

A Note on the Nepalese Satar Festivals of Soharai and Patamela

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The Satars live in Morang and Jhapa districts in the eastern-most part of Nepal's Tarai. They migrated to Nepal from Santhal Pargana and Choota-Nagpur of Bihar in India. Satars and Santals are of known common origin. In India they are called Santals while in Nepal they are known as Satars.

Satars divide themselves into Christian Satars and Hindu Satars. Christian Satars do not celebrate any of the traditional Satar festivals and rituals. Hindu Satars, on the other hand, celebrate these festivals as well as the more recently adopted Hindu festivals like Dasain, Tihar and Maghe Sankranti. Even though they regard themselves as Hindus and live among people of different communities within the Hindu caste system, the other Hindus regard the Satars as untouchables, i.e. at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Social, political and economic factors make it necessary for the Satars to establish working relationships with the members of the Hindu community. Like many other ethnic groups in Nepal the Satars are also faced with the twin problems of maintaining a separate cultural identity as well as establishing their place within the surrounding Hindu culture. This is especially significant for the Satars since they are considered untouchables.¹

Two festivals, Soharai and Patamela, are highlights of Satar traditions. The explicit reasons for celebrating these festivals are different, but there are some striking similarities underlying the rituals. During both of these festivals, men are sent on hazardous assignments (hunting in the one case and being swung in the air while tied to a bamboo pole in the other) and in each case, after these fears are accomplished the men are then worshipped by the women of the household. Another common factor is the worship of the Hindu gods like Rama and Mahadeva. By worshipping these deities in these festivals the Satars seem to be asserting that they are a part of the Hindu socio-cultural system, but with a distinct cultural identity of their own. The extent to which this is accepted by the Hindu community will only become evident through further investigation (or on how it is interpreted).

* This paper represents part of my current fieldwork in a Satar village of Morang district. The fieldwork is being undertaken to collect data for my Ph.D. Dissertation.

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Soharai

Dalton (1973:267) calls Soharai 'the festival of cattle'. He states that "the Santals used to celebrate this festival in the month of Ashwin, comparable to the Dasahara of the plains Hindus." According to Mukherjea, Soharai is generally known as Kali Puja in Mayurbhanj, India and here it is "celebrated along with the Hindu festival associated with the worship of the goddess Kali." But the Satars of Nepal's Morang district consider this festival their version of Sukaratia (Deepavali)² celebrated by the Hindus. A story which gives the origin of Soharai and draws the relationship with Sukaratia is told as follows:

'Traditionally Satars used to celebrate Sukaratia in the month of Kartik (October-November). One poor widow also used to celebrate this festival every year but once could not afford to do so. She then made a vow to celebrate the festival after cutting her paddy in Magh (January-February) and did so by inviting her daughters and relatives to the ceremony. When other Satars saw this they were impressed, mainly because in Kartik (October-November) they too did not have any money while at this time of year they had plenty from the new harvest of paddy. From then on they started celebrating the Sukaratia festival in Magh (January-February) by calling it Soharai.'

Archer (1974:198) talks of 'Soharai' as the eldest daughter of the first Santal couple, Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Budhi. The Satars of Morang district, however, are unaware of this legend and do not trace the origin of Soharai to the daughter of the first Santal couple.

Soharai is observed for six days in the month of Magh (January-February) after the harvest of paddy. A few days in advance, Handia (rice-beer) is prepared in every house. The first day of Soharai is called Um Hilok, "purifying day". In the morning all the houses are cleaned with cow-dung and water. Dirty clothes are washed by putting them in boiling water. Besides this, all the Satars, including infants and children, take a bath. Women wash their hair either with soap or with a smooth white clay. The evening of Um Hilok begins with the beating of drums by young men, and the playing of drums continues throughout the night.

The second day is Dakka Hilok or "food day". On this day the ancestors are worshipped and special food is prepared and offered to them at home by each male head of a family. A storeroom or kitchen is prepared for this puja (worship). The worshipper enters the room after taking a bath. Placed in front of the worshipper are a plate of rice and pulse cooked together, a jug full of rice-beer, a jug full of water, seven flour cakes, some kadam leaves or sal leaves and some leaf cups. The worshipper sits down facing west, puts the seven flour cakes on seven leaves and offers seven small portions of mixed rice and pulse on

the same leaves. Then he takes out a small portion of flour cake and mixed rice and pulse from the leaves and puts them one by one on the ground in front of the seven leaves. Finally, he offers beer and then water seven times by pouring them on the seven leaves. This puja lasts for about ten to fifteen minutes.

In the above ritual the perpetual emphasis on the number seven represents seven classes of ancestors on the worshipper's patrilineal side. Six of the ancestors are the worshipper's parents (if both are dead), his paternal grand parents (FM,FF), and his paternal grand parent's brother and his wife (FFB, FFBW) or the worshipper's father's brother and his wife. The seventh ancestor is the daughter-in-law or sister-in-law of the household who has died most recently. All the food and drinks are offered to these ancestors by invoking their names. After the ceremony is finished all the members of the family partake of the food offered to the ancestors.

Generally guests start arriving on this day. The guests of Soharai are mainly married daughters and sisters and their families. On this evening Satars decorate the entrance of their cowshed with dry rice flour and red vermillion powder. Cows and buffaloes are given a complete rest until the end of this festival. At night one or two candles are lit in the cowsheds.

The third day of Soharai is known as Khunto Hilok, "poles where cows and buffaloes are tied". This is a day for paying homage to these two kinds of animals. Cow symbolizes Laxmi (Goddess of Wealth). In the morning a group of men with the Jogmajhi (assistant headman), who beats the drum, go to each cowshed in the village and sing special songs for cows and buffaloes. The owners of these animals smear oil on the animals' horns and bodies. A bunch of paddy plant of new adwa rice and some dhubi grass are held in both hands by the male head of each family and moved in front of these animals three or four times. Finally the grasses are given to them to eat. The above rituals are said to bless the Satars with agricultural prosperity. The paddy plants signify agricultural prosperity while dhubi grass signifies its continuity.

After the puja some men gather at the majhi's (headman's) house for more drink and dance. A little before noon this group moves from one house to another, drinking beer in each house and singing different songs. Women dance and sing by holding each other's hand in such a way that their shoulders touch. Slight movements and small steps are the only actions required in this dance. They dance and sing along the village kulhi (road) and while doing so their eyes are fixed on the ground. Dancing continues for the whole day and night.

The fourth day is Jale Hilok, the "day of greeting". Villagers visit one another and in every house eat some rice and vegetables in banana leaves. The Satars of Morang say that this day used to be celebrated with great pomp and show. Now, due to the scarcity of food, no one tries to celebrate Jale Hilok with special (and costly) food. The dancing however continues.

The fifth day is Hako Katkom, "hunting of fish and crabs". After lunch all the villagers, including women and children, go out for fishing. The Satars believe that if one catches and eats fish on this day he will live a long life. Those who fail to catch fish in the village ponds try to obtain fish from other ponds or from markets.

The last day of Soharai is called Sendra, "hunting of animals". Vegetarian food is prepared early in the morning and the male members of each household are fed by 10:00 A.M., after which they go to hunt, taking bows and arrows. But before going to hunt the hunters visit each house of the village and eat some rice and vegetables in banana-leaves. After eating they throw the banana-leaves outside the houses.

In the evening the hunters come back and put all their prey which includes rats, rabbits, gallus and mongoose etc. at majhi hadam (the headman's house). They cook and eat these animals later. When they return home their feet are washed by a female member of their household irrespective of whether the men are servants or kin. The Satars stress that these hunters are back from treacherous jungles where tigers and other big animals live. Symbolically, these hunters go to fight with death, that is why before going they meet all the villagers and take food in their houses. Their coming back home signifies their victory over death. So their feet are washed as a sign of respect for them. After their feet are washed they are greeted warmly by their family members and given food.

Sendra is also the day for worshipping Rama and symbolically killing Rawana.³ The worship of Rama is performed in the morning by the eldest male member in each house. A storeroom or a kitchen is chosen for this puja. The worshipper sits facing west and places three sal leaves or kadam leaves on the ground. Three flour cakes are put on these leaves. Four leaf-cups of beer are offered one by one. Finally some water is sprinkled around the flour cake and beer. In lines with general Hindu ideas, everything is offered with the right hand while the left hand keeps touching the right elbow. No salutations or greetings are offered.

The evening of Sendra is for killing Rawana. A near-by field is chosen for this purpose. A small banana pillar is placed on the ground and one, three or five flour cakes are put on it. The odd numbers of the flour-cakes signify Rawana's extra nine (odd-number) heads. First a puja for Rama is performed by the Jogmajhi by simply offering beer in leaf-cups near the banana pillar. The purpose of this puja is to gain enough strength to kill Rawana. After the puja is over all the young men stand in one line with their bows and arrows and try to shoot the flour-cakes. The man who hits these is supposed to be the killer of Rawana. After this is over different kinds of games take place. In one the killer of Rawana lies down on the ground and is then carried on the shoulders of the other members for a few minutes around the village. At night the Jogmajhi visits the members of all the houses with a group of very young boys beating drums. These boys dance with sticks and in return for their entertainment are given khajari (fried rice) to eat.

Thus ends the colourful and musical festival of Soharai which is observed with great spirit and enthusiasm. The Satars' nomadic and adventurous nature is expressed in the last two days of this festival, namely Hako-Katkom and Sendfā. The worship of Rama and the killing of Rawana clearly indicate the influence of Hindu religious practices on the Satar-culture.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of Soharai lies in its having no specified date in the Satar calendar. It is simply begun on dates suitable for each village. The majhi consults the villagers to fix a date for its celebration. If some villagers are not ready to celebrate it, it is postponed. Fixing the date in this way has one clear advantage: one can enjoy Soharai both in his home village and at his in-law's village since the festival may take place in these villages at different times.⁴

Patamela

Patamela is celebrated in honour of Lord Mahadeva and is held between the last week of Chaitra (March-April) and the first week of Baisakh (April-May). This festival continues for three days.

On the first day a temple of thatched grass and bamboo is built for the Mahadeva. The roof is covered with sal leaves or kadam leaves. Satars consider themselves devotees of Mahadeva, and on this day some Satar men are spiritually possessed by Mahadeva. It is said that when Mahadeva enters a man's body it starts smelling like a gulaj flower. When this happens the possessed man rushes home, takes a bath and starts trembling.

When I was in the village, Bhuchung was the first man that year to become possessed by Mahadeva. When I met him at about 5 P.M. he was calmly playing his flute. But when he got possessed (around 8 P.M.) he started shouting, 'Chalai Shivai Parvati Mahadeva' (let's walk with Shiva Parvati and Mahadeva), trembling and stretching his body. He left running and panting, carrying a representation of the Mahadeva to the newly built temple. After placing the Mahadeva inside the temple, Bhuchung went to take a bath in the pond, all the time shouting the same verse, 'Chalai Shivai Parvati Mahadev'. Then he sat in the temple to worship Mahadeva.

A possessed man is not supposed to eat anything until the end of worship. As soon as one becomes possessed and sits to worship the Mahadeva, he is given a thread to wear by the Jogmajhi who is a main ritual officiant in this festival. This thread is made of three strings. The possessed man wears it either on his left shoulder or the right shoulder in the style of the sacred thread worn by the Hindu Brahmins. So long as he wears it, he is "like a Brahmin" as the Mahadeva is, and he is not supposed to eat any kind of meat and fish. In the words of one Satar, "this thread ties up Mahadeva who is supposed to be inside the body of the possessed man".

Many people of different age groups may get possessed during this time. During my field work four men got possessed. Two were 16 years old, the third was 40, and the fourth was 9 years old. All of them wore "sacred threads."

Inside the temple the Mahadeva idol is placed in the eastern corner together with representation of his servants. Usually oval, long or round stones represent Mahadeva. A Yoni (representing "female energy") is also made there and the Mahadeva is placed on it. Some burning guintha (dried cowdung sticks) are put on one side of the room near the Mahadeva. When the worship starts a panda (priest) should be there to perform the rituals. In his absence (i.e. if no one in the village wants to serve as a panda) anyone who is possessed by the Mahadeva can perform in his place.

The panda sits near Mahadeva facing east. He starts preparing offerings (pulas) which consist of about 300g. of adwa rice, water and milk. Adwa rice is put in a plate and washed in water two or three times and then left in water for a few minutes. Gulaj flowers are used to decorate the Mahadeva. A banana leaf is placed in front of the Mahadeva and two pan leaves are put on it. Some rice soaked in water is also placed on the pan leaves. The worshipper picks up some gulaj flowers and piles them up in the shape of a pyramid. He then takes a supari (nut) and washes it with water and puts it in a bowl full of oil. After that he takes the nut out of the bowl and, holding it in front of a burning cowdung stick, tries to heat it up. Finally, he puts the nut on the pulas. While praying, he asks the Mahadeva to fulfill his wishes. This he does without speaking out loud. The Satars say that if the wishes of the panda are to be fulfilled, the nut must slide down to the ground from the pulas. The sliding down of the nut is seen as very important. According to my informants, the nut slides down every time the panda's wish is granted by the Mahadeva. If it fails to slide down, the wish may not be granted. Panda makes personal wishes as well as the wishes for the welfare of the whole community. Once when I was observing the ceremony, the nut slid down twelve out of fifteen times. When the nut slides down signifying that the wish expressed by the panda may be fulfilled, he prepares the pulas rice-pyramid afresh by putting some more soaked rice and gulaj flowers on it. Then repeating the same procedure with the nut as mentioned above, he places the nut on top of the pyramid while praying for the fulfillment of his next wish. The process continues until he has prayed for the fulfillment of all his wishes or the nut has stopped sliding down continuously for three times. Every time the nut slides down the panda salutes the Mahadeva. In between he chants the following verses: "Chalai Shivai Parvati Mahadeva", "Chalai Shivai Fuladurio Mahadeva", "Chalai Shivai Lilamuni Mahadeva", and "Chalai Shivai Bhonked Mahadeva". These mean respectively 'let's walk with Shiva, Parvati and Mahadeva.

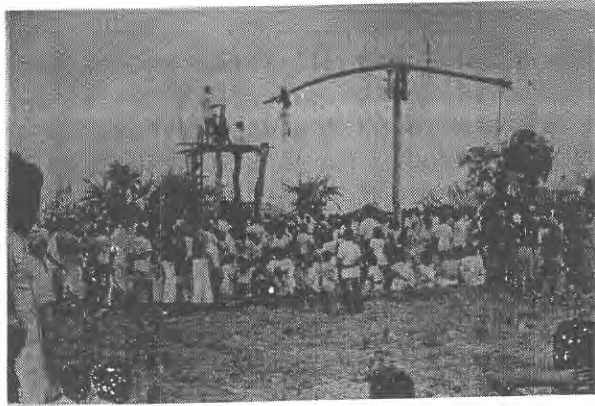
When the puja is over all the rice of pulas is put in a plate and the nut on the banana leaf. Now the jogmajhi gives some brown sugar to the panda. He mixes this with the soaked rice, distributes it to all the people assembled there, and keeps some for himself to eat. He keeps

eating this way as long as Patamela is celebrated (about three days). The puja is performed twice a day and all those possessed by the Mahadeva spend their days and nights in the same newly built temple. No women go there. Most of the village young men spend their days and nights there as companions to the possessed men. The last day of Patamela is perhaps the most interesting. A long pole is placed on the ground outside the temple with a revolving cross-bar of bamboo placed on the top. This pole is called pata-khunto. In the morning four or five village women (depending on the number of possessed men) come wearing wet clothes which signify purification. Each is carrying a jug of water. A small mango, its leaves and some gulaj flowers are placed in the jugs. Mangoes and their leaves are considered very auspicious. Some pieces of burning charcoal are placed around the temple. The jogmajhi starts beating a drum. All the possessed men take a bath, stand in a line and walk in a circle around the temple and pata-khunto. The jogmajhi walks in front of them. Next, each of them comes to the pata-khunto walking directly on the fire. Each one in turn is tied to one end of the cross-bar with a long piece of cloth and rope. The other men swing the bamboo six to seven times from its other side by holding a rope which is tied to it. The man who is tied to the cross-bar carries a basket of flowers and uncooked rice in his left hand and a stick in his right hand. Every time he is swung around the pata-khunto he throws rice and flowers on the people standing below. After his turn is over he comes down. One of the women with a jug of water goes to him, washes his feet, pours the rest of the water on the pata-khunto, touches the khunto with her forehead, and finally salutes it by bending over and touching her feet. This act is repeated every time another worshipper is tied around the bamboo.

After this ceremony the fair continues for a few more hours. Men and women wearing their best clothes come from different villages and dance. The men play flutes and beat drums while the women dance. All the men who were possessed by the Mahadeva pick up the representation of the Mahadeva in the temple, give it a bath in a pond, and finally bring it to the same place from where they took it. After this all of them take off their threads and eat ordinary daily food (rice and vegetable).

There is a story relating to this festival that clarifies some features of the above rituals:

"Once while Mahadeva was sleeping his cow was stolen by some thieves. He did not see who stole it. Some devotees of Mahadeva were passing by, heard about this theft and started talking about it. Mahadeva took them for thieves and placed some fire in their way. As the men were innocent it did not matter to them and they walked easily on that fire by removing it with their legs as they went by. Mahadeva got furious, caught them and threatened to punish



A Satar man being swung around in the air while tied to a bamboo pole.



Three Satar women representing the mothers of the supposed thieves in Patamela.



A Satar women sweeping her courtyard with a mixture of cowdung and water. Note that like other ethnic groups of Nepal Satar women neither sit down nor use their hands while washing. They always wash with a broom by bending over.

them badly. Those men tried to tell him about their innocence, but in vain. When their mothers found out about it, they came running to rescue their sons. They cried and pleaded for mercy but nothing worked. Mahadeva fixed a khunto (a pillar) with a bamboo across it and tied each man to it. He then swung the bamboo several times. While doing so he said 'if you are guilty you will either fall down from this bamboo or the bamboo will break into parts.' Each man was tried and tested but, as all were innocent, nothing happened to them. Every time one came down his mother ran to him to wash his feet because he had escaped death by proving his innocence. Mahadeva's cow is still missing and he is still looking for it."

In Patamela the men possessed by the Mahadeva represent the thieves, women with jugs of water their mothers, and the pata-khunto signifies the Mahadeva himself. My informants in the village told me that previously people used to be suspended from iron hooks pierced into their back muscles and swung around very fast. As a result of fatal accidents they do not practise this anymore. But it is their strong belief that any one who acts as though possessed without actually being possessed by the Mahadeva will either fall down from the bamboo or the bamboo will break into parts.

Conclusion

Soharai is an annual ritual recognition of much that is of fundamental importance to the Satars, and some of this is of economic importance. Following "purification", the Satars ritually acknowledge in turn their ancestors, their domesticated cows and buffaloes, their social ties (on the "day of greeting") and finally fishing and hunting of the wild animals. Patamela, by contrast, is an annual worship of the god Mahadeva. But the climax of both festivals is similar: village men symbolically conquer death and are then worshipped by women. In Soharai the conquering of death depends on the bravery and strength of the men in their struggle with wild nature; in Patamela the escape of death depends on the men's "innocence" and loyalty with respect to the Mahadeva. This is both reflected in the myth behind Patamela and in the idea that were a man to falsely pretend possession during the pata-khunto rite, he would die.

The festivals are similar on another level, too, in that they both reflect some Satar adaptations to the surrounding Hindu community. The Hindu influence is clear in both festivals. Not only

are Rama, Rawana and Mahadeva the focus of ritual attention, but in Soharai there is the specifically Hindu style of making offerings, the use of dhubi grass, etc. Perhaps most striking is the ritual-donning of sacred threads by the possessed men in Patamela--threads that make them "like Brahmans". This is a rather clear sanctioning of the ritual values of an external society, a society that considers Satars untouchables.

On the other hand, the Satars are not merely emulating the external Hindu community with these festivals. For one thing they have not adopted these festivals as whole alien traditions but rather have woven Hindu elements into some of their own traditions, so that Soharai and Patamela still appear as distinctive Satar ceremonies. Even more interesting is the fact that the Satars do not consider that the worship of Rama and Mahadeva has been borrowed from the Hindus. Rather they claim that this worship is rooted in ancient, traditional Satar culture.⁵ Thus it would appear that while Satars have been adopting Hindu elements in their religious life, and are catering to some of the values that come along with that adoption, they are at the same time asserting a separate and distinctive Satar identity. In any case it is clear that the Satars do not view themselves as a "tribal group emulating Hindus" but have instead reinterpreted some Hindu traditions as Satar traditions.

Both these festivals, Soharai and Patamela, appear as the biggest events of Satar life, and they perform a variety of both social and religious functions. For example, both provide an opportunity for boys and girls from different villages to meet; and sometimes marriages are negotiated as a result of these meetings. In addition, many of the rituals attached to these festivals are community rituals, and this creates the atmosphere of common belief and helps to transmit a sacred tradition.

Notes

1. This obtains even though the Nepalese law forbids discrimination on the basis of caste.
2. Deepavali, which is also known as Tihar, is celebrated for five days in October-November. Its first day is the worship for crow, second day for dog, third day for cow and Laxmi (Goddess of Wealth), fourth day for ox and the last day for one's own brothers. Candles are lit in houses at night during the last three days.
3. Rama and Rawana are two mythical characters of the Ramayana, a Hindu epic. According to the texts, Rama was an incarnation of Bhagwan (God) Vishnu and His main aim was to fight against the evil which is represented by Rawana. Success was achieved

by Rama in destroying the evil, that is by killing Rawana. This victory of Good over Evil is still being celebrated by the Hindus in one of their biggest festivals, Vijayadashami, which takes place in September-October.

4. Satars marry both within and outside their villages.
5. As Mahadeva is a known Hindu god, Troisi (1978:145) suggests that Patamela is not historically of Santal origin.

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