



# THE REPRESENTATION OF SUPERSTITIOUS PRACTICES IN ANIL GHARAI'S STORY *REINCARNATION OF PARASHURAM*: A CRITICAL STUDY

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**Abstract:** As literature reflects society, dalit or tribal literature is, no doubt, the document of dalit or tribal society and its people. Generally, it is known to all that dalit or tribal people, belonging to the lowest strata of caste system in our society, are 'untouchables' in traditional 'Varna' system. Being subaltern section of society, they have been exploited economically, discriminated socially and marginalized culturally by upper caste people throughout the ages. They have been forced to be deprived of education. So, they are mostly illiterate and they can easily be fooled by hypocrites. On the other hand, belief in superstition comes out of ignorance and illiteracy which co-exist in society. This paper attempts to study systematically the superstitious practices and beliefs of these rural and tribal people with reference to Anil Gharai's *Reincarnation of Parashuram*, a story which explores how a tribal family suffers from superstitious beliefs and practices, seeks remedy of its ailing child with the help of a gunin, and shows how an aged mother is labeled a 'witch' and killed by her son as in the myth of Parashuram. This paper also discusses how a rural tribal family as well as society has been ruined only because of superstitions and acts of ignorance.

**Key-Words:** Tribal Society, Superstition, Illiteracy, Witchcraft, Gunin, Black Magic.

## INTRODUCTION

India, being a country of multi-lingual, multi-religious and multi-ethnic people, has been a living place of various races and tribes for generation after generation. Various types of tribal people have been living here for ages from ancient times. According to the statistical reports, after Africa the second largest tribal populated country in the world is India. The term 'tribe' comes from 'tribus', a Latin word which means "a group of persons forming a community and claiming descent from a common ancestor" (Oxford English Dictionary, IX, 1933, p. 339, as cited in Fried, 1975, p.7). The word "tribe" refers to a "socially cohesive unit, associated with a territory, the members of which regard themselves as politically autonomous" (Mitchell, 1979: 232). Even Anthropology mentions 'tribe' as 'a group of people who live together, share the same language culture, history, and stay outside towns or cities'. In Indian subcontinent, like the other part of the world, these tribal people are considered and denoted as the indigenous people who are uncivilized, primitive and love to live in jungles and hills. They are popularly known as 'Adivasi' (original settlers) in India. Tribal people have their own social, cultural and religious identity which is completely different from the other people in society. They have been living in the hills and jungles under the lap of nature peacefully many years before the modern civilization had started its journey in Indian society. Serenity of nature goes parallel with their simplicity of life style and existence. The touch of modernity and the spreading of literacy are still not reachable in some places even at the age of advanced 5G technology. For more than 5000 years, the tradition of their literature remains as oral literature. Now a day, the written form of tribal literature is available since independence.

But the question is whether in written or in oral, tribal literature is a valid documentary of their life-style, their struggles for daily existence, their culture, faiths, social customs, sufferings of life and so on or not. Here in this paper the soul attempt is to find out and explain how tribal people in distant rural areas are still the victims of witchcraft, black magic and superstitions in their daily life and how they suffer from premature deaths and irreparable losses because of their superstitious practices.

This story *Reincarnation of Parashuram* by Anil Gharai was written at first in Bengali with the original Bengali title 'Punuscha Parashuram', published in Bengali Dalit magazine named "Kak O Anyanyo Golpo"(Crow and other Stories). If we go through the Bengali title of the story, we will be able to understand easily the meaning of the title and what about the story. The very name 'Parashuram' means 'Lord Rama with an axe' and he, according to Hindu mythology, is the sixth incarnation of Hindu god Vishnu's '10 Avatars', (incarnations). This story of Parashuram belongs to the 'Treta yug'. No doubt the story deals with out and out superstitious belief in connection with the myth of Parashuram, who according to the myth killed his mother without any hesitation at the command of his father. Similarly here in this story we have come to know that Bhishnath kills his own mother just out of ignorance at the temptation of gunin(witch doctor) named Mangala who is the representative of witchcraft and black magic in rural area where there is no much light of literacy.

The story opens with the beggar's description of a poverty stricken family in a tribal village during winter time. The setting of the story is at a village which is surrounded by a river and jungles where the natural wintry scene of the rural area goes at par with desolate condition of all the families in this village. The present story is the story of the Barlar family which consists of four members- Bhishnath, his aged mother, his wife Sunar and his son, Madho. The plot of this story and the whole action of the plot revolves round this one tribal family which is suffering not only from extreme poverty but also from the darkness of illiteracy. The story opens with the serious illness of Madho, the one and only son of this family. He is an infant boy of two and half year old. The wintry setting of the story reflects the nakedness of the family. For three days they are going through the extreme shortage of the daily needs and scarcity of basic necessities. Superstitious belief has a solid room in this family for all these. The ghastly presence of the aged, infirm and toothless mother-in-law creates the atmosphere of superstition in the very beginning. After having the bath in the morning river, Bhishnath's aged mother trembles like an uprooted tree against the cold wind of winter. It makes her unstable on feet. This strange and lifelong habit of mother-in-law makes Sunar suspicious of her presence in the house. Also her talking with the crows in the tamarind tree forces Sunar to believe her mother-in-law is an embodiment of witch or 'daine'. Madho, a small boy of this Barlar family has been suffering seriously from incurable fever for some few days. This makes the helpless father more addicted to cock fighting and drinking 'hadya' voraciously so that he may forget the suffering of his son and his helplessness as a father. But the mother Sunar is very worried about the ill health of her son. The whole night she remains sleepless and her limbs are protesting against the continuous sitting in the same way. Madho is so weak that he is unable to suck milk from the breast of his mother and if he sucks milk, his stomach vomits it out. The house is running shortage of everything as Sunar is unable to go to jungle for fetching wood or collecting 'saal' leaves. As a result there is no grain of food at the kitchen. This extremity makes the male member more indifferent about the illness of Madho. The picture of extreme poverty is clear when the story teller says:

"They could not light any lamp even after the previous night's rain and storm for want of kerosene. Not only kerosene, everything in this village was scarce—rice, dal, *makai atta*, even edible wild roots and dried *mahua*."(p-41)

Actually this picture is very common in this rural area and the people are habituated with this scarcity and shortage of everything. If they work hard they can feed themselves and if they do not do any menial job, they have to starve. This is the grim reality of these people. They totally depend on 'saal' leaves, fetching fire woods throughout the year. Forest or jungle is their only main source of existence. This is the economy of a tribal village almost everywhere in India. They do not have any time or scope to educate themselves. They live in the heart of darkness, being completely isolated from the world of knowledge. Society or government also takes no positive steps. That is why, generation after generation, they are forced to remain illiterate. Illiteracy has no sense of reason that is why the story teller has presented the ugly and vulgar appearance of the mother –in-law and it is really awe inspiring.

"The old woman has no teeth with sunken cheeks her mouth looked as sharp and narrows as that of a hyena whenever she laughed. The skin on her face looked drier and uglier than the burnt out earth during May without any trace of mild greenery indeed, her whole body was so shrivelled and grotty that she appeared as a barren tree shorn of all leaves with the onset of winter." (p-42)

The presence of crow in the tamarind tree also adds to the seriousness of the superstitious atmosphere in the story. It was common at the time of his father's mysterious death, then this tamarind tree was occupied by crows and even at this time of Madho's severe illness, crows are there. So, crows, the ugly looking birds of nature are the ominous signs or symbols of death, destruction and despair. They make the situation grave when the mother-in-law, the haggard woman talks with the crows and this makes Sunar to

believe that she is the part of evil presence in the house. Uplifting her thin hand like the dry branch of a tree, the mother-in-law shouts in shrill voice:

“Get lost! You devil, go to hell! Why have you come again to my house? You have you eaten up everything in my house and yet haven’t had your fill?” (p-44)

On the other hand, the sudden and mysterious death of Bhishnath’s father made him a firm believer of superstition. Like all other rural and tribal people, Bhishnath’s father believed in black magic when he had a severe heart attack. He thought someone had cast spell on him when he had gone behind the thicket by the small pond for nature’s call. Being a traditional man, he had a great belief in herbal medicine and the magical power of a gunin. He says:

“Oh, my dear, I have a terrible chest pain! I can’t bear it. My whole body seems to be burning. Some rogue has cast spell on me. I shall take revenge if I get better. Come close to me, dear. Hold me and carry me to the bushes. I know the herbs and plants, you just grind the roots of herbs I identify and feed me the paste.” (p-44)

So he was not taken to hospital and died of heart attack. This picture is not rare but very common everywhere in the rural area. These tribal people have strong dislike for hospitalization or any type of availing medical treatment for they know that they have been fooled and harassed even by doctors in the name of service.

“There’ll be no remission of this fever in a hospital. Tell me, which disease has been cured in the hospital as yet’, Bhishnath fumed in resentment. Doctors, hospitals- these had never left any mark in Bhishnath’s life. Not to speak of an injection, not even a white tablet had ever been swallowed by him. Why would he subject his son to something which he had never undergone in his life?” (p-46)

Rather they have great belief in gunin like Mangala who can solve all types of problems quickly. This is because of their harassment in all forms and they have been easy victims of exploitation. That is why Bhishnath had no injection or white tablet swallowed by him in his life. So he has no value of these in his life and he does not want to apply these medical facilities in his son’s life too. Rather the local gunin, Mangala is called for solving the problem of Madho.

“Mangala, the sorcerer of the village, had to be called for. Mangala could cure any disease with his incantations. If Mangala could be brought to his house, he could drive away the evil spirit with religious rites and the chant of incantations.”(p-46)

For that Bhishnath has to arrange a worship, full of incantations, and he needs to look out black cock, mustard seeds- the elements of practicing witchcraft. Though he has no cash to buy, but the helpless mother without any second thought offers her silver necklace to her husband. To the mother, Madho is more precious jewel than everything in her life. Madho is her life and she had him in her life after five years of her marriage through the grace of Singbonga, their chief god. The physical appearance and dress of the gunin on the day of worship is very meaningful. His forehead was smeared with vermilion and his neck isbedecked with bones is awe inspiring. He had used *surma* to his eyes. He was wearing the garland of red *jabba* flowering down too his knees made his appearance demonic. He then started his worship by drawing a chequer board on the ground with the dust of charcoal and rice. There he laid the boy on that board. He talked with the ghosts, spirits, demons, devils and what not. He promised to drive the evil spirit in Madho. Then he with demoniac pleasure he tere off the neck of the black cock let the blood drop on the ground. He then with frenzied laughter marked the forehead of Madho red with the blood. Finally he said that Madho would be alright and behave like a normal boy. He would laugh and play from the day red mark would get automatically evaporated. This was how all the rituals of witchcraft ended.

After the worshipping of the gunin, the situation becomes more adverse for Bhishnath as the fever of Madho never falls but rises high. The situation worsens day by day. What the gunin promised is not fulfilled. That is why, again the gunin, Mangala is called for Madho’s uncontrollable fever. Now the cunning gunin somehow tries to hide his hypocrisy and divert the attention of Bhishnath by convincing him about the ill presence of his mother in the house. So he has concocted story of witchcraft and applies it on the mother who appears to be something sinister even for Bhishnath. The gunin says:

“Your old mother climbs up the tall palm tree at the dead of night every day. She has no clothes on her then. All the witches of the village assemble there each night on the top of the palm tree. They sing and dance, make hullabaloo at midnight. But with the break of dawn they come down, wear the clothes to go back home.” (p-51)

In witchcraft, always the innocent are sacrificed and it is very common symptom of practicing witchcraft. Here under the spell of the witchcraft, Bhishnath is hypnotized by the gunin. He then appears to be the real reincarnation of Parashuram and kills his own mother to save his ill son. When the whole situation is out of control, the gunin wants to be on the safe side and no how he wants to be exposed or caught red handed by people or police. So he says:

“Lift up the dead body. Let’s go and throw it in the jungle by the river. If the neighbours come to know it, you will be put in handcuffs.”(p-53)

Then Mangala gunin assures him that when he will return home, his son Madho will be all okay. But the picture is one eighty degree opposite at home. He sees that his wife Sunar is sitting like a statue and Madho is lying dead on her lap. Bhishnath takes no time to understand what has happened. Madho is not crying any more. Taking his dead son to breast, Bhishnath breaks out in loud sobs. But it is too late. Now he can clearly hear his mother saying:

“Oh my dear, dear son, what have you done? I carried you in my womb for ten months and ten days. Did you pay the debt back by striking me on the head with your axe?”(p-53)

Ultimately after Madho’s death, Bhishnath comes to know the real truth of Mangala gunin and his power of witchcraft. Then he, like a mad, runs out of the room and returns home after two hours. The ending of the story is very fearful and fatal as Bhishnath takes revenge of two murders on the gunin by killing him with his axe from which warm blood tickles down. So one killing leads to another killing. Sunar is bemused with surprise to know the reality when Bhishnath says:

“Oh my wife, I have expiated for my sin. I have killed the man who kills other men. Before we go to the police, let’s go to bury our son with our own hands.”(p-54)

This is how this story ends here with a sad note and Bhishnath comes to know all about the reality and result of superstitions in their life. Rural ignorant people quite easily fall victims to the ill practice of superstition. Last but not the least, the practice of superstition ruins the life of a common man like Bhishnath in this story.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it may be said that superstition has a strong surge in the sea of illiteracy and superstition is nothing creative but all destructive. Wherever are superstitions, there are the beliefs in all black magic, witchcraft, and ‘Diane’ system. This story has all these evidences to be a representative story of witchcraft, black magic and sorcery. Actually, illiteracy is all pervasive in tribal people as well as society. So they follow superstitious beliefs or practices generation after generation without applying the power of judging everything rationally and logically. Strong dislike for education or medical science remains inborn with them for ages. That is why all hypocrites like the gunin take this opportunity to exploit them both socially and financially. The ultimate result is sometimes very fatal for them as they become victims to premature deaths or irreparable losses. This scenario is very common in tribal areas even now. This malady has been strongly rooted in this society for many years and it is impossible to uproot these ill practices easily or by one day. For that it is very necessary to spread scientific education for all and arrange social awareness programme against all types of superstition in rural and tribal area, so that their society may be free from it and their life may become better and beautiful in future.

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