

## WOMEN, NATURE AND CULTURE: EXPLORING ODIA FESTIVAL 'RAJA'

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### Abstract

*Women, nature and culture are interconnected. Here nature implies landscape or the earth with its hills, dales, flora, fauna, animals, birds and water bodies. Culture refers to the way of life of people residing at a particular place. It includes the festivals and religions, art and architecture, food and clothing etc. performed, followed, observed and celebrated by the inhabitants of one area. Culture emerges from the landscape of one particular area. Women are integral part of any culture. In many cultures, earth which is 'Nature' is regarded as 'Mother' or 'Women' since earth brings about rejuvenation of life like an impregnated mother.*

*In many regional Indian cultures, festivals celebrate womanhood, motherhood and fruition or birth in relation to Mother Earth. Bihu in Assamese culture, Pongal in Telugu and Tamil cultures, Nuakhai in Western Odishan culture and Makara Sankranti in Indian culture are a few festivals which celebrate harvesting with pomp. Similarly the Raja festival which falls in the month of Ashada (mid-June) is celebrated with great pomp in Odisha. This paper explores how the Raja festival, the four-day mega cultural event of Odisha, celebrates motherhood and womanhood and glorifies women and Mother Earth and how it is relevant in today's industrialised world that faces a grave crisis on account of unabated destruction of natural world.*

**Key words:** Women, Culture, Nature, Festival, Industrialization.

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**W**omen, nature and culture are interconnected. Here nature implies landscape or the earth with her hills, dales, flora, fauna, animals, birds and water bodies. Culture refers to the way of life of people residing at a particular place. It includes the festivals and religions, art and architecture, food and clothing etc. performed, followed, observed and celebrated by the inhabitants of one particular area. Culture emerges from the landscape of that area. In 2010, UNESCO in its 'Declaration on Bio- cultural Diversity' describes culture and nature as two sides of the coin. It highlights the relationship between nature and culture in most appropriate words:

Cultures are rooted in a time and place. They define how people relate to nature and their physical environment, to the earth and to the cosmos, and they express our attitudes to and beliefs in other forms of life, both animal and plant. Even in our globalized world of cosmopolitan communities, made of transnational people, cultures tend to make roots in and adapt to the particularity of a specific environment and geo-historical context. This is because, at a fundamental level, biological and cultural diversities are closely interdependent. They have developed over time through mutual adaptation between humans and the environment, and therefore, rather than existing in separate and parallel realms, they interact with and affect one another in complex ways in a sort of co-evolutionary process.

In other words, there is interface between nature and culture and a change in one often results in change in the other. On the one hand, nature provides the backdrop for cultural beliefs and practices and on other hand, all these beliefs and activities give shape to biodiversity. Nature and culture are interlinked in four basic aspects: beliefs and worldviews, livelihoods and practices, knowledge bases and norms and institutions.

Festivals strengthen as well as perpetuate the culture of that particular area. In every society women are integral part of culture. They create as well as take part in it. Traditionally and historically women and nature have long been connected. Traditionally nature is identified as woman. Greek mythology presents goddess Gaia as the personification of Earth and Hindu narratives describe Earth in feminine names like Bhumi or Prithvi. In secular discourse Earth is referred as feminine-‘Mother Earth’. In many cultures, earth which is ‘Nature’ is regarded as ‘Mother’ or ‘Women’ since earth rejuvenates life like an impregnated mother. Traditionally women have been closer to nature for their roles as mothers and providing food to family members. Women’s life centers round fulfilling the physical needs of men. They take care of the household activities and bring up children so that men would go out in search of livelihood. Nature is often referred as ‘virgin’ forest or land until it is exploited or violated by the invasion of man. Destruction of the natural environment for the purpose of industrialization and urbanization is regarded as ‘violation’ of the ‘virgin’ land. Since time immemorial women have been passive and submissive like nature. Man has been controlling/ dominant authority / master over woman and nature. One aspect of nature is passive and submissive like mother and another aspect is furious when man crosses the limit. So the destruction and domination of Earth is often connected to the domination and violation of women. In mid-1970s, the term ‘Eco-feminism’ was coined to describe the academic, political and philosophical movement that finds connection between destruction, violation and exploitation of women /gender and nature/ environment by the dominant and powerful men. Jane Harkness points out the similarities between women and nature in these words as envisaged by the followers of Ecofeminism:

These women conceptualized the earth as an oppressed being, which was exploited for the economic and political gain of others. They saw similarities in men’s treatment of the earth and their treatment of women.

India is an incredible country with incredible people, diverse cultures and vibrant festivals. Its colourful festivals celebrated with pomp and gaieties are world-famous. Despite all diversities, different regions celebrate certain festivals related to the world of nature, particularly earth which is regarded as Mother Earth. In many regional Indian

cultures, festivals celebrate womanhood, motherhood and fruition or birth in relation to Mother Earth. Earth occupies a pivotal place in life of man as it provides the means of sustenance, that is, food. So people celebrate various festivals in order to express their joy over harvest and to express their gratitude to Mother Earth for her bounty. These harvesting festivals are also a way of worshipping nature or Mother Earth. These festivals are mainly celebrated by Hindus who are the original natives or indigenous people belonging to India. However harvesting festivals in different regions of the country are celebrated at different times of the year because of the diversity in climatic conditions. These harvesting festivals are Makara Sankranti, the oldest one which is celebrated in north India, especially in Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Haryana, Himachal, West Bengal, Punjab and Odisha. People celebrate the harvest of new crops on this day with bonfire, carnivals, songs, dances, kite flying, and get-together parties. Baishakhi or Vaisakhi is celebrated in Punjab and Haryana particularly by farmers in order to express their joy and thankfulness for good harvest. Harvest festival of Ladak is world-famous for its dramas or 'Chhams' depicting life and teachings of Buddha and different dance forms of Tibetan culture. Entire Ladak appears attractive with dance, music, gorgeous dress and colourful lighting of Buddhist monasteries or Stupas. Similarly Lohri in Punjabi culture, Bihu in Assamese culture, Pongal in Telugu and Tamil cultures, Onam in Kerala and Nuakhai in Western Odisha are celebrated with colourful gaieties to mark the harvest festival and to express thankfulness to Mother Earth for her gifts to mankind. Putting on new dresses, dance, music, partaking of traditional delicacies, bonfire, worship of deities and getting together mark these festivals.

However, the Raja festival in Odisha in the east-coast of India is slightly different. Odisha is known for its rich cultural heritage and celebration of many festivals throughout the year. There is a saying in Odia that thirteen festivals are celebrated in twelve months in Odisha. The Raja festival is a unique and the most popular festival of Odisha which is celebrated in the month of Ashada (mid-June) at the onset of monsoons. Therefore it is an agrarian festival related to agricultural communities and activities.

It is not a harvest festival like the above mentioned festivals which are celebrated after new harvest but a festival to worship, glorify and celebrate Mother Earth and

motherhood before harvesting when the seeds are sown. It is celebrated particularly in coastal Odisha and is a festival of unmarried girls.

The Raja festival is dedicated to Mother Earth or Basumati or Bhū Devi, the consort of Lord Vishnu. This is celebrated for three days which begins a day before Mithuna Sankranti and concludes two days after that. The first day of the festival is called *Pahili Raja* (first day of Raja), the second is Mithuna Sankranti or Raja Sankranti and the third is known as *Bhu daha* or *Basi Raja*. The preparation begins one day before the first day of Raja, and it is called *Sajabaja* (adornment) when the unmarried girls prepare themselves for the festival with all types of things to adorn and decorate them. They make designs on their foreheads with sandalwood paste, colour the sides of their feet and toes with lac-dye known as *alata* and paint their nails with traditional or modern colours. They put on new sarees/ dress, new bangles, new shoes and new jewelry if they can afford. This festival is a type of preparation for the unmarried girls for their wedding. They follow various customs related to the festival by consuming nutritious food like *Podapitha*, and many other delicacies, not walking barefoot, taking a bath on the first day, and swinging joyously. The festival is incomplete without *podopitha*, Raja swing and Raja *paan*. *Podopitha* is a type of rice cake in which rice-paste, molasses, grated and pieces of coconut, raisin, cashew nuts and many other spices are added and baked. Swings are hung from branches of mango trees or in the premises of almost every house and girls, women and children swing joyously. Sometimes men folk particularly in rural areas also enjoy swinging. Even community swinging takes place at many villages where many swings are hung and all the children, young women and young men enjoy swinging. Partaking of and distributing sweet *paan* is an inseparable part of the festival.

Though it is primarily meant for unmarried girls, it is a community festival as well. Women and men dwelling outside return to their native place for family get-together. Women and men irrespective of their age and caste celebrate it wearing new clothes, eating delicacies, exchanging delicacies, visiting friends, relations and people of the locality and playing various indoor games like *ludo* and outdoor games like *kabadi*. The best parts of this festival are that girls are exempted from doing any household chores during these three days and activity like grinding spices or preparing batter, sweeping

floors, combing of hairs are not done. These are done one day prior to the festival. With the passage of time some of these restrictions are hardly followed particularly in urban localities. However, being free from the burden of daily chores, girls indulge in fun and frolicking. Even works like tilling, sowing or any other work involving digging the earth or construction activities are not done during these three days. On the third day of the festival, girls do not walk barefoot on the earth. Earlier they used to put on slippers made of palm leaves and now-a-days they put on new factory-made slippers or varieties of shoes. The festival comes to an end on the fourth day with a ritual called *Vasumati Snana* or the purifying bath of a stone pestle symbolizing Mother Earth. Women bath her with turmeric water and offer her flowers and smear her with vermilion. Unmarried girls take bath on this day after three days.

The word 'Raja' is derived from Sanskrit word *Rajaswala*, meaning a menstruating woman. The Raja festival celebrates this unique aspect of womanhood. Menstruation signifies a sign of fertility, and it celebrates femininity and the ability of a woman to give birth to another life. It is believed that Mother Earth or Bhuma Devi undergoes her menstrual cycle during this period. It is a sign of rejuvenation. So Mother Earth is given rest during these three days and no work is done to hurt her. In fact, with the onset of monsoons the earth gets ready for new sowing/ the new life on earth. Raja festival celebrates menstruation which is considered a taboo in many cultures and thus foregrounds fertility and womanhood as matters of celebration.

The Raja festival is a unified celebration of women and nature. This celebration of womanhood and nature occupies centre-stage at the present scenario of environmental crisis. The modern discourse of Eco-feminism which developed in 1974 by the French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne establishes a relationship between the subjugation and exploitation of women and exploitation of nature and in both cases men are the culprit. It explores 'the connections between women and nature in culture, religion, literature and iconography, and addresses the parallels between the oppression of nature and the oppression of women. . . .Ecofeminism emphasizes that both women and nature must be respected (wiki, Ecofeminism). By the 1970s, culture refers to material industrial culture

ushered in by the development and spread of science and technology. This material culture has been causing immense harm to the natural world or natural environment. Sarah Milner-Barry expresses her concern that though the term 'Mother Nature' originated from the rich spiritual tradition, it 'has come to represent the twinned exploitation of all that patriarchal society considers inferior to men'. The industrialized world has been facing grave crises on account of unabated destruction of the natural world. Man's egotistical destruction of nature in order to master nature for the sake of material/ industrial progress has resulted in serious climate changes, tsunamis, floods, cyclones, earth quakes and many other natural calamities. These natural calamities threaten annihilation of life from the face of the earth. Similarly, despite spread of education among men and women, despite women holding high positions in society, many women are exploited, suppressed, oppressed and harassed irrespective of their education, caste and class in society. Eco-feminism underscores the need to respect and protect both women and nature. Looking through the lens of 'Eco-feminism', the Raja festival underscores the value of the Mother Earth and the need to protect it from environmental hazards caused by industrial culture on the one hand and to uphold the dignity of women and to save them from exploitation on the other. In other words, the Raja festival signifies dual glorification of women and nature and makes a plea for their proper treatment for the survival and prosperity of mankind.

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