

MY EXPERIENCE ON STOPPAGE OF ANIMAL SACRIFICE DURING PERFORMANCE OF BALIYATRA IN SONEPUR IN ORISSA

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Various traditions were started during the time of kings in Sonepur in the past, one of them being Bali Pratha. It had different meanings to different people. The festival was started in the last part of 19th century by the king. Goats were being sacrificed publicly from Mahalaya to the Purnima of month Ashwina as per Hindu calendar, while performing puja for goddesses Somalei, Sureshwari and Khambeswari. The main job is performed by a group of persons, called Barua. It had been conveyed to the people that the kings are agents of Goddess. During the Bali festival, certain rites are performed, the details of which are never made public. The goddess comes to represent herself through the physical body of Barua, who in the state of Samadhi could even drink raw blood from the fresh cut necks of the goats without difficulty. The goddess mixes with the crowd during the festival. For the common man, it is an act of wonder and awe. During this time of merry making, plenty of meat and liquor is consumed by the people of Sonepur town, who actively take part in this festival. They are mostly proud of this tradition.

The royal house demonstrated their influence and power through such public festivals involving their deities. Goddess "Somalei" at Sonepur is still the private deity of the living heirs of the then Maharaja of Sonepur and had not yet been taken over by the Endowments of Govt. of Orissa. The Baruas of Sakma village, who had to take active role, are the sebayats of Goddess Somalei. We referred to a book titled "Gruhachandrika" concerning this festival, wherein it is mentioned that "Bali" should not take place in the absence of Maharaja. For a long time, the heirs of erstwhile king of Sonepur were not living in Sonepur. But for reasons not recorded any where, the district administration through the offices of the Sub Collector, Sonepur and Tahasildar organized the festival, after the royal families ceased to take any interest in Sonepur. It showed the popularity of this festival at Sonepur.

Soon after I took over as the Collector of the district, a number of progressive minded persons met me with their arguments to discontinue such an archaic tradition, sometimes in July 1999. Notable amongst them were Shri Gorekh Sahu, a journalist and Smt Manjula Mishra, the Secretary of Subarna Nari Jagaran Kendra. They had the support from few like minded

people associated with organizations like Mahanadi Sahitya Sansad, Shree Gopalji Yogalaya, Gayatri Paribar, Subarna Nari Jagarana Kendra, Global Green, Sonepur and Zilla Jibedaya Samiti, Palli Mangala Mangaleswari Juba Sansad of Birmaharajpur. They did not dispute that goddess does not come down to represent through the Barua. Rather, according to them, after the performance of certain rites, the Barua comes to the position of Samadhi (trance), and he can even drink poison without difficulty. Drinking of raw blood from the freshly cut neck of an animal is not at all a difficulty. They put up their arguments to continue the Baliparba without the sacrifice of animals, showing kindness to the lower animals, as the goddess is mother of all living beings, including the animals. Shri Sahu even gave me a video film produced by Shri Sabyasachi Mohapatra, a noted film maker of Orissa, which showed how a number of poor women were getting into trance on their own, during the performance of this festival involving procession of Barua. He argued that Balipratha (it does not require animal sacrifice) gives occasions to many persons to get into a state of trance, called Samadhi, which is a pure spiritual experience.

Some progressive minded people had gone to the High Court of Orissa with a PIL petition to put a stop to the animal sacrifice in the year 1998. A case was registered at the High Court of Orissa vide OJC No.13745/98 (PIL Y 62/98). They were not aware of the decision of the High Court, as they had not kept track of the case.

To examine the matter, the papers available in the office of District Collector were called for. The file did not show any trace of receipt of the order in that case.

To understand the matter, I visited village Sakma where the Baruas live. They are the principal participants in the festival. Sakma is located about 20 Kms away from Sonepur town. During the year 1898, two hundred acres of land on rayati status and 400 acres of land on bhogra basis have been donated by the then Maharaja of Sonepur. In return, the Baruas render various services, which include drinking the blood from the fresh cut neck of the animal sacrificed.

I understood that the Baruas were in a state of fear. They revealed that some poisonous substance (soil) is put on their navels, and it is very difficult for



Collector had to use lathi charge by the police to disperse the mob. Some of them proceeded to the Collector's official residence and started pelting stones. In this process, they damaged an official vehicle, the front lights at the gate of the residence etc.

The same group of people again observed a bandh on 16th September '99. The administration had to make elaborate police arrangement to maintain the law and order in the town. The shop keepers showed popular support for the animal sacrifice by closing their shops. I was surprised to receive a copy of the resolution of the District Bar Association, Sonepur pressing their demand that animal sacrifice in its present form should continue and there should be no stoppage. Overall, there was overwhelming support to continue the animal sacrifice in Sonepur. The news of bandh reached Bhubaneswar and the then Home Secretary (present Chief Secretary, Orissa) Shri Ajit Kumar Tripathy enquired about the matter over phone from me. After hearing from me, he stated that my initiative on this issue had made him proud and he stood by whatever was being done by the district administration to stop animal sacrifice. Our motivation level went very high after that.

However, the families of Shri Gorekh Sahu, Smt Manjula Mishra and others, who wanted a change from the past, were subjected to untold sufferings and threats. Manjula Mishra was evicted from her house by the landlord and we had to provide her accommodation in the government quarters, as no one was willing to give house on rent to her family in Sonepur. Many of my admirers turned hostile in the town.

At that time, I was curious to know about the status of PIL started in the High Court of Orissa. Accordingly, I wrote a letter on 17th September 1999 to the Registrar, High Court and the Advocate General's office giving background of the current development in Sonepur. I requested them to supply a copy of the court order, if any, so that we would sort out the issues by opening a broad forum for discussion

Soon, we received a copy of the order by fax. The order No.8 dated 10th March, 99 relating to the PIL stated that *"Mr. P.K. Ray, learned Addl. Govt. Advocate for the State submits that the Collector, Sonepur will take all effective steps to stop slaughtering being done openly and publicly shocking the conscience of general public. Recording such submission and assurance to the Court we dispose of the writ application. All necessary steps be taken accordingly."*

The order was a shot in our arms. It vindicated the stand we had taken so far. I made further enquiry in my office as to how an order dated 10th March 1999 had not been received in the office till that date. It was understood that most of the persons working in the district office wanted the animal sacrifice to continue and therefore did not file the order on record.

In pursuance of the order of the Hon'ble High Court, we issued a general notice to the public, Sonepur District Bar Association and all the offices and Associations mentioning about the order of the High Court and the previous meetings with various people of Sonepur regarding stoppage of the practice of animal sacrifice in Sonepur. We informed that there would be no animal sacrifice henceforth and violation of the order would amount to serious consequence.

As an anticlimax to all the opposition, there was total silence from the concerned quarters. I discussed with the Sub Collector and Superintendent of Police if they would be in a position to handle the situation, if I proceeded on leave during puja. They convinced me that no one in town would dare to violate the order of the High Court and I could proceed on leave peacefully.

On my return from leave after the Puja holidays, the Sub Collector Shri Premanidhi Seth intimated that there was no animal sacrifice and puja was performed without any animal sacrifice. The people of Sonepur town were extremely angry with me and they would never invite me to any function in the town. Some of Priests, performed special puja in the temples so that Goddess would cause me harm. I replied that goddess must have been pleased with me for contributing to the escape from death of some her creations.

Since then, the Bali Yatra is going on in Sonepur without animal sacrifice. The Baruas have not been threatened with eviction notices from the Tahasildar from their land.

(Footnotes)

¹ The views expressed by the author are in his personal capacity.

