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Turning the Wheel: The Raas Festival of the Dule and Bagdi Community of Khanakul

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Abstract: Alessandro Falassi's exploration of festivals highlights the cultural significance, dramatic intensity, and deep historical roots of the festivals. They serve as platforms for communities to affirm social, religious, ethnic, and historical bonds, preserving cultural identities and lifestyles. The Raas Festival, celebrated on Raas Purnima, honours the divine love of Lord Krishna and Radha. It symbolizes the union of the soul with the Supreme Being and is significant among Vaishnavas and Hindus. In Khanakul, West Bengal, the Dule and Bagdi communities, belonging to Scheduled Castes, organize their own Raas Festival due to exclusion from upper-caste temple celebrations. The Raas Festival also illustrates complex power dynamics. While Brahmanical hegemony exercised oppressive, top-down power excluding lower castes, the Dule and Bagdi communities actively resisted by creating their own cultural space. This aligns with Foucault's concept of power as relational and productive rather than merely repressive.

Keywords: Culture, Dalit, Festival, Hegemony, Power.

Introduction:

Alessandro Falassi in his book, *Time out of Time*, described festival as an event and social phenomena that can be found across various cultures. He pointed out various important aspects of festivals, such as colorful variety, dramatic intensity of the dynamic choreographic and aesthetic aspects, the signs containing deep meaning and historical roots etc. The origin of the term 'festival' lies in the Latin word 'festum', though there are two other terms in Latin for festive events:

1. 'festum'- public joy, merriment, revelry
2. 'feria'- abstinence from work in honor of the gods

According to Falassi, in contemporary English, festival means "a) a sacred or profane time of celebration, marked by special observances; b) the annual celebration of a notable person; c) a cultural event consisting of a series of



performances of works in the fine arts, often devoted to a single artist or genre; d) a fair e) generic gaiety, conviviality, cheerfulness". (Fallasi,2, 1987)

Festivals contain shared values, ideologies and mythologies of the local community. Festivals provide an opportunity to the members of a community to participate in order to affirm and 'celebrate various social, religious, ethnic, national, linguistic or historical bonds'. Festivals are important, therefore, to maintain cultural identities and lifestyle practices of its audience. (Bennett, Andy, et al. 1, 2014)

The Raas Festival:

The Raas Festival (Raas Utsav) is held on the auspicious occasion of Raas Purnima (the full moon). It celebrates the Raas Leela of Lord Krishna and Radha along with the 'Gopini's (the female companions of Radha). It is one of the main festivals of the Vaishnavas as well as the Hindus. It is a festival of love. It advocates the union of 'Atma' (soul) with the Param-Atma (the God).

The Raas Festival we are going to discuss here is held by the Dule & Bagdi community (belonging to the Scheduled Caste) of Khanakul Paschimpara, Khanakul, Hooghly, and West Bengal. The exact date of origin can't be said, as there exists no written document regarding this. As known from the local sources, it was started probably between 1920-1930 A.D. At first, there was only one Raas Festival which was organized by upper-caste Hindus. This is still held in the Radhaballav-Gopinath temple. Radhaballav temple belongs to the Chaudhuris (Kshtriya) whereas the Gopinath temple belongs to Goswamis (Upper caste Vaishnava). Due to the prevalent casteism, people from the Dule & Bagdi community were not allowed to enter into the temple and participate in the festival. An interesting point to remember at this point would be that this temple situates at just the opposite of the birthplace of Raja Rammohan Roy at Radhanagar, Hooghly.

Casteism is the reason that the Dule and Bagdi community started their own Raas Festival. As they belong to the scheduled castes, they did not have the right to wear well dresses or shoes. They also were not allowed to eat with the upper caste. They were offered tea in broken cups. Upper castes even avoided their shadows. They could not even find any local Brahmin for the puja, and had to arrange from Bagnan, Howrah. This is what Ambedkar also mentioned in his writings where he pointed out the lowest place, and impure status of the shudras as accorded by the brahmanical hegemony. They must be kept in servility forever.

The festival starts with men and women carrying holy water from Tarakeswar. This is quite similar to the famous water pouring event of Lord Shiva Tarakeswar. Men and women walk all the way bare-footed from Tarakeswar to Khanakul (roughly 25 km). The procession carries a shiva-linga in a 'Chaturdola' (a framed structure). The framed structure has been decorated by the 'Mayur Puccha' (tail of



the peacock) which is symbolically related to Lord Krishna. After reaching the temple (quite simple and small in size when compared to Radhaballav – Gopinath Temple), the procession looks quite energetic. The successful completion of the task, gives them a sense of accomplishment (clearly evident in their body language). Now, they all surrounded the temple, carrying the 'chaturdola' and circle the temple yard several times. This is the central event. Later, people gather at the temple to pour holy water on the shiva-linga.

One thing is quite interesting to note about this festival, is the absence of traditional brahmanical way of puja. The festival does not use rigorous rituals based on brahmanical texts, scriptures.

Festivals can be divided into Sacred / secular depending upon the religious association of the festival. This is more theoretical rather than practical distinction as each type usually include elements of the other. Another important division is based on power, class, structure and social roles:

- Held By the people, for the people
- Held By the establishment, for the establishment
- Held By the people, for the establishment
- Held By the establishment, for the people
- Held By the people, against the establishment (Falassi, 1987)

The Raas Festival is sacred. Also it is held by the people against the brahmanical establishment.

Morphology of the Festival:

Morphology of the festivals indicates minimal units and the possible sequences. These contain meaning beyond their literal and explicit acts.

- Valorization/ sacralization: It modifies the daily, usual functions and creates an alternative meaning of time and space. An area, therefore, is reclaimed; cleared. It is also adorned, and forbidden to normal activities. The temple-yard of the Raas is an example of this.
- Purification: This is the cleansing part of a festival. For this purpose, fire or water or air is being used. In this Raas festival, holy water has been carried to pour on the shiva-linga in the temple.
- Conspicuous Display: The sacred objects are displayed from within the immediate boundary of the festival. In sacred procession, the decorated icon and symbolic elements are moved. The 'chaturdola' carrying the shiva-linga is an example of this case.
- Conspicuous consumption: Availability of food and drink in abundance and even in excess is an essential part of this. It represents abundance, fertility and prosperity. The 'Nara-Narayan Seva' is arranged for this purpose in this festival.
- Devalorisation: It happens at the end of the festival.



Festivals are important to articulate, perform and rediscover the identity. They are also important for their 'Liminality'. As liminal spaces, festivals provides a space to experiment with accepted identity. According to Bakhtin, these spaces are important in articulating the 'alternative liminal forms of identity'(Bennett, Woodward. 11. 2014). In this case, this festival is clearly an assertion of dalit identity.

Bakhtin points out the important role of the festivals in 'letting off the steam'. Festivals provide opportunities to celebrate and escape from the mundane nature of daily life. As a result, in the festivals individuals get the scope to step outside of the routinized identities and unregulated behavior (Bennett, Woodward. 11. 2014).

Early festivals worked as a space to express dissent. Festivals are anti-structural sphere where dominant social relations are inverted or leveled. Festivals provide a way for groups to gain control of cultural spaces. Festivals also challenge dominant ideologies and more specific issues to the center, particularly when the event is organized around a culture or identity that is marginalized in dominant culture. The Raas festival by scheduled castes is also an example of social resistance and protest. By inverting the dominant social relations with the upper castes, the scheduled castes tried to gain control of the cultural spaces. Another important concept related to festival is leisure. Leisure, being connected to the same social and political forces, it plays an important role in shaping various aspects of social life. Leisure, therefore, is also a sphere of struggle. It helps in human emancipation and social justice through the resistance, redistribution and overturning the dominant patterns of power. The Raas Festival continues for four days which provides people from the Dule & Bagdi community an opportunity for leisure. As the people connected to this festival, are mainly manual labours, they have to toil hard. So by providing leisure, this festival plays an important role in their life.

Festive behavior is also important in this respect. There are mainly two aspects:

1. The topsy-turvy aspect apparent in festivals
2. Similarities between daily behavior and behavior in festive time

The festive parallels the daily but they have a more stylized form and semantic meaning. But these aspects are not mutually exclusive, rather it only gains symbolic meaning by simultaneous presence. Festival, in this way, both renounces as well as announces culture.

Power:

The festival is also important to understand the concept of power and the way it operates in our society. According to Mitchel Foucault, power is not something which a group of people or an institution possess. Power is also not concerned with oppressing and constraining only. Rather, he argues in The History of



Sexuality, Vol I (1978), that power is in fact productive. It also gives rise to new forms of behavior.

According to Marxist theory, ideology is the means whereby oppressed people accept inaccurate views of the world. Ideology also works against the interests of the oppressed people. Marxist theorists, such as Louis Althusser, see power as one way traffic. It flows from the top to downwards. Individuals are passive in respect to the ideological pressures. On the contrary, individuals, according to Foucault, are active subjects. Power is often being understood as the capacity of powerful agents. They realize their will over the will of powerless people. The Brahmanical hegemony tried to exert its influence and power by not allowing the Dule & Bagdi community to participate in the Raas Festival that was organized by Brahmins and higher castes. This action, therefore, is the oppressive kind of power that Althusser talks about. It works one way, from the higher castes to the lower castes.

Foucault conceptualized power as a chain. It is a system of relations spread throughout the society. It is not limited to a set of relations between the oppressed and the oppressor. Also individuals are not simply at the receiving end of the power. Power, therefore, brings about various behavior and events also. The Raas Festival organized by the Dule & Bagdi Community is an example of this. The Dule & Bagdi community actively resisted the oppressive power of the higher castes, but they simply resisted and brings about a whole new festival of their own.

Conclusion:

To conclude, we must look forward to the concept of the invention of tradition. The term 'Invented Tradition' is applied to the traditions actually invented, constructed and formally instituted. They emerge within a brief and dateable period. They establish themselves with great rapidity. It responds to novel situations by tracing the form of reference to a historic past and establishing their own past by quasi obligatory repetition. The Raas Festival discussed here, is an example of this. It emerged in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and dateable period and established itself with great rapidity. By creating an exclusive festival for Dule & Bagdi community, it creates an alternative set of practices which inculcate values and norms quite contrary to that of Brahmanical hegemony.

It renews the life stream of a community. It creates a new energy and modify the basic modalities of social life by various ways such as distortion, inversion, stylization, or disguise etc. In this way, it produces the symbolic character of the festival. There is also the element of symbolic abstinence- such as from work or daily life routine. Through these behaviors, it represents the primordial chaos before creation.

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