025. Open Access.

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>