

Dasai Festival: In memories and inspirations

- Boro Baski -

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Dasai is one of the important cultural festivals of the Santal community. Even if the festival coincides with the Durga Puja, it is a kind of continual process of Santal livelihood. The Santal livelihood and the festivals are quite reciprocal in that manner. A Santal village has mutual faith in their livelihood and is prosperous with their culture, and Dasaiparob is a revelation of it. Santals have many cultural festivals throughout the year notably Ero Sim, Herior Sim, IriKundli, Janthar, Sohrai, Sakrat, Mah More, Baha, AabgeBonga, SimaBonga, Jom Sim, Mah Sim, KutamDangra and Dasai. Santal marriages, funeral rites or birth rites are not the essential part of any festival as such, they are more like cultural occasions. But the objective behind these festivals and occasions is to remember and worship the Bongas (supernatural souls) and our ancestors who protect us from various adversities. In every festival or occasion, Manjhi-baba, the main person of village culture and his team of five members- Jog Manjhi-baba (the guide for the young boys and girls), Naike (the priest), KudomNaike (the assistant priest), Godeth (the messenger), Paranik (the associate) play the most important role except for the Dasai festival. In this particular festival however, the Dasai Guru and his minions play more prominent role even if there be the presence of Manjhi-baba. In every Santal village, there is one or more Guru(s), the more elderly and knowledgeable within the community. Several times in a year, especially during the time of Chaitra and Baishakh when there isn't much work to do in the fields, the Guru-baba creates a temple porch with clay in his courtyard or sometimes beneath the tree and sit around with his boys. He tutors them of the Santal creation history, the mystical myths of birth and death, the Bongas, the Folk medicines, and the chants which could connect them to their ancestors. There is however no forced obligation to learn the traditional knowledge. The students gather rice, lentils, vegetables, and alcohol for their Guru and later they all sit down and share the food and drinks together. This teacher-student training runs all the year round sometimes through group discussions or in certain occasions where Guru-baba keeps his students beside him and works collectively. In this manner, the Dasai festival could be seen as an annual display of their learning outcomes.

- I was born in a village in Birbhum named Bishnubati. In my childhood days we had SubolKisku as our Guru who had immense knowledge of Santal society and culture. He was often invited to perform songs at KaramBinti or religious congregations in villages where he took his students along to exchange performatives of Santal tradition. I happened to take part with him in these performatives for two years, way back in 1975-76. It was during that time a Muslim teacher established a government school at the vicinity and my parents insisted that I quit SubolGorom's traditional school for the mainstream pedagogy. Today such complementary traditional trainings do not work owing to the intervention of government schools in Santal villages. With time, many of his students have become Paatchela or trustworthy followers of Dasaiporob. Gorom is no more. But his paathchela, Dhana Soren, has become the doyen of Dasaiporob in our village.

Dasai:

Much like other Santal villages, our initiation to Dasai begins a few days after Mahalaya with the ritual commonly known as bel-boron. However, the particular day of the ritual might vary in places. The ritual could be divided into two parts: one, where the customary ritual takes place within the periphery of the village and second, that takes place outside the village premise. The ritual of bel'boron takes place inside the village where the Dasai guru takes the men to the nearest forest early that morning. They gather various known/unknown fruits, roots, plant tendrils, barks of trees from the forest. That evening, at the manjhi-than, the guru'baba explains the community the uses and medicinal benefits of these natural herbs and roots. Thereafter he invokes the bongas and other unearthly souls through the ritual worship with water and various chants. One must note that the Santalbonga or souls are generally of two kinds: auspicious or beneficial and adverse or hostile. The beneficial ones guide the ritual worship while the hostile ones are either barred or appeased. Here the manjhi-baba, dasai guru, ojha, jaan guru and their subordinates mediate between the bongas and the community.

There are customary gestures and gesticulations through which the bongas or the souls are invoked at the site of manjhi-than on the day of bel-boron. One who intends to call upon the bongas particular to the family must sit on a grinder and rotate himself. After a few rotations if one notices a behavioural change in the person, like he might begin to crawl or yell through gesticulations, then he is presumed to have been possessed by the bongas. The bongas who generally possess the bodies of Santals are notably hodubonga, gudubonga, raksasbonga, chutyobonga, kurgubonga to name a few. The bongas are thereby appeased

through proper chants and ritual sacrifice. Often if the bonga demands flesh then it is appeased with a chicken which is eaten alive. Alongside the dasai guru sings the chants in rhythms while the village community accompanies him in it. During these rhythmic chants, few gurus are also remembered notably kamru guru, byuong guru, dibimoi, kolimoi, ganga moi et al. After the day of the initiation, the bel-boron, the next few days the dasai-guru trains the men to Dasai-dance and the songs at the manjhi-than and after completion sends them off to gather their dance costumes. These costumes are quite different from other festivals. The men wear shirts or t-shirts and wrap around a saree worn by their women folks; popularly termed as 'kosnibande'. They also wear a headgear by tying up saree or long dress around the head flaunted by bak-phool on the head and peacock's feather in their hands. They carry two baskets which dangle around their waist. As for their musical instruments, they not only carry the percussions like madal and lagra, but also flute, gabgubi, gongs, wooden string instrument, dotara, and of course, arrows. The team comprises of one to two buyong-the harlequin who uses masks made from earthen pots or dried skin of gourds. After the costumes have been gathered, they prepare themselves for the dance-tour through their own village visiting each and every household. This dance-tour through the village is commonly called "aatojagao" or "gram jagao", a kind of wake-up call for the bongas of various families for the next few days.

Once the bongas have risen, the bel-borong ritual ends and so begins the part where the rituals travel beyond the village. We call this aspect of the festival "disomdaran" or village-tour. The Dasai guru takes his minions touring across neighbouring villages from the seventh day onwards or Saptami of Durga Puja. Early in the morning they offer their ritual worship at the manjhi-than and then travel beyond their village as they dance along. The students maintain a record of the musical instruments to be accompanied during the dance-tour. After they return with alms they feast and a specific portion of the feast is offered to the owner of the musical instruments as well.

From Saptami to Dasami, they travel around the neighbouring households, displays their dance and songs and collect alms in the process. In each village the Dasai Guru is welcomed cordially and the women wash their feet, take their blessings and greet them with rice, lentil seeds, vegetables and whatever they could afford. Each day they return to their own village in the evening, offer their ritual worship at the manjhi-than, inform the manjhi-baba and finally disperse and go to their respective households. Thus, the dance-tour across villages ends with a final ritual sacrifice of a buffalo, also known as "kadamah". This final ritual sacrifice is quite symbolic and instead of an actual buffalo a pumpkin is offered as sacrifice.

The Story of Dasai:

The festival is celebrated uniformly across Santal villages but the story differs from places. The more popular version of the narrative and the one that could be authenticated by our creation myth and various dasai songs, goes like this- Right from the origin, women are seen as the most valuable aspect of the community. Guru Kohlean writes: “we are running around from various places in the shape of beetle, trying to protect our women from the others”. Our songs and myths also refer to a certain Madho Singh who threatened to forcibly marry Santal women for which our forefathers migrated in large numbers. But even then, in different lands, they didn't feel safe. So, it becomes a custom for the women to draw tattoos on their chest and hands and the men had a circular mark etched on their left hand with a heated rod, commonly known as ‘siko’. These signs identify our ethnic roots. We have since carried on this tradition. Our forefathers also cautioned us, telling: “Step anywhere but never cross the nougoda or the River Damodar ...” Hence, we stayed away from the river. Our old inhabitations are thus always on the elevated region. Those who didn't paid heed to these folk narratives, seemed to have lost their ethnic roots. Our Dasai songs speak of two female rivers- Aynam and Kajar (some say, Hasi and Dumni) crossing which these people have merged with the other communities. The Dasai guru and his minions thus go out in search of and retrieve the lost folk members. The buyong- harlequin- who walks ahead of his dancing team acts as an investigator. He peeps into the corners, here and there, as a symbolic search of the two lost souls. They wear sarees so that no one is suspicious of their activities. Bows and arrows lay hidden inside the musical instruments, so if need arises, they could check the enemy with a mighty fight.

A second narrative which is still popular in various parts goes like this: right from the beginning we fought for our survival, often concerning our habitation or food or even for the security of our women. Times when we won, or lost and have taken refuge in forests and mountains. We had, then, with us a very valiant fighter, Durgo. For his physical prowess and indomitable courage, few called him, “HudurDurgo”. He fought as a vanguard to the community. It is said that the enemy conspired against him and employed a femme-fatale to lure him to his death. So today, the festival remains a happy occasion for the youngsters but for others it carries a painful memory of betrayal and torture. That is why the mournful refrain of ‘haihai’ comes within every song. The songs carry the tales of the search for the lost siblings- Aynam and kiKajar, along with the tragic tales of valiant Durgo. Often parents name their children after them, even today.

Dasai festival in contemporary society:

Many rationalists may consider such Adivasi customs and rituals, including Dasai, as merely superstitions. Even some adivasis themselves deny such a community belief. It is also true, that majority of the community have been able to comfortably reconcile with the traditional values and their distinct lifestyles. Some, who have been exposed to modern pedagogy and life ethos, often ruminate their growing distance from the roots. This fear is not entirely unjustified: in the name of development and rationality, the mainstream often tries to homogenize cultures, and this apparently inevitable cultural genocide often triggers our fears of survival attached to our own ethnic roots. This often surfaces as a resistance- even a resistance and apathy towards the beneficial and essential requirements. In this regard, the government education policy could have taken a serious role to reconcile, but has failed drastically in the process. They remained one sided, and due to its autocratic and bureaucratic requirements, the policies have been thrust upon from above. It is evident now that until and unless we assert ourselves by creating a dialogue within our socio-cultural, economic and political spaces, such political, economic and cultural oppression would continue. Dasai, thus, remains a memory of resistance as much as an inspiration.

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<https://youtu.be/on4VPSedyTE>