

The Kora Culture of West Bengal: Birth Death and Marriage Rituals of the Kora Community

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Abstract

Every community gets its own unique identity through its very own culture. In the same way the Kora community has also made its unique identity. However, this distinct Kora community is not well known in huge parts of modern India. This essay tries to bring to focus the unique cultural identity of the Kora community by shedding light on their birth, death and marriage related customs and analyzing their relevance. The point is show that this unique community and their practices are also an integral part of the cultural heritage of India. This essay is an attempt to bring to focus the various aspects which are part of the Kora tradition and culture and how these are reflected in their rituals. These also give us a picture of the life and struggle of the Kora Community.

Keywords: Kora Community, Culture, Birth, Death, Marriage, Rituals .

Introduction

In ancient times, before the arrival of the Aryan race, India in its undivided glory was a land primarily inhabited and culturally dominated by no-Aryans or aboriginal people. It is now established that the ancestors of present tribal people were the original inhabitants of the land of India. However, with the coming of the Aryans and with gradual modernization these people have been pushed to the threshold of an existential crisis. They have been completely ignored and marginalized, and their culture has gradually been pushed to the periphery of our contemporary society.

Like many other native communities in other countries, the Koracommunity of West Bengal are also facing similar existential problems. According to the 2011 census the total population of the Kora community in West Bengal is 159,404. Despite such low population, the Koras are in no way lacking in cultural heritage. They have their own, unique religious, cultural and social practices and festivities. These cultural aspects are handed down from one generation to the next. Their own sense of being part of a tradition drives them to preserve their own cultural aspects through their day to day life. This essay deals with the unique beliefs and practices of the Kora community with regards to birth, death and Marriage.

Birth, death and marriage have been an integral part of human existence. From ancient times, different cultures have developed their rituals and customs centering on these three fundamental aspects of human life which affects every family. Among these many cultures, the 'Kora' community is no exception, as they have their own unique and typical customs and rituals that form the nucleus of their tradition and heritage. This paper analyses these cultural practices associated with the Kora community.

The Kora Culture of West Bengal: Birth Death and Marriage Rituals of the Kora Community Birth refers to the inception of new life on earth. For all the cultures, this is an occasion of celebration and mirth. The Koras are no exception in this case. The birth of any child in the Kora community ushers a wave of celebrations that are marked by certain rituals. This tradition still continues to this day. This paper would like to give a detailed overview of the rituals that follow birth in this community.

Whenever there is a new birth, the new born baby is bathed in a large pot of water. A large chunk of iron or an iron bar is placed in the water. After bathing this water, the baby is made to wear slim iron rings in his/her hands and feet. The Koras believe this ritual using iron protects the child from any type future ghostly or demonic attack. This is followed by the offering of dry rice grains in the same water. The first grain of rice is put in the water in the name of the main god of the Koras. This is followed by a grain of rice in the name of the child, and then many such grains are dipped in the water in the name of the grandfather, father,



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grandmother, uncle, aunt etc.. It is believed by the Koras that by doing this, the new born child imbibes the good qualities of the members of the family. For example, if the grain of rice that has been put in the water in the name of the new born child mixes or comes in touch with the grain of rice put in the name of the grandfather or grandmother, it is believed that the child would imbibe the characteristics of that person. Alternatively if the child's grain comes in touch with that of his uncle or aunt, the child would inherit their characteristics. If the child's grain somehow comes in touch with that of the lord of the Koras, then it is believed that the child is destined to inherit divine characteristics. Apart from this, it is believed that the person with whom the child's grain comes in touch with, that person will be considered a witness and responsible for all the future activities of the child.

On the other hand it is seen that the mother of the new born child goes to the pond for bathing, she takes with her palm leaves, an egg and some vermilion (also known as sindur). After finishing her bath, the mother puts the egg and vermilion in one palm leaf and on the other palm leaf she leaves a few drops of her milk, this is then put into the water as a form of offering to the water god. The prayer and expectation of the mother is that her child be spared from any sort of danger or drowning whenever he/she comes near any water body. The palm leaves are meant to be a substitute for the child's life, if the water gods wishes to play, he/she should play with the offerings in the palm leaves, not with the life of her precious child. After finishing this ritual, on her return journey from the pond, the mother drops her breast milk in three different locations on her way. The first is over the thorn of Babul or Babla Tree (thorn Mimosa) and the other two on cow dung in two different places. It is believed that by doing so the mother is protecting her child from getting hurt in the future, the child would not get pricked by any thorn whenever he goes out in the field, nor would he get injured whenever he goes out with the cows. This ritual is also supposed to protect the child from any evil eye. These rituals are performed by the mothers. However there are some differences in these rituals based on regions. For example, in some regions, after bathing of the child, the people try to make the child eat Neem tree (Indian Lilac or Azadirachta indica) fruit or leaf, and then try to make the child sleep in the sunlight in the empty space in middle of the household which has been cleaned and plastered with cow dung.

Death is a fundamental truth of human existence. Where there is life, there is also death. The prospect of the inevitability of death is something that all societies, cultures face. Despite the sorrow and grief that accompanies death in a family there are certain rituals which are observed when someone dies in a particular culture. It is through these rituals that the uniqueness of a community, even their identity and subjectivity is defined. The Koras also have their own rituals that are followed when

someone in the community dies. The dead in the Kora community are burned in a funeral pyre. The people who accompany the dead body to the cremation ground are supposed to follow certain rituals on their return journey. For example, all of them have to go over the thorn of Babla or Babul tree (thorn mimosa) without getting pricked. This is kept on their way. Then they will have to embrace and hold the trunk of a Peepal tree or Ashwattha tree (*Ficus religiosa*). Then all of them have to take a small fire burning in a small broken earthen pot, and they use the leaves of the Peepal tree to absorb the warmth of the fire and this they put in their shoulders. This is done so that no presence of the dead remains on their physical body, since they have carried the dead on their shoulders. These rituals are done so that these people do not face any future ghostly activity. All the people who return from the cremation ground gather in the courtyard of the house of the deceased person, and consume Neem tree leaf, 'misri' (Crystallized sugar lumps), and some rice grains and water. After this they all return to their respective homes. Three nights after the death, the women of the house give white clothes to their brothers, and on this day all the people who went to the cremation ground are invited for a simple meal. Generally, the expense for this meal is to be done by the daughter of the deceased. Moreover, the children of the deceased are supposed to go every night to the cremation place where the deceased body was burned and offer food for that person. This has to be done on three nights before the Shradh ceremony. They will also have to go in the following mornings and check whether the offered food has been consumed or not. In reality different types of insects consume the food, but it is believed that the dead person has consumed the food. The shradh ceremony takes place generally after fifteen or ten days after the death. On the previous evening of the Shradh a red coloured hen and a black coloured hen are taken to the cremation place where the body was burned. In that place a small house made of sand is built for the deceased person and the red coloured hen is offered as a sacrifice in front of the entrance door of that small house. In a distance of about 20 to 25 feet, the black coloured hen is then sacrificed and his severed head is left there as an offering to god. At this exact same moment, the sand house is set on fire. Addressing the dead person, a message is uttered that is- since this house has been burned so you return to your own house. Since the Koras invoke their ancestors during different pujas, this ritual is done to bring the deceased persons soul to the home where his children or heirs live. Then one leg of the red hen is attached with one end of a string and the other end is then either attached or touched in any one of the ears of the son of the deceased person. After doing this they all return from the cremation place. On the return journey it is required that the leg of the hen must touch the ground few times and the returning party must make noise and could even beat drums while returning. When the party approaches

their village or colony, all the other residents of the place close their doors and windows. The hen is then brought inside the house and a fire lamp is kindled and the hen and the fire lamp are then taken inside the room where the dead person used to live, if the flame moves towards the exit of the house then it is assumed that the dead soul is unwilling to enter the house, however if the flame points towards the room then it is assumed the dead soul is willing to go inside the house. The leg of the hen is kept in a bucket along with some rice in the courtyard of the house. Some Koras keep this hanging in the front door and bury it in front of the house on the next day. However, if the Koras believe that the deceased person does not deserve to be in the company of ancestors then they follow a ritual. In the name of that deceased person a black hen is driven from the house towards the cremation ground and then it is sacrificed there. The people, who pursue the hen to the cremation place, do not return to the house of the dead man, rather they return to their respective homes. This ritual is still followed to this day to drive the evil or dishonest soul from entering the house.

The Kora people are not financially well off. Hence it is very difficult for them to visit the city of Gaya for the ritual of 'Pindidan'. Therefore, they devised a new way to offer Pindi after someone dies in the family. Generally, the Koras dig a hole in the ground in front of the house and consider this as an imaginary form of Gaya. In the hole, they place broken egg and in it they place cotton, 'Krishna Til' (sesame seeds), shards of iron and a portion of the root of Karamcha tree (Bengal Currant or Carissa Carandas). The relatives of the dead put these things in the hole in the ground, this is done a day before the day of the 'Shradh'. This procedure is known among the Koras as 'Bhutrutungi'. On this same day, the son of the deceased uses two Sal tree (Shorea Robusta) leaves to absorb the warmth of fire and rubs the leaves on the shoulders of the people who went to the cremation ground. He also rubs mustard oil in their shoulders. The people are then invited to have meal in the house of the deceased. The Koras follow this ritual to alleviate any pain that might have been caused to the shoulders of those people who carried the body of the deceased to the cremation ground on their shoulders. From the day of the death to the previous day of the Shradh, it is forbidden for the son and other relatives of the deceased to eat any sort of salt, or spicy food. On the day when all the people who went to the crematorium are given a feast, the son takes permission from all of the said persons to have salted and spicy food again. To this day, the Koras try to follow these rituals associated with death.

Marriage is a social institution which can be observed in almost all the different cultures and societies of the world. Marriage therefore is also an integral part of human societal existence. Through this institution, two people bound together in a social bond and a relationship that supports the continuum of family. The Koras are generally economically weak,

so they have work really hard to sustain themselves. For these poor people marriage, like in other societies and religions, brings about a freshness of life, an occasion of joy and mirth that they seldom experience in life. This is one of the happiest moments in the life of the Kora people and hence like all other cultures they have their own way of celebrating this auspicious occasion. The following section would try to shed some light on the marriage related practices of the Koras.

The marriage of the Koras is preceded by numerous practices that take place a few days before the actual day of marriage, and this generally happens in both the families- the groom's as well as the bride's. There is a lot of singing and music and dancing in both the houses. There is Jhumur dance and drum beating (Dhamsa and Madol are used as musical instruments). A few days before marriage the family members of the groom visit the house of the bride to bless the prospective bride and this is popularly known as 'Ashirvadi'. The vice-versa happens as the family of the bride visits the groom's house to bless him. In this ritual almost 60 to 70 people are involved. This ritual also helps the two families to socialize amongst themselves and to know each other. A lot of dancing and singing is also associated with these visits. The women of the groom's family, mainly his sister-in-laws and sisters often socialize with the bride, as they chat and have fun, they also braid the bride's hair. Similarly, the mothers of the groom and the bride, and their aunts and other female relatives put 'alta' a kind of red dye in the feet of each other. This is a very colourful occasion, one that gives us a vibrant picture of villages of Bengal. In yet another ritual the 'Morol' (Morol refers to an elderly person of the village who acts as the leader of the village community) of the respective villages take country made alcohol in an earthen pot and gift it the other 'Morol' of the village as a Prasad of the lord of the village. This country made alcohol is popularly called 'Hariya' in the local dialect. This alcohol is then distributed among the elders of the respective villages who also take part in dancing on the tunes of 'Dhamsa' and 'Madol.'

Seven days before the marriage, the two families visit each other's house for a special purpose, this is popularly known as 'DutamAggo' which means bringing of the marriage. In this ritual, a white thread is taken and it is stained with haldi (turmeric) and the thread becomes yellow in colour. This thread is then knotted seven times and the bride and groom's families exchange the threads with each other. The seven threads symbolize the seven days prior to the marriage, with the passing of every day, one knot in the thread is untangled and therefore seven knots for seven days. Like other cultures, the Koras also believe that marriage is not only a special occasion but also very auspicious. Therefore they feel that it is not right to bring this occasion to their doorsteps empty handed, and hence they use threads. Another reason for this practice is that since the Koras are

generally illiterate, the seven knots in the thread helps them to properly calculate the day of the marriage as it comes near. Although in contemporary times the Koras are literate enough to calculate the days before marriage, in ancient times it was really difficult for them to calculate the exact day of marriage. This practice is still maintained today by some Koras as it is a part of their tradition. In contemporary times, dowry system is a social evil that still plagues most parts of India. The Koras also have a tradition of dowry. However, this is radically different from the prevalent dowry traditions in India. Generally, in dowry systems, the bride's family has to give money and other properties to the groom, for the Kora community it is the exact opposite, the groom's family has to give a dowry. The amount of dowry has remained same from earlier times, that is, a dowry of four and a half rupees is to be paid to the family of the bride.

On the day of marriage, the 'Chatnatola' (a pavilion structure made of upright erected bamboos and wood, where the marriage ritual takes place) is made, this is known as 'Manduatola' in Kora dialect. A Mandua puja is organized here on the day of the marriage. A red coloured hen is sacrificed here on this day, and the meat of the hen is distributed as a 'prasad' (a food offering for the gods). However, only the relatives of the bride and groom are allowed to receive this 'prasad'. The Koras build an idol of a monkey in the marriage ceremony, the idol is made in such a way that it seems that the monkey is supervising all of the marriage ceremony. There is a popular folk story behind this practice of using monkey idol in marriage ceremonies.

During the marriage another 'Chatnatola' is built in the groom's house. The groom is moved to and fro from this chatnatola to his bedroom three times. These three times the groom's body is plastered with turmeric powder. Then the groom is made to eat atop chhal or atop rice. This is commonly known as 'AiburoBhat', the Koras call it 'thuburomaddi'- this means the groom's last meal as a bachelor. The clothes that the groom wears on this occasion (generally a loin cloth for lower body known as dhoti and a small shawl covering the upper body known as 'gamcha' or 'chador') are stained with turmeric powder, this same dress is to be worn by him during the marriage ceremony. This dress is considered to be holy for the groom. Before departing for the marriage ceremony, as a ritualistic practice, the mother of the groom makes the groom sit on her lap asks him a question three times, the question is -'son what are you going to bring?', tradition dictates that the answer of the groom should be- 'mother, I am going to bring a slave girl for you'. The mother is then supposed to kiss her son on the forehead three times and bless him and let him go wishing that he succeeds in his mission. When the marriage party of the groom reaches near the house of the bride, the groom is first made to get married to a mango tree in the vicinity of the bride's house. Some vermilion and turmeric powder is smeared on the mango tree, and a

thread is strapped seven times with the tree. The groom then embraces the tree and leaves for the bride's house. On reaching the bride's house, the bride and the groom are accompanied by some members of the families to a nearby pond, river or any water body. There the bride and the groom use sickle to draw two lines on the water, this is known as 'Jal Kata' (literally meaning cutting the water). The place where the lines are drawn on water, the bride and the groom pour some water there and take the remaining water in earthen pots ('kalsi') back to the house. This water that they carry back is considered to be as holy as 'Gangajal' (the water of the river Ganges). This practice is referred to as 'JalPranam'. This is then followed by a dramatization of an imaginary war between the groom and the brother of the bride. The husband of the sister (either elder or younger) of the groom and that of the bride respectively dress themselves as horses. They then carry the groom and the brother of the bride on their backs or shoulders and an imaginary war ensues. In this war the main weapons are the 'Gangajal' and the leaves of a mango tree. After sometime the brother of the bride concedes defeat in the war and happily embraces the groom and offers his sister as bride to the groom. Marriage is presented as an end to this war. The reason for this unique ritual has a historical context. In history, whenever a king attacked another kingdom and defeated the armies of that kingdom, the king of the defeated kingdom usually offered his daughter or sister as a bride to the victorious king or prince. The reason for this offering was to save the kingdom from total destruction at the hands of the victorious king. The marriage of the victorious king and the defeated king's daughter would therefore bring about peace. This was a standard practice in ancient days. The Koras follow this tradition till this day by enacting a mock war and the marriage is indeed made to look like that the groom had won the hand of the bride by defeating her brother.

After the conclusion of this mock war, the women of the bride's family pour many buckets of water in the Chatnatola, and this makes the place muddy. It is then the responsibility of the women of the groom to make this place dry again. They do so by Jhumur dance. This practice is known amongst Koras as 'ManduaLohor'. Generally, no person from the groom's family can return home until this work is properly done. The Koras are deeply associated with earth and therefore it is no surprise that such unique rituals centering on earth and mud is part of the Kora community. Earth is such an integral part of their existence, it is revealed through such idiosyncrasies of their culture.

When the groom returns to his house with his newly wed bride, the mother of the groom unveils the bride's veil and sees her face and ritualistically welcomes her to the house which is known as 'Boron'. After this the bride and the groom are accompanied by their friends to the pond where they go for bathing. Once there, the groom has to try to untie the braided

hair of the bride with his left hand, this he has to do without looking at the bride. Simultaneously, the bride and the groom keep on placing soft mud on each other's heads. The friends of the groom hide a small brass pot in the pond and the friends of the bride and the bride are supposed to find it out. Similarly the groom and his friends are also required to seek out a small brass pot hidden in the pond by the bride and her companions. After the conclusion of these games, on his return journey the groom is supposed to hunt for a wild animal or bird with the help of a bow and arrow. The bride is then supposed to take that hunted animal or bird to the house. Then she is supposed to prepare and cook it as a food item and distribute it to everyone in the house. This ritual is reflective of the Kora's ancient way of livelihood. The koras like other tribes used to hunt down animals and birds for food. This was their primary source of food and hunger drove them to hunt. However, in contemporary times, the groom is not made to hunt for animals or birds, rather armed with his bow and arrow the groom shoots fruits from trees and gives it to the bride. The Koras still follow this ritual as this is stark reminder of the fact that the life of the Kora community is beset with hardships and struggle. If unnecessary they may have to hunt again to satisfy their hungry bellies. The fact that they still follow this ritual is also a testament of the commitment to uphold and preserve their cultural traits that have shaped their identity as a community.

Traditionally it is seen that in the 'chatnatola' of the marriage, the Koras keep a 'Jhuri' or bucket, a 'Kodal' or spade (digging hoe), and the yoke of a bullock cart. The bride and the groom place their right feet on this yoke and in this position the groom smears the forehead of the bride with vermilion accepting her as his lawful wife. In Hindu traditions, the nuptial bonds are sealed keeping fire as a witness. Similarly in Kora tradition, the bonds of marriage are solemnized keeping the yoke of the bullock cart as witness. When the groom smears the forehead of the bride with vermilion or sindur, this sacred moment of purity is veiled by a yellow cloth by people who stand close to the couple. The couple is veiled in such a manner that only the people who are holding the yellow cloth can see them. This also creates a loving moment of intimacy in the marriage. It is also believed that the profession of earth digging is future means of livelihood for the newly married couple. For this reason the bucket, spade and the yoke serve as symbolic reminders or markers. Apart from this, during one of the rituals the groom places a bucket ('Jhuri') on the head of the bride and the bride utters a message for the husband. She says that he is her husband and she will forever nurture or take care of him by digging earth. This reflects that the daily utensils that provide the livelihood for the Koras, they symbolically try to represent these items in their marriage ceremonies. Through these varied and unique practices and rituals their marriage

ceremonies are celebrated. These practices differentiate their marriage ceremony from those of the other cultures. These rituals and traditional practices associated with birth, death and marriage have created a completely unique cultural identity for the Kora community.

Aim of the Study

The Kora community of West Bengal is a relatively unknown community. There is very scarce research and documentation based on their lives and culture. This essay aims to provide a comprehensive knowledge of the unique rituals of the Koras, especially the customs related with Birth, marriage and death. These customs are distinct and unique. Therefore the essay strives to bring to focus the marginalised culture of the Kora community. By doing so, this essay also attempts to contextualise the culture of the Kora community within the larger Indian culture. Therefore, this study not only adds to the knowledge about the Koras but also brings up a new dimension in the cultural diversity of India.

Conclusion

The above mentioned cultural practices are not only unique to the Koras but also reflect the colourful and merry nature of the Kora people. The community strongly believes in its traditions and have not forgotten the roots of their culture. This makes them extremely proud of their culture. They are not only hard workers but also very fun loving energetic people. The wave of westernisation has been unable to shake their beliefs in their own cultural practices. They have not forgotten their connection with the land and their ancient past. The rituals and traditional practices associated with birth, death and marriage have created a completely unique cultural identity for the Kora community.

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