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Sarna-Hindu Theology: a Study of Some Cults, Gods and Worship in Jharkhand

Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar

This paper focuses on certain Hindu beliefs, traditions, and even gods and temples or shrines having their origin in the Adivasi beliefs with a focus on Sarna faith among the Santhal community. It has been argued that it might be possible that Hinduism in India has evolved from Adivasi beliefs or appropriated elements of Adivasi beliefs and a faith system of cultural and ritualistic patterns has emerged in the shared and contested lives of adivasi and Hindu people.

Keywords: Adivasi traditions, Sarna.

With my observation and experiences of religion amongst the Santhals, I refer to two main pointers in the concept note of this journal. They are mentioned below:

1. When theologies and lived practices are so intrinsically linked to each other and when political theology becomes a dominant discourse easily, it is most important to revisit the darsanas themselves and look for points of communication, dialogue and enrichment between various religious philosophies that find themselves in unique positions in India from time to time.

2. While religious movements have been known to be sectarian and exclusive, there exists a “leap of love” that brings differing semiotic systems together in ascribing distinctive yet universal meaning to signs. ... Only when theology is understood in its original contexts, secularism will cease to appear as an antithesis of faith leading to assimilation, inclusion and pluralism.

I will use these two pointers to show a few instances where Adivasi beliefs have given way – or, rather, fused with – the mainstream Hindu faith, thus giving birth to a faith that is neither entirely Adivasi nor entirely Hindu and, yet, re-

mains both and carries that beauty in belief that various faiths only in India can have, minus any jingoism and any feeling of superiority regarding either faiths. I cannot really give a reason as to why I prefer the word Adivasi over the term Scheduled Tribe. Maybe because the term “Adivasi” means the “First Dweller”—a term that has more authority and more purpose and describes us Adivasis in a better way than the term Tribal or Scheduled Tribe which sounds just official and nothing more than that. The term “Adivasi” has a feeling of belonging to a place that the terms “Tribal” and “Scheduled Tribe” do not have.

The first example I would like to give here is of a festival called “Buru Bonga”. “Buru” is a Santhali word which means “hill”; while “bonga” is a Santhali word which could mean either “a god”, in which case the word “bonga” becomes a noun, or “a worship” or “the process of worship”, in which case the word “bonga” becomes, respectively, both a noun and a verb. Both words taken together, “Buru Bonga” could mean either “the worship of the hill” or “the hill which is a god”.

The Buru Bonga is held in a village called Baraghat, which is about 10 kilometres from Chakulia in East Singhbhum district of Jharkhand, right on Jharkhand’s border with West Bengal, on the second Saturday in the month of Ashadh. Ashadh roughly corresponds with June-July on the Gregorian calendar. The buru (hill) here could either be an offshoot of the Dalma hill range or it might be a distant portion of the Ajodiya hill range of the neighbouring Purulia district of West Bengal. Baraghat is about 5 kilometres from my ancestral village, Kishoripur, which lies roughly between Chakulia and Baraghat.

As a Santhal, right from the time I began to understand Santhali words and sounds, I have been hearing the term “Buru Bonga” and felt the excitement it generated among the people around the time this festival took/takes place. However, I was stunned to learn that the Buru Bonga, which was a cause of much excitement among Santhals was not a Santhal festival at all. Buru Bonga is widely known in the non-Santhali-speaking world as “Pahar Puja”. “Pahar Puja” is easier to understand, meaning ‘The Worship of the Hill (or Mountain)’. And this concept is a Marh one.

Marh are a community in areas around Chakulia. They are not Adivasis. A long time ago, the Marhs used to call themselves Malla-Kshatriyas. In the pre-independence India, the kings of the Jhargram area (now in the Pashchimi Medinipur district of West Bengal) was a Marh, a Malla-Kshatriya. They used to be called Malla Raja or Marh Raja. Since the Marh called themselves Kshatriyas – the warrior caste in the Hindu caste hierarchy – after independence, the Marh, notwithstanding their social, economic, etc. status, were put in the General category. They are now struggling to be put in Scheduled Caste (SC).

The Marh are followers of Hinduism, and the actual puja done on the top of the pahar is done by a priest who belongs to the Marh community. The priest is, obviously, a Hindu. There are rocks on the top of the hill. These rocks are arranged in the form of a shrine. According to legends and popular beliefs, the rocks are supposed to represent Lord Shiva. So, the Pahar Puja is, ultimately, a worship of Lord Shiva. There are also sacrifices done on the lower parts of the hill—sacrifices of chickens and goats.

Historically, the dating of the pahar puja is difficult. No one seems to remember how old the Pahar Puja is, if it is actually a religious ceremony of only the Marh community, or if it has always been celebrated/patronised by all the communities of this area—Marh, Santhals, Kurmis, etc.

Buru Bonga – or Pahar Puja – might have been a simple one-day affair sometime in the past. Today, however, it is a colourful weekend fiesta—far different from the religious gathering that it was meant to be, that it is supposed to be. Today, it has transformed into a mela (fair) attended by thousands from all over—Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha. Baraghat, the place where this hill is, becomes host to the annual Baraghat Pata – “pata” being a Santhali word meaning a “funfair” – or the Baraghat Mela. The Baraghat Mela lasts the entire weekend—the Saturday of the actual puja, and the Sunday. Although the actual term for this fair is Baraghat Mela – the name by which a number of people know it all over – the fact that this mela has found a name for itself in Santhali just goes on to show that this festival has, down the years, become fairly popular among the Santhals who have adopted or appropriated this festival as their own. Santhals of this area are mostly animists, followers of the Sarna religion. The religion that we animist Santhals and other Adivasis of the Chhota Nagpur Plateau region – like, Ho, Munda, Oraon, etc. – follow is called Sarna. We worship in the jaher, a grove of sal trees. Marang-Buru and his consort, Jaher-Ayo, are our most revered deities. While the term Sarna has been accepted quite well by non-Santhal Adivasis, among the Santhals there is quite a conflict as to what our religion should be called. While many Santhals accept the term Sarna, some Santhals prefer to call our religion Sari Dharam – meaning, The True Religion – however, this is a different matter here. Since I have grown up with the term Sarna and every Santhal I know and trust uses the term Sarna, I will call the religion of us animist Santhals, Sarna. The Pahar Puja – or Buru Bonga – shows, there is an amalgamation of the Hindu and Sarna faiths. The collective term for gods in Santhali is “bonga-buru”. When one says “bonga-buru”, one means the entire pantheon of Santhal gods. The highest deity among these gods is Marang-Buru, who is seen as a father figure. The consort of Marang-Buru is Jaher-Ayo, who is seen as a mother figure. Now, the Santhali word for hill

is “buru”. Somehow, down the years, the “Buru” in Buru Bonga has come to mean not just the worship of the hill, but also the worship of Marang-Buru who is supposed to dwell in that hill. Santhals believe that that rock at the top of the hill at Baraghat, the rock which the Hindus worship as Lord Shiva, is, actually, Marang-Buru. So even Santhals go up the hill and worship the rock, offer chickens and goats in sacrifice, and even observe some Hindu methods of worship. Since some methods of worship among the Hindus and Santhals are quite common – like, the use of sindoor—Marang-Buru is supposed to be pleased by just a touch of sindoor and a few drops of haandi – the customs have been absorbed into the syncretic cultural, ethnic and social characteristics of lived religion in India.

Another example of intermingling faiths concerns goddess Rankini of Ghatsila. Goddess Rankini, popularly known as Ma Rankini or Rankini Mata, is supposed to be the patron deity of Ghatsila in Jharkhand in eastern India. Ma Rankini is the family deity of the royal family of Ghatsila. The Dhal kings – kings no more, but their estate stays and their progenies are still addressed as royalties – of Ghatsila worship Ma Rankini. In this ritual observed by the royal family of Ghatsila, two buffaloes are sacrificed. Both buffaloes, incidentally, are donated by the Sarna Santhals of two villages, Powrah and Bagla, which lie on the outskirts of Ghatsila, with each village donating a buffalo each for the two-day worship in the month of Ashwin (September-October, in the Gregorian calendar). There are at least two interesting legends connected with the Dhal kings of Ghatsila and Ma Rankini. In the first legend, an itinerant vendor selling bangles and other ornaments comes to the palace of the king of Ghatsila to sell his wares. He rests under some tree beside the pond of the king and a small girl, maybe five or six years old, comes to the vendor and tells him that she would buy bangles. The vendor gives her a few bangles of her choice. The girl wears those bangles happily on both her hands. The vendor asks the girl who would pay for those bangles. The girl tells the vendor that her father was the king of Ghatsila, so he would pay for the bangles. The vendor goes before the king and asks for his money. The king is surprised, for he had no daughter! Who was that little girl? The king asks the vendor to take him to the place where he found the little girl. The vendor leads the king to the pond, where the girl had come to him to buy bangles. Of course, the girl was nowhere to be found, and the king was angry and the vendor very afraid. But then, a miracle happened. Every person present there – the king, the vendor, the king’s attendants, everyone – witnessed that miracle. Two hands emerged from the pond. Two giant hands, wearing the same bangles that that vendor had sold that little girl. Just two giant hands, wearing bangles, no body. As if that sight wasn’t enough to stun them all, they then hear a voice. The voice of a woman. She addresses the

king of Ghatsila.

‘Father, I am your daughter. I bought bangles from this vendor. Won’t you pay him for my bangles?’

The king was dumbstruck. It is not clear – I never asked anyone this – how he came to know that that little girl was goddess Rankini, but he knew that she was goddess Rankini and that she had come to stay in his palace. That was why she had come to him as his daughter. The king pays the vendor handsomely, and, with all the rituals that go with bringing a goddess – or a daughter – home, receives Ma Rankini into his palace, and there she stays till now and, perhaps, forever, becoming, over time, the patron goddess of Ghatsila. There is a temple of Ma Rankini in Ghatsila, a popular revered shrine.

The other legend goes something like this. Earlier, before the buffaloes were chosen to be sacrificed to Ma Rankini, humans were sacrificed. To perhaps mitigate the natural responses of disgust this would engender, it was added that the human sacrificed to Ma Rankini was not from Ghatsila. He – or she – was not a resident of Ghatsila. On the day of the sacrifice, the materials for sacrifice and the puja were prepared and placed before the goddess. The priest, the ordinary public, the royalty, they would all be waiting. And then, all of a sudden, a child who is a stranger just appears from the crowd and places himself on the sacrificial altar. That child speaks nothing, no one communicates with that child. It just goes and places its head on the altar, where the priest must have anointed it with sindoor and other materials used in the puja. And then the hangman strikes. That child is the chosen one, the one who is sacrificed, whose head is chopped off before the goddess. Because of the complete anonymity of the child, the people are spared the obvious guilt and compunction that would result from this act. The possibilities of the child being a stranger who could have been abducted and drugged, or brainwashed for months and years – like suicide bombers – that it was born to be sacrificed to the goddess seem to conveniently escape all.

There are three temples dedicated to Ma Rankini in the whole of the Ghatsila area. There is one in Ghatsila, the temple established by the erstwhile royal family of Ghatsila. The second temple to Ma Rankini is in Kaporgadi area of Jadugora—a temple built into a rock face of a hill. Because of its scenic location – hills, tress, small waterfalls – the Rankini Mandir at Kaporgadi is more famous, perhaps, as a place for recreation than a place of worship. However, the Rankini Mandir where the goddess is first worshipped is in a small village some 5 kilometres from Ghatsila, towards the west, on the national highway 33 that goes further towards Jamshedpur and Ranchi. This village is called Galudih, and the temple here too is called “Pracheen Rankini Mandir”—Ancient Rankini Temple. However, it is this

temple in Galudih that showcases an amalgamation of Hindu and Sarna faiths and also poses a possibility: Was Rankini an Adivasi deity who was appropriated by the Hindus as their own?

Rankini is supposed to be a manifestation of Shakti . With reference to the relationship between Shiva-Sakti, Rankini is sometimes considered an avatar of the goddess Durga. However, there is no mention of Rankini in the epics, the Vedas or the Puranas.

Since the legends associated with Ma Rankini have sacrifice – either of a human child or a buffalo – in them, it could be claimed that Rankini is a goddess in the mould of the goddess Kali. In mainstream religions, like Hinduism, the faith of the primitive indigenous people has always been a matter of curiosity, with the indigenous people often being associated with violent, bloodthirsty practices. Perhaps, something like this has happened with the goddess Rankini too.

One of the legends about Ma Rankini connects both the temples at Kaporgadi (Jadugora) and Galudih. According to this legend, Rankini is a consort of Lord Bhairab—Bhairab being one of the manifestations of Lord Shiva. Bhairab and Rankini used to live in the Bhairab Thaan in Organda village (the Santhali pronunciation is Orgoda) near Silda village in Binpur block of Pashchim Medinipur district of West Bengal. This Bhairab Thaan is still there in Organda. Rankini was a man-eater. Every day, one human being used to be sent to her so that she could eat that human. One day, a young and fearless mahra man – mahra are the cowherd caste, the gwala – was sent to her. Apart from being fearless, the mahra man was also clever. He devised a method to save his life from Rankini. He challenged her to a task: eating gram. The mahra man invited Rankini to a gram-eating competition. He placed two bags of gram before each of them and told Rankini that if she would be able to beat him by eating all the grams in her bag before him, she could eat him; if not, the mahra man would chase Rankini out of the village. Rankini laughed at this challenge—she was a goddess, she could eat the entire bag of grams in one go. The gram-eating challenge started, and while the mahra man ate his grams slowly, patiently, chewing each mouthful, Rankini just stuffed her mouth with fist after fist of gram, chewed in a wink, and swallowed in a breath. She was sure she would win the challenge, eat the grams first, then the young mahra man, till... One movement of her jaws over the grams in her mouth, and all her teeth cracked and started falling off in pieces.

The mahra man had, very cleverly, filled, along with regular grams, solid iron pellets inside the bag. What Rankini chewed first were regular grams, but then, in her excitement and over-confidence, she, unknowingly, unmindful, stuffed her mouth with those iron pellets, and, naturally, her teeth cracked.

With her teeth gone and gums bleeding, Rankini could not complete the challenge. Fearlessly, the mahra man stood before Rankini and ordered her to leave their village. Where would she go? The mahra man knew that if Rankini stayed anywhere close by, she might again start preying upon them. So he actually chased her all the way from Organda (in West Bengal) to Kaporgadi (near Jadugora in Jharkhand), perhaps a distance more than 100 kilometres. In Kaporgadi, Rankini, tired after the run, hid in a pile of clothes of a dhobi man – a man of the washerman caste – who was washing clothes at a ghat and requested him to not tell the mahra man her whereabouts. When the mahra man came, he asked the dhobi if he had seen Rankini. The dhobi said he had not. The mahra man warned the dhobi of Rankini and returned. When the mahra man was gone, Rankini, still dazed, came out of hiding and asked the dhobi if she could stay in that village. The dhobi now knew Rankini's credentials, so he extracted a promise from her that she wouldn't harm any living being of their village. Rankini promised and settled in Kaporgadi. Perhaps, that is how the temple to Ma Rankini came to be built at Kaporgadi.

Bored of nothing to do all day, Rankini would often saunter to the banks of the river Subarnarekha that is quite close by. One day, Rankini fell in love with a Santhal man who came to work in fields by the Subarnarekha. The man was from a village called Putru. Putru is very close to Galudih, just a kilometre or two apart, on the national highway 33, between Galudih and Ghatsila. This Santhal man had the surname Soren, and his progenies are still believed to be living in Putru. This Santhal man was very handsome; but he was married and had children. Yet, Rankini fell desperately in love with him and wished to marry him. Rankini sensed that Mr. Soren was a devoted family man. He couldn't bring home a second wife. So she did not openly propose to Mr. Soren. What she did was: she took up the form of his wife – who used to bring food for him in the field – and fed him with her own hands. Though Mr. Soren was a devoted family man, he couldn't tell the subterfuge the goddess employed. Every day, Mr. Soren's real wife would bring food for her husband, and each time Mr. Soren turned her away, because his stomach would be full—his “own wife” had already fed him with her own hands. ‘But you just fed me the food,’ Mr. Soren, surprised, told his wife. ‘When? I brought this food just now,’ the real Mrs. Soren, equally taken aback, replied. ‘No, no,’ Mr. Soren said, not being able to understand why his wife was feeding him so much food, ‘you take this food back home. I will eat it later. I just had my meal.’

Mrs. Soren, with her acute feminine instincts, decided to investigate. What was, after all, wrong with her husband? The next day, she decided to follow her husband to the field. The real Mrs. Soren hid behind some trees away from her husband's field and saw in horror as a fearful looking goddess emerged from nowhere, changed her looks to resemble the real Mrs. Soren, gathered food out of thin air, and went and started feeding Mr. Soren. The real Mrs. Soren was more enraged than scared. She went up to Rankini and gave her a tight kick.

'How dare you take up my form and feed my husband?' she demanded of the goddess.

Rankini, despite being a goddess, was so helplessly in love with this Santhal man, a human being, that she fell at Mr. Soren's feet and begged him to marry her. She begged him to at least keep her in his house. She said that she would remain like a maid in his house all her life, that she just needed to stay close to him, but Mr. Soren did not budge. Also, the real Mrs. Soren was fuming red with anger by now. Broken-hearted, Rankini asked Mr. Soren to fulfil a wish of hers. She assured him that it had nothing to do with marriage. She would leave Putru and go and live in the nearby village of Galudih (where a temple for her was built), but her only wish was that on her day, the day when her puja was done, a man from the same Santhal family, the family of that Mr. Soren of Putru, should start the puja at the Sorens' ancestral house in Putru. This custom continues till date.

Though Rankini is a Hindu goddess and a Brahmin comes to worship her on the day of the Rankini Puja, the rituals are initiated by a man from that Santhal family in Putru. Ende is a festival celebrated by Santhals in the month of Bhador. On Ende, sal twigs are planted in fields where paddy crops have been planted so that the crops might stay safe. Exactly twelve days after Ende, on the day of the Bindha – which, according to the Santhali calendar, is in the month of Bhador, but, according to the Bengali calendar, is in the month of Ashwin – one of Mr. Soren's descendants – any male member of his family – starts the puja at their ancestral home in Putru, observing Sarna customs, and only then does the Hindu priest take over at the temple in Galudih.

What could be concluded from this? One legend says that Rankini is the consort of Bhairab. However, in reality, Rankini is first worshipped by a Santhal family with Sarna customs. So who exactly is Rankini? Was Rankini never a Hindu goddess? Was she an Adivasi deity (a Santhal deity, to be more exact) who was appropriated by the Hindus and has now become a Hindu goddess; even found a place beside Lord Shiva as an avatar of his consort, Durga; and was reintroduced into the Santhal pantheon as a Hindu goddess? Or is this too an example of a harmonious amalgamation of Hindu and Sarna beliefs? What, exactly, is the story

of Ma Rankini and what does it signify?

There are some other instances of Hinduism appropriating animist Adivasi beliefs and beliefs of other lesser known religions. I wish to draw our attention to the fact that Adivasis are nature worshippers and have been known to worship monoliths.

In Baidyanath Dham Deoghar in Jharkhand there is the famous Baidyanath Temple where the world famous annual Shravani Mela is held in the month of Shравan (July-August). I have written about the Shравani Mela in my essay, “105 Kilometres For Shiva”, in the 19-September-2016 issue of Outlook magazine. According to legends, Lord Vishnu disguised himself as an Adivasi cowherd boy to trick Ravana into placing the shivalinga on the ground. According to one other legend, a Bhil man called Baiju – (the Bhil part is contentious)—Baiju, in all probability, was a Santhal as Deoghar is in the Santhal Pargana area of Jharkhand and Baiju is a common name for males among the Santhals – discovered the shivalinga at Deoghar and started worshipping it, and after Baiju, the place came to be called Baijnath Dham, which later on turned to Baidyanath Dham, and the world famous Shiva temple was built at the place where Baiju had discovered the shivalinga. Now, since Adivasis have always worshipped monoliths, could it so happen that there was no shivalinga at all? The myth about Shiva, Ravana, and Vishnu was just that, a myth. The shivalinga could actually be a monolith the Adivasis – Santhals, maybe, – used to worship, which was appropriated by the powerful Hindus and turned into a shivalinga and a Hindu temple built where Adivasis used to worship .

During a personal visit to an ancient cave at a place called Kanchangarh Litipara block of Pakur district, I met a man who testifies to his mystical visions of Shiva and Parvati. The cave is called Kanchangarh ka Gufa and is a series of two caves. The caves were supposed to house the Paharia king and queen. The Paharia are now grouped in the PTG (Primitive Tribal Group). Through the 1855 Santhal Hul and all, these caves remained untouched. Today, these caves have become a shrine to Shiva and Parvati. A Paharia man named Gosani Paharia works as the unofficial priest-cum-caretaker here. He lives alone. The alms given by visitors/devotees is his only income. During personal conversation, he explained how his visions and Shiva-Parvati’s blessings keep him safe in a place where he is often visited by huge cobras, kraits, and pythons, It left me in thought about the ancestry of the cave, the pre Vedic origins of Shiva, the ritualistic practices of Hinduism there presently.

There is the famous Dewri Mandir at Bundu on the National Highway 33 between Ranchi and Jamshedpur. The goddess Dewri too is supposed to be an

incarnation of goddess Durga and is supposed to have sixteen arms. Traditionally, the goddess Dewri was worshipped by Adivasi priests. Pahan priests of the Munda tribe used to worship goddess Dewri. Maybe goddess Dewri too was an Adivasi deity who was appropriated by the Hindus and the Munda tribals made to adopt Hinduism. Anyway, the Dewri Mandir was a low profile spot on the national highway till Mahendra Singh Dhoni (the former captain of the Indian cricket team) became a renowned personality. Dhoni, who has become the face of Jharkhand now, is an ardent devotee of goddess Dewri. His visits to the Dewri Mandir made the temple so famous that it came to be known as Dewri Mandir aka Dhoni Mandir. At present, the traditional Munda priests have been pushed to the periphery while Brahmin priests have taken over the temple. The possibility of goddess Dewri being a tribal goddess appropriated in the Hindu pantheon is likely.

An older and wise man told me that the Hindus took Ta from the name of the goddess Tao in Buddhism and Ra from the Jaher Era of the Sarna Santhals and created a new goddess called Tara or Ma Tara. There is a famous temple town called Tarapith in West Bengal which is famous for its Tantric Hindu temple dedicated to the goddess Tara. Goddess Tara is supposed to be a fearsome Tantric aspect of the Devi of the Shakti cult and the town of Tarapith is famous for its sadhana (Tantric rituals) that take place in crematoria. Were both Sarna and Buddhist faiths violated when the Hindu goddess Tara was created?

In Mayurbhanj district in northern Odisha, there is a town called Khiching, famous for a temple dedicated to the goddess Kichakeshwari Devi. According to the older, wise man who told me about Tara being an amalgamation of Tao and Jaher Era, Khiching too was a centre of Buddhism. The temple there was actually a Buddhist temple, but Hindus took over, sculpted Hindu mythological characters on the Buddhist temple and turned the temple to the temple of goddess Kichakeshwari Devi. This older wise man said that there is actually a board of the Archaeological Survey of India that says that that temple was actually a Buddhist temple that fell prey to Hindu sculptors and turned into a famous Hindu temple.

As another illustration of this amalgam, whether syncretic or appropriative, is experiential. In the study of lived faiths, it is imperative to highlight the experiential as the aspects of ritual, performance, mysticism and psychological dimensions can be analysed in the immediacy of lived experience. I belong to the Santhal community. As dedicated followers of Sarna religion, we go to jaher, the grove of sal trees held sacred by the followers of Sarna faith. We pray to Marang-Buru and Jaher-Ayo, our guardian deities. Yet, we also light dhupbattis (joss sticks, a Hindu worship ritual) and dhuna (the fragrant, dried up sap of the sal tree) is an impor-

tant ingredient in the religious rituals of both Hinduism and Sarna, and we also pray to Hindu deities. In the context of the worship cult of Ma Rankini, the Santhals largely believe that Rankini is, actually, a Santhal goddess who was abducted by the Hindus. Maybe she wasn't even a goddess. Maybe she was a real woman who was so forthright that in a strongly patriarchal society of the Santhals she made a grave mistake of falling in love with a married man and also being excessively sexual about it. Maybe there were class differences between Rankini's family and that man's family. Though caste hierarchy (the varna system) is not present in Santhal society, the distinctions of economic and social nature are a part of it, as in any society. Rankini, as a Santhal woman, could have been banished from her village due to social hierarchies. Maybe she was adopted by some kind-hearted Hindu. Maybe those Hindus saw something divine or god-like in Rankini, that the Santhals could not appreciate, that made them turn her into a goddess of theirs; and, maybe, when Rankini finally became a goddess, she, as a goddess, expressed her desire to at least see a man from the family of the man she had loved. Maybe that was her way to salvation, what would have given her peace.

My family, despite being Sarna Santhal, also worships Ma Manasa (or Goddess Manasa), the Hindu goddess of snakes, poison, fertility, and prosperity. The worship, till a few years ago, took place in our village, Kishoripur. The worship of Ma Manasa (especially at times of crisis in the family) does not negate one's Santhal identity, but it is reminder of the cultural ties and faith networks that operate beyond the thick walls of religiosity. In Kishoripur, the Hindu communities – the Kamar (the blacksmith caste) and the Kunkal (the potter caste) – have always worshipped Ma Manasa.

Also, the story of Ma Manasa displays the divisions in the Hindu society as well. Goddess Manasa is supposed to be an illegitimate child of Lord Shiva who was insulted by her stepmother, Goddess Parvati, and, consequently, disowned by Shiva. So, while Shiva's other children, the goddesses Saraswati and Lakshmi and the gods Kartik and Ganesh, found mainstream acceptance, Manasa, Shiva's illegitimate daughter, was pushed to the fringes and had to create an identity of her own. While Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Ganesh have their individual pujas, observed very elaborately by the mainstream Hindu society, the worship of goddess Manasa remains a marginal affair. I have seen goddess Manasa being worshipped only in villages, mostly by low-caste Hindus – who would count among the SCs, BCs, OBCs, and the like – and as a part of the Hindu pantheon, i.e., if one worships all the Hindu gods at one time, that person also mumbles a few lines of prayer to Ma Manasa.

Also, a myth associated with Ma Manasa depicts her as a half-sister to another

Hindu goddess, Goddess Shitala—the Hindu goddess who cures difficult diseases like pox and measles. The worship of goddess Shitala (Shitala Mata) is popular among Hindus though few temples are found in her dedication. Her widespread worship owes to her offering the cure for diseases that beset children, and limited medical knowledge and low infant mortality earlier could be the reasons for her popularity for the psychological comfort she can offer to people pressed by economic and other constraints). Temples dedicated to Ma Shitala are usually found in the areas where the Dalits live. My parents used to work in the copper factory in Moubhandar in Ghatsila area of Jharkhand. The Harijan basti in Moubhandar – most people of this basti work as sweepers in the copper factory or as sweepers and ward attendants in the hospital run by the company – has a Shitala Mandir. The Harijan basti in Mosaboni, the place where the copper mines are, has another Shitala Mandir. So, this phenomenon might prove that Ma Shitala is not just the goddess who cures diseases, she is also a deity of the downtrodden, the Dalits.

In 2016, on deputation in the medical team at the internationally famous Shrawani Mela in Deoghar district of Jharkhand. The Shrawani Mela is, essentially, a Hindu festival. One can observe Sikh pilgrims, Santhal pilgrims, and Muslim pilgrims coming to offer the holy water from river Ganga to Lord Shiva at the Baidyanath Dham temple in Deoghar. The dargah of Sheikh Moinuddin Chishti at Ajmer in Rajasthan is a sacred place revered by people of all faiths. The Basilica of the Holy Rosary (commonly known as Bandel Church) at Bandel in West Bengal is a Christian site, but it is as revered as any of the Hindu shakti-peeths in India. It is said that the statue of Mother Mary at that basilica was never destroyed through several calamities that that basilica went through. Such are the powers of the Basilica of the Holy Rosary of Bandel that not only Christians, but also Hindus and people of several faiths go there to pray and ask for their wishes to be granted. The Golden Temple at Amritsar (Punjab) in north India is testimony for inter religious harmony with Sikhs, Hindus and people of other faiths visiting throughout the year.

In the context of lived religious tradition in India, cultural intertextualities transcend theological specificities. The lived practices of Adivasi and other communities in India testify to the need of rejecting a myopic view of religion that consistently threatens to reduce lived religion to performative symbols and tears away at the syncretic religious fabric of contemporary India.

Notes:

1. Kailash Kumar Mishra in his article 'Shiva Legends in the Sacred Traditions of Indian Tribes', <http://ignca.nic.in/kmsh0003.htm> accessed on 1st March 2017, has argued for the influences of tribal practices on Hindu religion. He argues for Shiva to be a unifying god among adivasis and Hindus and also accepts pre vedic essentially adivasi origins of Shiva. It is not clear whether he wants to insist on distinct cultural and theological roots of adivasis and Hindus of India or whether he wants to highlight how an adivasi deity finds poetic references in Vedic texts. Either way simply points to possibilities of appropriation being discussed in the paper.