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Kati Gaan: An Indigenous Rajbanshi Women's Art Form

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Abstract: Indigenous art form is a cultural practice related to the way of life of a traditional group. It includes painting, sculpture, music, dance, and more. This art form is passed down through generations. Rajbanshis are a group of ethnic people in the northern part of West Bengal, the Lower part of Assam, and some parts of Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan. They belong to the Royal family of Kamta / Kamrup Dynasty. Over time, they have mixed with other communities, yet some have preserved their identity through their traditional culture. Rajbanshi women initially represented themselves for the welfare of society and to welcome guests. Over a period, this representation evolved into an art form. Kati gaan is a ritual based on the worship of God named “Kati”. Only women artists perform the song of Kati along with the dance. The study will focus on the contributions of women artists, the process of acquiring this art form, and its cultural relevance. The research will follow qualitative research methodologies. The findings of this research Women perform around the Kati deity. The song describes the Kati deity, Kati’s birth story. In their performances, they describe the various parts of Kati’s body part like the hand, nose, ears, etc, which have been created. Then prays to Kati for a son.

Keywords: Kati Gan, Rajbanshi women, Women’s art form, Rajbanshi

I. INTRODUCTION

Kati gaan is a ritual based on the worship of God named “Kati”. Only women artists perform the song of Kati along with the dance. The Kati songs narrate a story centered around Kati. The Gidals advance the story through statements and dramatic dialogues. Kati gaan includes the song, dance and the acting part of women. Kati Puja is closely associated with ‘Gidali’. Those who sing are called ‘Gidal’. The word ‘Gidali’ is feminine. In Rajbanshi culture, singing is inseparable from various puja festivals. Kati songs are associated with Kati Puja. Kati Puja is completed through singing. The perfection of Kati Puja depends on the manifestation of the glory of the goddess through singing to the women who come to the puja wishing for children. Rajbanshis are a group of ethnic people who reside in the northern part of West Bengal, the Lower part of Assam, and some parts of Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan. They belong to the Royal family of Kamta/Kamrup Dynasty. The Rajbanshi society was completely based on agriculture. In that economic structure, the role of women was also dominant; after carrying out the household work, they also took part in the agricultural work. According to Charu Chandra Sanyal, "The women never till the land with the plough. But they help man to weed jute, paddy or tobacco, to prepare and sow paddy seeds for nursery of winter paddy (aman dhan), to transplant 'aman' seeds in the fields (roa-gara) and help cut the paddy plants when the paddy is ripe. Rajbanshi women also observe pujas and parvans (festivals) as part of their social



and religious practices. The specific 'pujas' and Pārbaṇa observed by Rajbanshi women may vary slightly depending on regional and familial traditions, but some common practices include seeking blessings for well-being, fertility, and prosperity (Ray D. N., 2024).

RAJBANSHI

According to Girija Shankar Roy in the book "Uttarbanje Rajbanshi Jaatir Puja Parvan" mentions about "Bangalir Utpatti" where the famous literary Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay refuses to accept the Rajbanshis as Bengali. He mentioned, "According to some, they are descendants of the Dravidian or Austrian peoples, others of the Mongolian people (Roy G. S., 2015).

"Music is probably as old as the history of man on earth". The Rajbanshi community is the largest branch of this group. Some anthropologists claim that the Rajbanshi belong to the Proto - Austroloid group based on their physical characteristics. The process of Aryanization began around the 6th century BCE and resulted in a fusion of Aryan and local cultures in the Northeast (Ray N. , 2016).

The study concerns the Rajbanshis, the major group of people who claim to be the sons of the soil of the northern part of Bengal, popularly known as North Bengal, which has recently been claimed as Kamtapur by a section of the ethnic group. By folk literature is meant the literature of the folk, the folk community. Folk community is a 'tribal social organisation- the lower classes or common people of an area. Encyclopaedia of Anthropology defines folk community as follows-a less ethnocentric and broader definition of folk would be any group of people who share at least one common factor (for example, common occupation, religion or ethnicity). So, folk literature of Rajbanshi encompasses the literature of the common people, at least the majority of them, of the area popularly known as North Bengal which includes the districts of Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur and Malda (Barma, History Of North Bengal, 2018).

Jyotirmay Ray describes in 'Rajbanshi Samaj Darpan' that they are members of the largest Bodo Community, living on the east side of the Kartoa River, and Rajbanshis are from Mishra Shankar Jaati, Pundra Khatriya and a great group of the Bodo ethnic group (Roy J. , 2012).

According to Minhaju-S-Siraj, the author of the Tabaqat-i-Nasiri compiled in c.1261, Kamrupa was inhabited by the Kwnc, the Myj and the Th'rw (ie. the Koc or Koch, Mec or Mech and Tharu) peoples whose Mongoloid race and speech made a distinct impression upon the Turks, themselves also of the same race, these races had Turki countenances' ie., slanting eyes, snub noses, high cheek bones and yellow complexion of the Mongols, and they spoke a different idiom' from the language of India proper. (Sanyal, 2002)

'Rajbansi' is an indefinite term, and a few of the individuals may belong to other castes. In the lower delta, Rajbansis are said to be a subdivision of Tiyaars, but by far the great majority, coming from the districts of Dinajpur, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri, Cooch-Bihar, and Goalpara, are the same as Koch and Palliyas. Capt. Lewin, a Deputy Commissioner of Cooch-Bihar, while commenting on the census of 1872, observed that the present inhabitants of Cooch-Bihar State do not belong to any particular race. The Meches who inhabit the Bhutan Duars, coming into contact with the immigrants from the south, intermarriage has taken place, and the descendants are the modern Cooch-Beharis (Sanyal, 2002)

According to Eminent literary Padmashree Dharmanarayan Barma from his literature 'Kamrup Kamata Cooch Behar Rajyer Itihas' – The origin of the Coochbihar kingdom or dynasty is the Kamrup Kingdom. According to Nagendranath Acharya, the first king of Kamrup, 'Pushya Barman', ascended the throne in 380 AD. Then the first king of the 'Pal dynasty', Brahmapala, ascended the throne in 990 AD, the first king of the 'Ray dynasty' in 1200 AD, The first king of the 'Khan dynasty', Niladhwaja, ascended the throne of Kamapur, later known as Kamarupa, in 1496 AD, and finally the first king of the Narayana dynasty, Biswasingha, ascended the throne of Kamatapur in 1440 AD. Biswasingha was the son of Haridas Mandal or Hariya Mandal of the Hoi Hoi or Chandravanshi Kshatriya dynasty. This suggests that the population of this large kingdom was a direct branch of the Kshatriya clan (Manta, 2005, pp. 33-107).

According to Amanatullah Khan Chowdhury's A History of Cooch Behar, the term 'Koch' is said to have originated during a time when the Kshatriyas, fearing Parashurama, sought refuge in the "Koch" or lap of the goddess Bhagwati. The word 'Koch' is thus believed to have been derived from Sankhoch, meaning the place of refuge for the Kshatriya race. This statement suggests that the Rajbanshis' earlier identification as Kshatriyas can be traced back to this origin. However, despite references to the term 'Koch' in several sources, there is no concrete evidence of a kingdom named 'Koch' or any documented reign of a Koch king during a specific historical year (AD) (Ahmed, 1936, p. 4).

RAJBANSHI WOMEN

Rajbanshi women work more than men. They help men with household chores, planting irrigated crops or harvesting crops. They collect dry firewood for cooking and sell agricultural products in nearby markets. The contribution of women in Rajbanshi families is significant (G B Moumita, 2012). According to Charu Chandra Sanyal, Rajbanshi women do not cultivate the land with ploughs. Women help men in weeding jute, paddy or tobacco, preparing, sowing, planting paddy seeds and cutting the paddy plants when the paddy is ripe. Women of Rajbanshi Jodder families (Economically high sound) also participate in the production system in the same way (Roy Utpal, 2012). Most women spend more time on both housework and childcare. Just as there is a wage gap between men and women in the workplace, there is a "leisure gap" between them at home (G B Moumita, 2012). Women enjoyed a respectable position in society. The female member of the family was the head of the household where there was no male member. Apart from domestic matters, they also played their role in social, economic and political fields. They started to elevate themselves in society (Roy, J., 2018).



CONCEPT OF RAJBANSHI WOMEN ABOUT 'KATI DEVA'

According to the Skanda Purana, Kati is the god of war and prosperity. Mahabharata and Ramayana: He is the son of Mahadev and Parvati. These gods came into existence after Mahadev entered the body of Agni. Brahmavaivarta Purana: He was born as the power of Mahadev. According to some Rajbanshi women, 'Kati is the goddess who grants fertility and increased productivity. This cultural similarity with the Kati deity of the Rajbanshis is seen in songs popular in the Tamil-dominated regions of South India. (Bhakat, 2014)

RAJBANSHI WOMEN ENGAGED IN 'KATI PUJA'

Dr. Girija Shankar Roy's 'Puja Parvan of the Rajbanshi Nation of North Bengal' reveals that the origin and development of the culture of the Rajbanshi Kshatriya community originally began in the Rangpur (Bangladesh), Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri districts of West Bengal, India. (Roy Dr. Girija Shankar, 2015). Women of the 'Rajvanshi' society observe 'Kati Vrata' in the hope of having a son, especially a handsome son like the god Kartik (Bhattacharya Suchandra, 2012). Katika or Kartikai is the folk deity of the royal women living in the region of Cooch Behar i.e. North Bengal and Lower Assam. (Bhakat, 2014). In the evening, the 'Gidali' and ten maos (mothers) come to an enclosed area outside (or behind) the house and select a place for worship. They plant banana trees. They make rangoli (alpana) with thin rice husks, soil, abir etc. At the end of the night, the puja ends in the morning with prayers, dances, fasts, keeping pots in the house, distribution of prasad etc. (Bhattacharya Suchandra, 2012).

KATI PUJA METHOD AND MATERIALS

In Rajbanshi society, this puja can be performed on any day of the month of Kartik. The puja requires incense, a lamp, a pot, amrapallab, curd, jaggery/sugar, banana leaves, a pot made of banana bark (dhongal), a towel, a saree and a dhoti. A priest, a priestess and a gidali are required for Kati Puja. At any auspicious event in society, a young, virtuous woman is required to welcome guests or gods and goddesses. Singing is inextricably linked with Kati Puja. The group of women who sing about the greatness of Thakur is called Gidali. In the puja, the priest performs yagna or sacrifice. The larger Rajbanshi society installs idols next to brinjal fields, chilli fields or any field. During the Kati Puja, trees including Atiya Kala, bow and arrow, batul, jhik (gun made of bamboo branches), mariya (editor) and other tools are collected and kept along with plough, jungle, panty, fishing tepai, khalai, hocha/jakui etc. Women fast all day and each donates a pair of pots and betel nut (Gua Betel nut) on this occasion. Four banana trees are planted around the perimeter and the peacock vehicle of Lord Kartik is placed in the middle. An earthen pot filled with water is kept at the base of each banana tree (Ray D. N., 2024). (Picture Paint by: Satabdi Barman)

THE PERIOD OF KATI PUJA SONGS

The power of the Brahmins gradually grew stronger during the rule of Pragjyotishpur to Cooch Behar. The kings brought Brahmins knowledgeable in the scriptures from places like Benares, Mithila, etc. to educate their kingdom in Vedic or Puranic teachings. Chandi is the folk form of Goddess Durga or Parvati. Like Goddess Durga's son Kartik, he is also established in the folk mind as the son of Chandi. That is, with the mythological incarnation, the mythological Kartik became known as Kati in the larger royal society as the son of the local Goddess Chandi. Needless to say, women in this region once had a social

status. Only by analyzing how women's social status gradually declined in the larger Rajbanshi society can we find the answer to the question of how old the Kati Puja song culture is in Rajbanshi society. In this context, in the book 'Gender and Commonwealth Literature', Dr. Utpal Roy, in his article 'Towards Patriarchy: A Changing Profile of Dynastic North Bengal', says that before mythology and Vedicization, dynastic women enjoyed multiple rights, including economic ones. According to Dr. Utpal Roy, the more the royal society adopted Puranic and Vedic ideals, the more royal women were deprived of their rights. Sons became more valuable than daughters. The idea that sons are more valuable than daughters does not fit the culture of the region. Initially, the royal men or women performed the puja themselves. The idea of seeking scriptural explanations from Brahmins also came much later. With the gradual adoption of Brahminical culture, the Kati Puja of the Rajvanshi culture has become a mixed culture. Men have entered the Kati Puja and the priceless jewels that men have been indirectly declared. The beginning of Kati Puja is certainly a result of the influence of Brahminical culture in the royal society.

KATI PUJA AND GIDALI

Kati Puja is closely associated with 'Gidli'. Those who sing are called Gidal. The word Gidali is feminine. In Rajbanshi culture, singing is inseparable from various puja festivals. Kati songs are associated with Kati Puja. Kati Puja is completed through singing. The perfection of Kati Puja depends on the manifestation of the glory of the goddess through singing to the women who come to the puja wishing for children. At the end of the puja, the gidalis themselves express their sexual activity with the women who come to the puja, wishing for children through songs.

DRAMA IN KATI PUJA SONGS

The Kati Puja songs narrate a story centered around Kati. The Gidals advance the story through statements and the Gidals advance the story through dramatic dialogues.

KATI GAAN AND RAJBANSHI CULTURE

Singing, especially around pujas, is part of the culture of the larger Rajbanshi society. Gidali narrates the story of Katigan orally, which reveals the special talents of women.

WOMEN CONTRIBUTION

They pray for the wellness of society. Rajbanshi women have been central to creating, performing, and preserving their community's folk traditions. Through storytelling and song, women have played a vital role in preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge and values from one generation to the next. Women perform this puja to preserve the existence of their community.

KATI GAAN

In this puja, dancing and singing continue throughout the night. The Gidali group sometimes dances to the beat of the dhaki musical instrument and sometimes to the beat of the song. They dance in turns. Sometimes, some take a break for a while and then start dancing again. Some performances are also performed along with dancing and singing. The entire story is presented in the form of a Pala-Gan with dance and song. Some parts of this song are forbidden for men due to the so-called obscenity in the context of Kartik's birth. (Burman Subal Chandra, 2012). Women fast all day, and on this occasion, each donates a pair of pots and betel nut (Gua betel nut). Four banana trees are planted around the base of the Samyana and the peacock-carrier Kartik Dev is placed in the middle. An earthen pot filled with water is kept at the base of each banana tree. A bow and arrow are tied to a banana tree, and a branch of a Myna tree is buried behind the idol. A bunch of paddy trees with paddy branches are planted in front of the altar. First, the birth story of Kartik is narrated in the Srijan Geet. Then the deity is described, and then Kartik is prayed for a son. Women sing and dance around the Kartik idol. Two women dance side by side, dressed in men's clothing. The lead singer sings the lines of the song Kati Pala, and others join in singing. (Barman Sukhbilas, 2011). This puja is not only held in Cooch Behar, but also in Goalpara in Assam, where Rajbanshi women perform Kati puja and dance. In some places, women dance naked. (Dev Ranjit, 2014).

KATI SONGS

Song 1: Bandanā

(The Chanting of God by Women Singer 'Gidali)

Mārēyā' tu'im Kati pūjāra bāyanā hāmāka dilu.
 Āji girira bārita haibē' Kati pūjāra gāna.
 Mā'ō sarēsbatī hāmāra gīdālilāra bhaKati nēna..
 Tōmarā karilē dayā Katira gīta bhāla ka'i.....
 (To be continued)

Translation: Mareya (The convener), you have given me the advance & agreement of Kati Puja. Today, there will be Kati Puja songs at Giri's house. Mother Saraswati, please take care of my Gidali. If you are kind, I can sing Kati songs well. When I get blessings, the joy of singing blooms in my mouth.

Song 2: Śibēra bibāha

(Marriage of Lord Shiva)

Gīdālī1: Ō sajanī sa'i hē - śiba ṭhākūrēra kī uddīśa hē?
 Gīdālī2: Ō sajanī sa'i hē - buṛā śibēra ēlā'ō' biyā'ō' hayā nā'im hayā hē!
 (To be continued)



Translation:1st Gidaali : Oh my dear - What is the purpose of Shiva Thakur?

2nd Gidaali: Oh my dear - Old Shiva's marriage is either going to happen or not!

Song 3 : Born of Kati Dev

Kati rē tōra muṇḍa bānā'ichē kōnajanē\
 chaṡya māsa bhariyārē tapa'isyā kariyārē (To be continued)



Translation: the creation of nose, ear, hand etc. is described in the song. And after singing and dancing about Shiva's marriage, Kati's birth, etc., prayers are offered to Kati for son-in-law. While the puja, dance and music are runs, at that time the entrance of men with dhak instrument (Dhak) is prohibited.

CONCLUSION: This practice has long been supported by traditional forms of informal education, with women playing a central role in its continuation. In the past, it was a common practice, and it persists today. It is deeply connected to socio-economic factors and cultural beliefs, making its preservation essential. Art forms like this serve as a mirror of society, reflecting our values, stories, and identity. If we fail to protect and sustain such traditions, there is a risk of losing an important part of Rajbanshi society. Preserving the heritage is not just important; it is necessary for cultural survival.

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