



A path to well-being? Experiences of Satsang within the Gond community of Mohgoan in Madhya Pradesh.

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Abstract

Every community holds closely the rituals that are unique, the rituals that have been closely connected and understood as a part of the communities. The understanding that the communities have been having around their ideas of birth, marriage and death is solely unique and has transformed and developed with the passing ages. It has been reported in many studies that music as well as Satsang (singing of folk songs in a group) have had positive effects on psychological well-being. When interpreted closely one can understand how these folk songs convey messages that praises the Gods and Goddesses, sing about incidences from the scriptures that convey spiritual or religious messages. But then we have to also keep in mind how these group can sometimes breed hierarchical barriers within communities who would belong to a particular satsang group. Here in this paper I would be partly discussing about the work and experiences during the Master of Philosophy (Mphil) Degree, where immersion as a method was adopted which rightly helps in understanding the context where the researcher is placed with no prior knowledge. It explains how it was important to listen, communicate and sit together in discussions and meetings as an act that would move towards a collective auctioning along with the community members as co-researchers, about the rituals when it comes to death and how the *Gond* community living in Mohgoan village, Karanjia Block, Dindori district, Madhya Pradesh have been differently and uniquely understanding it. This paper highlights their association with Satsang which they have adapted shows us how it has become a part of these ceremonial rituals within their community spaces.

Keywords- Ceremonial Rituals, Satsang, Gonds, Immersion

Introduction

Beginning the immersion¹ is a beautiful as well as a terrifying process in itself. We start discovering about the various understandings and processes of each and every element within the village that exists, eventually giving us a wider picture of the surroundings. The researcher takes up this action research and (rural) immersion as a part of Mphil Development Practice program, Ambedkar University, Delhi while working closely with PRADAN², which is one of the reputed organisations that has been working with women in different states of the country actively forming women Self-Help Groups and involving them in various livelihood, gender and other activities.

While trying to write this paper, the beginning has been more about giving the idea of the village I was placed, while also trying to understand the day to day activities that takes place within the village. The initial stay within the village has been about getting adjusted and familiar within the unfamiliar surroundings and then building a strong relation especially with the host family. I was advised by the PRADAN team to explore as much as I could and gradually go and live with different families within the village in order to closely understand the existing dynamics that would open up windows giving my idea of interaction within the community a much deeper meaning in terms of web of relational network that exists.

¹ Immersion is considered as a state where the individual or the being is completely said to be involved into something deeply

² <https://www.pradan.net/>

This was also the same feeling which I developed once I had stumbled upon one such area that was quite new for me even when I had heard about it before. Many members within the community of Mohgoan Ryt³ have adopted the practices of Satsang⁴ amongst them and have incorporated it within their daily lives. The practice of Satsang could be found majorly within two hamlets – *Dongri Tola* and *Bar Tola or Awas Tola* and a very few families from the other three hamlets.

As I gradually proceed to explain the prospect of this article, there would be a brief background of the village I am currently placed in and then try and understand the impact of the Satsang within their lives.

About the village

For the immersion to begin with, I was placed in Mohgoan, mostly inhabited by the *Gonds*⁵, which comes under the jurisdiction of Baraspur Panchayat. The name of the nearest block is Karanjia which is roughly 25kms away from the village. Connectivity to the village from the block is limited and one has to rely mostly on private vehicles or auto vans that ply on these roads.

Mohgoan has 5 hamlets: Bar Tola, Neecha Tola, Imli Tola, Khamar Tola, and Dongri Tola. These names of each hamlets have their own significance. Usually they would pick up names that would be either significantly found within the vicinity thus helping in particularly situating the hamlet. Each of the hamlets are in distance from each other and the houses in each hamlet are pretty scattered. To travel from one hamlet to the other there are no proper roads within the village and one has to walk within the fields which can be seen as a common sight in the villages. Walking from one place to the other gets extremely difficult especially in the rainy season. The village is spread across 411.77 hectares with a population of 563 with 275 males and 288 females. The number of households in the village has been put up to 126 households (Census, 2011). But then the number of households could increase with many people who have constructed recently and the ones who are in the process of constructing new. The other noticeable castes in the village are the Panikas (5 families), Laman Banjaras (2 families), Yadavs (2 families) and Lohar (2 Families) (Personal Communication January 19, 2018)

Migration of young men to work in urban areas was quite prominent. These young men would travel to other cities, work in companies, earn money and would not usually return increasing the workload of agriculture on the remaining members. In discussions with the older men, they also pointed that how the younger generation would usually refrain to work in the fields and rather step outside, as it indicated that it kind of uplifted their lifestyle which was different when they remained back. With agriculture as a primary occupation within the village, we witnessed that young men would eventually step out in search of new jobs and opportunities. Talks of jealousy and Black magic (*Jadu Tona*) would also come up time and again. There are no temples to be found within the village but people who follow certain groups would have prayer rooms where they would conduct prayer meets on weekends and some families would have a corner outside the house

The experience of attending a Satsang was quite a surreal experience. The satsang would usually take place on Sunday afternoon at Shatarupa Didis⁶ residence. Gradually I started exploring the areas within village and would move in between different hamlets to speak to people. On one such instance, the host family suggested me to accompany them to attend the Satsang. Partly I agreed because I was not willing to spend time alone as the members of the family would return usually after dark and partly it was out of curiosity. When I first entered the room, it was dimly lit and had almost a room full of people. It was indeed an overwhelming experience in itself. What was overwhelming was the gradual exploration of how Satsangh has in itself impacted their lives and has also changed their food and eating habits.

It has been noticed that there existing tradition is completely collapsing very rapidly. The reason for such a decline has been mainly because there has been a dilution of the traditional belief systems, impact of the developmental practices that has led to increasing developmental agendas being imparted on these populations which might impact them on changing their places from rural to urban areas in search of better livelihood options, crunches in resources, fluctuating market economy so on and so forth which also impacts the lives of these groups living in areas which are full of minerals and resources that has impacted their lives in a major way. Gond is considered one of the principal tribes of the Dravidian family and they are perhaps the most important non-Aryan or the forest tribes of

³ Ryotwari system or Ryt is a system of land revenue instituted in the late 18th century by Sir Thomas Munro, Governor of Madras in 1820. In this system, the peasants or the cultivators were regarded as the owners of the land.

⁴ A Sanskrit term derived from two roots: *Sat* meaning true and *Sangh* meaning community or association. It may be referred to a group of people engaged in a spiritual dialogue.

⁵ The Gonds are an Indian Ethnic group found widely spread across the central part of the Indian state. They have been given the status of a reserved category under Scheduled Tribe

⁶ An older female, which is often used as a form to address

India. It is considered that there are three sub divisions that are recognised namely a. *Raj Gonds* b. *Dadves* and c. *Mokasis* (Heda, pp.727, 2012)

Infrastructural amenities within and outside the village

Mohgoan has three Anganwadis. Two anganwadis were functional while the third one was not functioning, as the caretaker of the anganwadi had not visited for a long time and would only come around when there would be any inspection or visits (Personal Communication January 25th, 2018) The village has one upper primary school. After that the students are either supposed to travel to Rusa or travel to nearby village Sengura to complete their secondary school education. Higher secondary schools are in Rusa (village at a distance of 12kms from Mohgoan) and Karanjia. There is a Primary Health Care centre near Parsel (village at a distance of 3kms from Mohgoan) but apparently it is very small and the availability of doctors is negligent. The nearest bank was almost 12kms away from the village. The weekly haat⁷ or as they refer to it as *bazar* was Karanjia on Tuesdays while trying to sell off vegetables on other weekdays in nearby villages.

Influence of Satsang on the community of Mohgoan

As discussed above the majority of the population are Gond. Within the community, it is well visible that their kinship ties is extremely strong indicating a strong sense of unity. Speaking of the hamlet that I stayed on in the initial days, the six houses are all family members – Murave and Khushram. Whenever there was any requirement of labour either to help them construct a house or to work in the fields, the villagers could be seen helping each other and the payment was done in kind, either cooking a meal for the workers at the end of the day. Yet again the community members were divided when it came to practising and adopting different Hindu Gods and groups amongst themselves.

The community was divided into a group of people who follows the *Satsang* community, then there was *Radhe Shaym*, *Jaimata* and then some who would practice and follow the rules and principles of Godwana (*Bara dev*). So the community here in the village are being gradually instructed to follow different Hindu Godmans or *Guru Maharaj* as they are fondly referred to and are being strictly advised to follow strict vegetarianism. Indulging in non-vegetarian food and alcohol is a sin within these families but there were only few families left who would make Mahua⁸ and consume it.

During the winter months especially in the beginning of the year time, the community also witnesses a number of deaths and it was very surprising for me as they would be busy attending *Dasgattras* or Tenth day death ceremonies throughout January and February. Witnessing these families joining these communities and adopting a different lifestyle abstaining themselves from certain food habits opened up gambits on how the religious political dynamics that has been taking place in these rural areas gradually over the years. Phagu Murave whose household I was staying once spoke to me over dinner saying that it was his extended family members who came in contact with someone from a nearby village when on one such instance when a women or they referred to her as ‘baiji’ had come to speak and explain them the meanings of these spiritual songs and bhajans. Gradually his family too began visiting these Satsang sittings and hence they too started following. He mentioned, *Pehle hamara parivar bhi yehi sab khata tha, Maas daaru, kya hota tha iske baad arey pucho maat maar peet, gali kaloj. Fir humne chor diya, ye sab buri aadatein, ab dekho Guru Maharaj ki kripa se hum sab khusal mangal hain, sab kuch hamare zindagi mein theek jaa raha hain.* (In the beginning we used to consume everything, meat, alcohol and after that it always used to end up in fights and abuses. We could then finally leave consuming everything and are thankful to Guru Maharaj and his teachings which has proved fruitful to us and our family which has helped us to leave behind all these bad habits) (Personal conversations 22nd of January, 2018)

When it comes to the different communities the three important groups of custom centre round the three events of birth, marriage and death. The observances around the characteristic of these depend upon certain well-defined principles of savage philosophy. Of these three great groups of custom that connected with death is the most complex and the most interesting. These may be roughly divided into two classes-those in which the object is to preserve the body, or certain relics of it; and, secondly, those in which the ruling intention is to put the dead out of sight (Crooke, 1899, 271-272) there has been quite a considerable amount of literature written around the Gonds of Central India, the Gonds are considered the aboriginals of the central provinces and then there is the Baiga tribe.

⁷ A market, especially one held on weekly basis in a rural area.

⁸ Mahua is an alcoholic drink made out of flowers of the mahua tree and is a popular summer drink

The Gonds have been divided within various sub groups and have been impacted and influenced by the various cultures and Hinduism that has surrounded them for many years. Ideally when we are speaking of rituals and the various ways in which the rituals are being conducted, the Gonds as well have a unique and different nature when it comes to rituals related to death (Helvert, 1950, 209)

As soon as a death occurs, the villagers reach to the house immediately and the word spreads within the village. The corpse is kept within the house before it is taken out, placed on a cot or a mat and the rituals are then performed before they take the corpse to either burn or bury. When it comes to performing the funeral rites it could be the father, the son, the brother or any other member of the deceased. Initially when we look into the different articles surrounding the rites of death, we notice that the Gonds would bury the deceased but gradually with the influences of Hinduism heavily pondering over the community, there has been certain changes in their practices and this shows how the various different cultures surrounding the community also tend to influence their practices with each passing time. It would be usually the men who would be taking the corpse to burial site. The Gonds refer to the ceremony which usually take place after 9-10 days, as *Dasgatra*. Gonds would be also conducting a ceremony on the third day after the death has taken place. It is usually referred to as the *Tirsa*. Such ceremonies also witness the Gonds living in different villages showing up and partaking in the rituals being conducted in the Dasgatra ceremony. Usually the practices have started to differ from region to region where the Gonds have been gradually settling down for years within Central India. On the tenth day, the women headed by an elderly women of the house would first offer food to the dead where the last rites were performed and then would walk miles to reach a river where they would be taking a bath, and then return before the sun sets. Once they are back, the women would sit around outside the house where they would be provided oil to be applied in their bodies and the women of that house would be providing small tokens to these women who had taken part in the bathing ceremony. The men usually would stay back and since Satsangh has started to play a major role in the different ceremonies, pages of the Ramayana would be read out. This usually happens during the night time, where men and women would sit separately. The women usually sit inside and the men would put up tents and would sit outside occasionally smoking a *beedi*, sitting around a fire when it is winters. The meal that would be later served to the guest would consist of puri, sabji, rice, dal and curd afterwards. After Ramayana is read out, Prasad would be served.

It is definitely not easy to just not notice the influence of Hinduism on the Gond community and vice versa. It is quite evident that the Gonds for a greater part have partaken certain rituals and rites and the influence that Hinduism has taken up can show how much the influences of the community have changed or is changing gradually, but it can be directed directly around how the influences would have come about. But the influences within these primitive tribes also show the changing nature of how the Gondwana Samaj would look into preserving their age old traditions and with the advent that Hinduism has started to play along shows the dichotomy of the two.

I wasn't really sure so as to how would these encounters lead to because I have heard stories and conversations around their preaching's and their outlook within the village, their ideas around 'Manav Dharam' which is something the disciples follow and preach to their devotees.

When I had the opportunity myself to go visit weekly Satsangh gatherings and also Satsangh programs that are being organised mostly in Bar Tola at Shatarupa Dhurve's place mostly during Sunday afternoon. Around 2-3pm a loudspeaker announces the commencing of the program in the entire hamlet. Songs devoted to stories of god are being blasted along with musical instruments preaching the goodwill. Large gatherings are so organised when women whom they refer to as 'Baijis' as young as 20 year olds would come and conduct these gatherings. Old and young men and women would come touch their feet and seek their blessings, offerings in small amounts of money would also be made.

It was interesting to note the kind of enthusiasm that erupts amongst them when such large gatherings take place. They would sing their bhajans loud, would dance in their Guru Maharaj's name.

Organising a Satgurmaharaj Satsang

Satgurmaharaj is based in Haridwar, a city in the state of Uttarakhand. This city is considered one of the important Hindu pilgrimage sites. Few families in the village have also visited the city and has lived in the ashrams of Gurumaharaj. Encountering a situation which I fondly remember while staying at Shatarupa Dhurve' house, her daughter was sharing a trip with her family to the ashrams. Her eyes twinkled as she shared her story of living there for three days and attending the Gurumaharaj's ceremony. *Waha ka pani, waha ki hawah, sab kuch itna acha tha didi* (The water there, the air, everything feels so pleasant and nice) (Personal conversation 25th of July, 2018) and while she was talking her eyes were gleaming of joy while she recalled her stay. Another incident was while I was living with their family when a self-style preacher who she believed has been sent by god himself had come visited. So as soon as she entered everybody in the room, young, middle-aged, old would touch her feet even though she

would roughly be of their daughter's age. This gesture was followed by everyone in the room. I was also asked to do the same to which I refused. I sensed that my refusal was not taken on a good note amongst them.

The organisation of these programs and ceremonies are also based on my observations as well as after speaking to the people around regarding how they take their work ahead.

As mentioned above these meetings usually take place in the house of one of the devotees' homes on a weekly basis on every Sunday and then usually after few months large gatherings are organised where disciples gather and sing bhajans and songs.

Devotees' then find it very interesting to meet and join like-minded devotees where they study, chant and reflect on the preaching's of their master. Organizing a Satsang is basically modelled along the following lines:

1. To begin with they usually take their Guru Maharaj's name followed by the names of Gods and then towards the end praising the 'Bharat Mata'
2. This is then followed by reciting the Satsangh recitals which usually consist of Hindi scriptures
3. The parents also bring their children for these gatherings and are also encouraged to sing and learn bhajans songs. It may also happen that individuals are asked to sing individually
4. The prayer room is adorned with a huge photograph of Guru Maharaj and other Hindu deities.
5. They sit silently for about 10-15 minutes after everything gets over usually to meditate.

This usually concludes the Satsangh. After which 'Aarti' is performed followed by distribution of refreshments to the devotees are made. The program is conducted for 2-3 hours and finishes before evening.

What needs through discussion is how these communities have been impacting and imparting their knowledge to the people living in these rural areas, and to notice so as to how the recent blooming of Hinduizing the adivasis for national integration has taken shape.

Many of the Low Middle Income Countries are populous and even with moderate rate of undernutrition and somewhat low rate of over nutrition the numbers for both are substantially high and hence double burden of malnutrition. It is then not incidental that this double burden of malnutrition overlaps with the co-existence of infectious and non-communicable diseases, and thus making it a public health challenge (Prentice, 2018). Allocation of scarce resources to address a wide range of health problems makes it a big challenge for LMICs. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated this challenge as the undernourished are more susceptible to any infection while the obese with co-morbidities like diabetes and hypertension, once infected, have a higher risk of fatality. Underdeveloped countries are prone to deficiencies in nutrient intake attributed to food insecurity and poverty. With the advent that these various communities especially belonging to the rural areas do suffer from acute dietary deficiencies (Viswanathan and Agnihotri, 2020, p.1-2) When restricted to follow a certain dietary instructions what stops them from consuming certain food has effects on their bodily functions. Not many families are used to having a heavy meal that would have everything that is required. In one such satsang program the people were advised to consumed little amount of ghee or clarified butter in their daily consumption. These community members that I was living with would rely on the Public Distribution system for their monthly groceries and instructing them to consume things that do not belong to their everyday diet was concerning.

Explorations

Music and instruments play quite an important role in satsang gatherings and in particular when I was asking someone from the community so as to why they adopted these practices, she was quick to answer she felt good after she started following the practices hinting that it had a positive effect within her. This was the kind of response I would receive from many devotees' within the group. But what were they trying to hint? Was they trying to hint towards a much deeper understanding of their well-being? The songs that are being sung hinted that it broadly meant praising the Gods and Goddesses and songs that convey spiritual and religious messages. It has also been researched and understood and put forward in the recent years that psychologists have long been interested in studying the role of religious beliefs within psychological well-being. It was also observed that within the psychology of health, an important contribution made by researchers is the significant relationship between religiosity and psychological well-being. The practice of religion has also had quite a significant effect on happiness and an overall sense of personal well-being. It had been well-accepted that religious beliefs can shape a person's psychological perception of pain or disability as it creates a mind-set that enables the person to relax and allows healing on its own. When it comes to articulating the basic structure of psychological well-being, discussions nearly

always center on the distinction between positive and negative affect and life-satisfaction (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Bradburn, 1969; Bryant & Veroff, 1982; Liang, 1984, 1985 as mentioned in Joshi et.al. 2008, pp.345-346)

In order to understand well-being more precariously, there has been variations in order to delineate different types of well-being by the researchers. One broad way to classify well-being could be understood through hedonic vs eudemonic distinction. The first is hedonic which could be understood as referring to pleasure and that of positive feelings that are imbibed by the individual which has been endorsed by philosophers such as Locke, Hobbes to name a few and on the other hand when we speak of eudemonic well-being which then refers to having a sense of meaning, having some purpose and fulfilment that the individual holds within his/her life. This form of well-being was endorsed by philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle who strived that such form of well-being indicated that it was more fruitful to strive rather than just simply having hedonic happiness within the lives. It is also extremely necessary to categorize and have an understanding of what can well-being have which explains it to be more towards evaluative, experimental and having more and more eudemonic meanings to have a more and more purposeful life (Ryan and Deci, 2001 as mentioned in Newman and Graham, p.2, 2018) What with having all the discussions about how the Gond community has adopted itself to meanings that have had different meanings for them could be also understand is there a sense of loss that they have started to feel as well as also keep in mind because certain practices that have been there within their life worlds are sense of losing its importance given the fact that the generation of today have moved away from various practices which has been put forward by the different groups of adopting practices of satsang within their lives and their association with their own traditional cultures and ceremonies have ended up moving towards a more Hindu way of life adopting bhajans that only speak could not have been something that was present say years ago. This is something which we could also keep in mind when we think and reflect back to have an understanding of their early lives because there have been discussions with women who would say that after they have married they have started to follow certain rules and certain practices that might have had its effects on their health as well as psychology quite differently. It has also been interesting to note so as to how they are being advised by these 'Baijis' to adopt various food habits and practices while I have been staying for the immersion had hardly seen them adopting. Like in one program that I had visited they were advised to eat more of pulses of different kinds as well as more and more of seasonal vegetables along with a touch of ghee, but in reality not all these families are able to consume all that has been mentioned above especially where in this region very few families consume milk and its few selected families that would have buffaloes within the village. And the sudden dietary change that is adopted by few of the women turning themselves completely vegetarian, might have impacts which might then effect their well-being as well.

Through this article I have tried to open up how religion, development and well-being have had impacted their lives differently leading to changes in their various rituals, shifting them to incorporate certain lifestyles and also impacting their overall well-being and how they have been living with all these changes currently within their spaces in the village and how their lives have been continuing adopting to these changes gradually.

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