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The Social Life Of The Oriyas During The 19th Century Under British Rule In India

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Abstract:

Orissa from very early days developed a social life whose pivot was the village. Village life and agriculture formed the core of the Oriya's life and living. So the social life of the Oriyas during the 19th century was a legacy of the past-a past which upto 15th century was a glorious one but after 15th Century from 1568 came under the dark shade of alien rule. But it must be remembered that a culture which was built upon a strong foundation that a culture which was built upon a strong foundation of hundreds of years could not be completely wiped out, although it was subdued and lustureless.

Orissa of 19th century under the British was of that type. Naturally the social life of the Oriya which was village oriented and therefore an embodiment of simplicity and honesty could not be appreciated by the English rules who painted a very dismal picture of the social life of the Oriyas. L.S.S.O.' Malley while writing about Oriyas as distinct from others stated "the Oriyas recall the old idea of the 'mild Hindu' being kindly, peaceable and gentle race. A century ago they were described as the most mild, quiet and inoffensive people in the Company's territories" and this account still holds good. They are somewhat unenterprising, but are not averse to leaving their homes to better their lot and outside Orissa they have an excellent reputation as domestic servants- they have supplied the English with bearers since they first came to Bengal- and also as chaprasis, gardeners and labourers." The above remarks though sheds light on some aspects of the Oriyas, yet that is not the whole picture of Oriya's life. Mr. O' Malley has seen the Oriyas who did not have English education nor did they have much of property at home. He has rightly said that the Oriyas do not go out to better their lots but are those chaparasis and colliers the representatives of the total Oriya population ? This remark is undoubtedly very sweeping and onesided.

But the later part of his description paints the true Oriya character. He stated "Among them the old village life may be seen in all its simplicity, scarcely touched by modern influences. Of all the races in the two provinces (Bangal and Orissa) they are perhaps the most conservative and priest-ridden but be it also added, the most devoutly religious, the rules of ceremonial purity are strictly observed and caste rules are so rigid that merely bodily contact can cause pollution."

AVERSION TO CITY LIFE :

The Orissa population has hitherto developed no tendency towards city life. For example, while the rural population has enormously increased (In 1822-1, 296, 365 but in 1855-2, 644,087) the capitals of

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three divisions can barely hold their own and no new centres of industry spring up. Thus in 1825, Puri contained 5741 houses and although their number increased in 1841 on the abolition of the pilgrim tax, they had fallen again in 1861 to 57084. Cuttack the capital of the province, furnishes and even more signal example of the popular aversion to town life. In spite of the greatly increased number of officials and its being made the starting point for the net work of canals, Cuttack shows no progress as a city. In 1825 the commissioner reported that it contained 40,000 inhabitants. In 1869 a most careful census only disclosed 46,436, the slight increase being more than accounted for by the day labourers temporarily drawn to it for the canal work. Yet Cuttack fulfils every condition which should lead to the growth of a city. With all its merits it fails to attract the home stead loving people of Orissa. Nothing except dire necessity can induce the Oriyan peasant to quit his hereditary fields and if so compelled, he will prefer the humble shed in the country to city life. He looks down on the town people, and seldom intermarries with them, partly owing to the idea that the customs and practices of town life are not strictly in accordance with caste rules.” (Hunter, 1872,PP. 129-131)

Even when the Oriya husband man is forced to take himself to a town he carries with him all the habits of the country. The maritime city of Balasore, the capital of the District of the same name furnishes a conspicuous instance of this. In spite of its merchantile character, village life goes on in the heart of the town just as it does in the remotest homestead. The minor towns throughout the province are mere collections of hamlets. Sometimes clustering into crowded streets and Bazzars, but in many places separated by clumps of trees and rice fields. In Orissa, so far from any tendency being apparent on the part of the population to collect into larger cities, the smaller towns cannot hold their own. While the rural population has doubled, the magistrate of Balasore District reports to me that several cities seem to have been larger in former times than they are now, and that others have certainly declined within the past two or three generations. Bhadrakh and Jaleswar are examples of the former; Soro and Balasore itself of the latter.

The Oriyas donot have inclination to commit crimes.

To quote Hunter,

“ The truth is, that a well-to-do, home living peasantry like the Oriyas have little inclination to crime. Their religion, although falling far short of that higher level of faith and christian activity which the western world has reached, nevertheless exercises a very practical influence on their life, and public opinion has a power among their secluded homesteads which it has long lost in the great cities of Europe. “ To do right and to worship the village God” may seem to English theologians a very inadequate rule of life. But no one who strictly adheres to it will ever find himself within a British Jail. The Orissa husband man, moreover, loses much more by imprisonment than an English citizen does. In the first place, he becomes an outcaste, and his only choice at the end of his sentence lies between degrading expiations in his own village or perpetual exile from the home which he loves better than life itself.

Amid all these material progress, the moral condition of the people has not been neglected. During many centuries Orissa stood forth not only as the most orthodox but also as the most ignorant, of Hindu provinces of India. The Brahmins had the monopoly of education and they kept it strictly in their own hands. Nowhere else do the ancient caste rules exercise such an influence. “ (Hunter, 1872,PP. 136-139)

Even at the present day, in spite of our system of public instruction, the most ridiculous distinctions are maintained. Thus, men following precisely the same occupation are sometimes separated by so vast a social gulf, that the slightest bodily contact with each other brings pollution and the higher cannot touch any article that the lower has handled, until it goes purification by being put down upon mother earth.

The missionaries as a rule, are despised by the Hindus and Musalmans.

“Our state efforts and education, although of later origin, are naturally on a more imposing scale. Government, not less than the missionaries, long found itself baffled y the obstinate orthodoxy of Orissa.

The truth is, the whole population was against us. Such little success as our schools obtained, they owed, not to the uriyas themselves, but to the Bengali families whom our courts and public offices brought into the province. Thus of the fifty Orissa students who upto 1868 reached even the moderate standard exacted by Calcutta University, at its entrance examination, only 10 were Oriya native Oriyas, while fortyeight belonged to immigrant families.

“ The genuine Oriya has not yet quite lost his abhorrence of the infidal Government schools. Many of the more orthodox elders still regard all that pertains to our system as hateful to the Gods. The first Uriya Brahman who accepted service under the English Government tried hard to overcome this

national prejudice. Himself a subordinate Judge, he offered to prepare other Uriya Brahmans gratuitously for official posts. But it was the greatest difficulty that he could get a single one of them to listen to his proposal. The present Inspector of Schools writes to me, as a strong proof of progress in Orissa, that a good many Uriya Brahmans have now accepted Government employ.” (Hunter,1872)

“As late as 1860, a learned Uriya, on being appointed even to the orthodox post of Sanskrit teacher in our Puri School was excluded for a year or two from the Brahmanical order and stormy discussions took place as to whether he should not be formally expelled from his caste. The this moment the court officials, after their public functions are over for the day....

Carefully renew their caste marks on their foreheads and wash them off again every morning before coming to office. (Hunter, 1872,PP.145-147)

“In 1870, an Oriya Brahman held the post of Sub-Inspector of Police at Puri itself, within the shadow of Jagannath, although a leather belt formed a part of his uniform five years ago, Brahman who accidentally touched leather would have had to choose between public expiation or degradation and expulsion from caste.

The Oriyas have strong rural instincts and they are averse to city life- an aversion so strong, that even when forced to seek employment in the towns, they hold it unlawful to take their wives with them. But the propriety of our court officials bringing the female members of their families with them to the capital, has now become a question deemed capable of discussion. An English officer lately mentioned, in proof of the enlightenment of the people, that an Oriya Brahman was actually looking out for a suitable lodging for his wife in Cuttack city. Elderly Oriyas have more than once deplored to me the hopeless degeneracy of their growing up sons, many of whom have actually no objection to wearing English shoes.” (Hunter, 1872, PP. 146-147)

The rural people are poor. Almost the whole population lives on agriculture. A well- to-do husbandman has one or two pairs of bullocks and four or five milch cows. The houses are generally made of mud and bamboos. From among them the Brahmins forming the priest groups do not depend on cultivation. Study of Sanskrit and performing the sacred rituals of the villagers form their regular activities through which they earn their livelihood. The Karans or Kayasthas read the 3rs' and devote time in maintaining accounts under the Land holder or Zamindar. Other like, Carpenter, Washerman, Blacksmith, Milkman, Boatman etc. mainly depend on their hereditary occupation and thus engage themselves to cultivation.

Thus the Oriyas being secluded from other parts of India due to lack of communication and being very much subservient to the dictates of culture, stick to their age old customs, traditions and superstitions.

The Oriya tradition did not look at Education from a utilitarian point of view which would provide bread and butter for day to day living. Education to them was the gateway to the lore of spiritualism and religious doctrines necessary for living a simple life with high thinking. Therefore the British education system could not hold out a better prospect for them who were content with the serenity of village life.

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