

The Sacred Complex of Munda Tribe

Malini Srivastava

*Department of Anthropology, University of Allahabad, Allahabad 211 002, Uttar Pradesh, India
Telephone: 0532-2642772; E-mail: malini1_srivastava@yahoo.com*

KEYWORDS Munda. Religion. Sacred Centres. Sacred Performances. Sacred Specialists

ABSTRACT The Munda, one of the scheduled tribes of the Jharkhand, occupy third position in the numerically strongest Kolarian tribes, are the inhabitants of Chotanagpur region in Jharkhand. Racially, they are proto-australoid and speak Mundari dialect of Austro-Asiatic family. The present study was undertaken in Chotanagpur plateau in Jharkhand to study the religion of the Mundas within the framework and concept of 'Sacred Complex'. Four Munda villages, namely, Daugada, Buruma, Sarwada and Kullipiddi under Khunti subdivision of Ranchi District were studied.

INTRODUCTION

The Munda are one of the major tribes in Jharkhand, numbering more than half a million. They are supposed to be one of the earliest settlers in the area. Their culture, therefore, manifests some of the oldest tribal traditions in the country. Jharkhand is one of the states which have witnessed the most industrialization in the tribal belt resulting in major changes in the tribal culture. But of all the aspects of culture religion is one of the least changeable. In this paper I will attempt to present the religious life of the Munda with the help of the Concept of Sacred Complex, proposed by Vidyarthi (1961).

According to Vidyarthi (1961) "A Sacred Complex is intricate and interdependent grouping of sacred centres, sacred performances and sacred specialists and is in cultural-structural relationship with the whole Hindu civilization" (Sahay and Singh, 1998, p. 110). The holistic picture of tribal religion can be drawn in the framework of Sacred Complex of which their sacred beliefs, types of spirits, sacred geography, sacred specialists and sacred performances are a few components. The sacred places and symbolic articles or objects representing different supernatural powers constitute the sacred geography. Sacred specialists are the persons who propitiate the God/Supernatural powers of the group concerned on behalf of the individual worshipper; and the sacred performances reflect the method of propitiation, rituals, worship, offering sacrifice, etc. practised by the people. Another theoretical framework of Nature-Man-Spirit Complex has been developed

by Vidyarthi, in which he discovered close relationships of Nature, Man and Spirit and their mutual interactions, which go to constitute a complex. (Vidyarthi, 1963, pp.8-9). For the present study, the author is trying once again, to study the sacred complex of Munda tribe, organize meaningful data, to project the culture within this framework, and study the significant sacred Sarna religion of Mundas. The converted Mundas are returning to their religion Sarnaism once again. This is because of the fact of resurgence of ethnicity among the Munda. (Sachidanand, 1979, p.60). They are now showing an increasing awareness of affinity with their tribal beliefs and customs. This was found true even for the present area of study among the four villages.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Munda tribe of the Daugada, Buruma, Sarwada and Kullipiddi villages, under Khunti subdivision in Ranchi district of Jharkhand was studied. Khunti subdivision is one of the few areas in Jharkhand where least immigration has taken place. These villages are located about 20- 25 km east of Murhu Block. There are mainly 24 Gram Panchayats in Murhu Block and each gram panchayat has four or five villages under it depending upon the population. At present there are 24 Gram Panchayats in the Muruhu Block. These villages consist of mixed population of *Sarna Munda* (those Mundas who worship Nature) and *Christian Mundas* (converted to Christianity).

SACRED COMPLEX: SACRED CENTRE

Sacred centres are the particular spots where

Correspondence Address: Malini Srivastava
231, New Mumfordganj, Allahabad 211 002,
Uttar Pradesh, India

the sacred performances take place. Sacred centres are most important because all rituals and devotional activities are performed here. There are, mainly, four types of sacred centres in the villages under study. These are as follows:

Sarna: Although the greater portion of the primeval forest, in clearings of which the Munda villages were originally established, has since disappeared under the axe or under the jara-fire¹ (Roy, 1912: p.221). It is a religious place of Mundas, where *Sakua tree* is found. Mainly, only one *Sarna* is located in a village. It is believed that when Munda ancestors came to Chotanagpur plateau they left a patch of forest uncleared with the belief that the Gods would reside in this patch of forest. Therefore cutting *Sarna tree* (*Sakua*) or other trees around it is prohibited. People go to *Sarna* only once in a year to celebrate the festival of *Sarhul*. Women are prohibited to visit this religious centre *Sarna*. It is believed that if a woman touches even a leaf of the tree, she will be affected with the curse of *Bonga*. This curse on a woman can only be removed if she sacrifices a red hen by the *Pahan* (religious head). The *Pahan* at *Sarna* performs every religious activity.

Sasandiri: The place where Mundas bury their relatives is called *Sasandiri*. The word 'Sasandiri' is made up of two words: *Sasan*, which means the place of reburial and *diri*, which means a big stone.

The relatives and villagers in *Sasandiri* bury the dead body. Women do not participate in this activity. After burial there is a custom of erecting stones over the dead body. There is no fixed time for placing stones. It is to be noted that women participate in placing stones with men. In all these villages it was observed that before placing the stones they wash it first by the blood of goat or hen, followed by water, and *handiya* (local liquor made of rice) and finally by oil. These stones are kept vertically erect. The name, date of birth, date of death is written on the vertical stone. The *Pahan* performs all the customary rituals in *Sasandiri*.

Akhra: *Akhra* is a place where a tamarind tree is found, under which some big stones are arranged for sitting. Mainly all types of political matters are resolved here and some religious functions and dances related to them also are performed here. Women are allowed to visit *Akhra*. There are two types of *Akhra* in Munda villages.

i Jadur Akhra: It is for *Sarna Munda* and situated in the middle of the village.

ii Christian Akhra: This is for *Christian Mundas* and located in the village near the jungle.

Sacred Performances

The second important component of the Sacred Complex is the *sacred performances*, mainly performed by the village priest. Sacred performances are the sets of rites and rituals performed by worshippers at different sacred centres. The sacred performances are mainly dedicated to God, deities and ancestors etc. In performing *puja*, they mainly use the *vermillion*, *arwa rice* (red rice), flower etc. The new cereals like maize or paddy are also offered. They celebrate sacred performance for the blessing of God and good wishes for health, happiness and rich harvest etc. On some occasions the offerings are associated with Shamanistic performance. Purity is strictly observed otherwise the spirits may become displeased resulting in disasters to the persons, family or village concerned. Mundas celebrate hunting festivals like *Phagu*, *Bisu sikror* etc, *Rogahari*, *Mage Parab*, *Ba parab*, *Batauli* etc.

In these Munda villages, mainly, the following sacred performances are made.

Sarhul: It is an important festival of *Mundas*, celebrated in the month of April. This festival is celebrated to worship their ancestors. Legend says that once a lion ran after a man and the man escaped and saved his life by hiding himself behind the bush. He at once resolved that once in a year he will offer *Sakua's* flowers and leaves and sacrifice a living animal. Since then this festival has been celebrated by the Munda people. During the *puja*, *Pahan* comes with three pitchers to *Sarna*, out of which two pitchers are filled with pond water. It is widely believed by the Mundas that if the water level gets reduced overnight rains fail to come through the year and if the water level remains the same, monsoon arrives on time. Since it is prohibited for women to go to *Sarna* all the men go to *Sarna* to offer *Sakua's* flowers and leaves along with *Arwa rice*, *handia* and three hens. On the first day cooked *Arwa rice* is offered to *Sarna*, and then the people eat it. On the second day third pitcher is filled with *handia* and kept in front of *Sarna* and accepted as *prasad*.

On the third day, a hen is sacrificed and eaten after cooking it. If some food material is left over then it is brought to the home and then eaten only by the males. Women are forbidden to eat

even the *prasad* offered at the *Sarna* during the festival of *Sarhul*.

Phagun: This festival is celebrated in the month of March, where “a plant of *Simar*” is fixed under the “Tag of phagun”. After that hen, arwa rice, handia are taken to that place to be offered and then arwa rice is fed to the hen. Soon after, the hen is sacrificed and cooked there. The whole process is performed by the *Pahan*, who after mutilating the hen cooks it and then offers *roti* (*chapatti*). Rice and cooked hens are given to children while adults are supposed to drink *handia* (local liquor). Women are prohibited from participating in these sacred performances.

Karma: It is organized in October in the hope of getting better harvest. There are some stories regarding sacred performances. Karma and Dharma were two brothers. Once their father asked them who among them was greater. On being asked this Karma started worshipping the tree of *Karam* and started farming and Dharma kept busy himself in doing something else. Finally Karma became richer than Dharma. Therefore this sacred performance is celebrated.

Pahan sow the seeds of rice (paddy) one week before the worship gets started. One week later, village people come with *kettledrum* to bury “a twig of *kadumba* plant” in *Akhra*. And the *Pahan* worships that twig. When the whole process is done all the children and adults have handia (local liquor), rice and dance around *Kadumba* plant buried in *Akhra*. This process takes place for three days. By that time, the plant of rice, which was sown by *Pahan* in *Akhra*, grows up to 20 cm., which is a sign of good farming. After three days, the whole objects offered in *Akhra* are then put into the river. Men and women participate equally in this process and everyone gets *Gud*, *Chiwda* and *Mudhi* (local name for eatables made of puffed rice) in the form of *Prasad*.

Roghara: This is celebrated once in a year in the month of April. The main objective of this festival is to drive away evil spirits and diseases out of their homes. Only women can participate in this festival and they keep fast during the puja. In *Roghara*, women clean their houses by cow dung and keep ashes, cow-dung, leaves of hundi, udi, saag, water, soap, and a small broomstick in a pitcher. Then they put vermilion marks on a pitcher and assemble at *Akhra* with stick rods and their pitchers. Women put vermilion on each other's forehead. Later all the village women throw *arwa* rice at *Akhra* and *Pahan's* wife sits with a

chicken to let it pick the rice. *Munda's* (political head) wife also plays an important role in this process. *Pahan's* wife with a chicken and all the other women move forward by singing a song and keeping the pitchers on their heads. After covering some distance they stop and place their pitchers on the ground, remove impurities from it and wipe on the ground and again they put pitchers on their head, and proceed forward. While doing so they reach the border of the village and put their pitchers on the ground and worship. Then they break the pitchers with the stick and leave a chicken in the jungle and run back into the village by some other path. Because it is believed that if they return by the same path they have come with pitcher, having all the diseases and ghost-like things in it, might be hovering there and may catch them. While returning to their village by different path, they take bath in a pond on the way, so that they get rid off completely all the diseases and supernatural influences. Then all the women gather at *Akhra* and have handiya in a cup, which is made up of folded leaves, which makes them feel cool. After that all the women sit together at *Akhra*, and eat *Chiwda* (roasted rice) and *Mudi* (puffed rice).

Sacred Specialists

The third and important component of the Sacred Complex is sacred specialist. Generally, all tribal groups have a priest or a group of sacred specialists, who are limited to two or three in number. Membership to the office is usually hereditary. They are called by different names in different tribes. In other word “Sacred specialists are the priests associated with different centres and help the worshippers and pilgrims in the sacred performances.” Ho and Mundas of Jharkhand call them *Pahan*; Gonds of Madhya Pradesh call them *Baiga*. They are religious headmen and are responsible for religious matters in which they have great influence and command. Just as a secular headman maintains proper relations between the villagers and the world outside, so the *Pahan* is responsible for the relations of the village with gods and other supernatural beings.

The following types of sacred specialists are found in these four Munda villages:

Devda: *Devda* is a part time religious specialist among the Mundas who is believed to have possessed special powers so that he can free them from evil spirits and witchcraft. When Mundas

are suffering from severe health disorder, they are considered to be under the influence of souls. In such circumstances they go to Devda to overcome from such bouts of illness. Devda treats them by chanting *mantras* and tingling with the peacock's feather. But in severe conditions Devda asks for patient's urine, which is kept in a large flat dish. After that he gets to see the image of the witch possessed by the patient by splashing some drops of oil. Devda also sacrifices goat or a cock to let the patient free from evil souls. Sometimes, he himself advises Devda to let the soul go away by splashing some water with a stick poured in oil. Devda not only takes interest in witchcraft but he also provides medicinal herbs for the treatment like epilepsy, malaria, loose motion, fever etc. After recovery patients usually donate money and 'Dhan' (paddy) as per their economic status. *Devda* is not a hereditary post, i.e., it is not necessary that the son of Devda will become *Devda*. To become Devda one has to undergo training given by an old and experienced Devda and after getting such an education one has to reward or donate something to his *guru*.

Pahan: It is the full-time sacred specialist among the Mundas. In other words he provides the Mundas with all the rituals and religious services. All the family members of Pahan are also called Pahan. This office is purely hereditary. If the Pahan has no son, in that condition his brother is designated as Pahan but neither his

wife nor daughter can be titled as Pahan. The wife of Pahan conducts such performances where only women can participate. Pahan enjoys honour and prestige in the society.

CONCLUSION

From the above findings and discussion it can be said that despite the drastic changes due to urbanization and industrialization the Munda tribe is still maintaining its religion and culture. We can conclude that in spite of the fast pace of modernization the Mundas are still maintaining their traditional religion, values and culture.

NOTES

1. By the 'jara' system, land is prepared for cultivation by burning down portions of jungles.

REFERENCES

- Roy, S.C.: *Munda & Their Country*, Asia Publications House, London (1912).
 Sachchidananda: *The Changing Mundas*, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi (1979).
 Sahay, Vijoy S. and Singh, Pradip K.: *Indian Anthropology*. K. K. Publication, Allahabad (1998).
 Vidyarathi L.P.: *Sacred Complex of Hindu Gaya*. Asia Publishing House, Bombay (1961).
 Vidyarathi L.P.: *The Maler: A study in Nature-Man-Spirit Complex of a hill Tribe*, Bookland Private Ltd., Calcutta (1963).