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Ritual, Gender and Identity: An Anthropological PerspectiveParamananda Naik¹, Sanghamitra Sethi²

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the complex interrelationship lies inbetween rituals and the formation of gender identity in contemporary contexts. Gender and ritual are interconnected aspects of indigenous culture that influence and shape the human experience as a whole. The paper explained the holistic discourse on the remarkable participation of Bejuni (female Shamanin) in fairs and festivals in Dongria Kandha society. This paper examined the symbiotic relationship between gender identity and rituals within the Dongria Kandha community of Odisha, India. The study was conducted among the Dongria Kandha community of Bissamcuttack Block, Rayagada District, Odisha. The Dongria Kandha is one of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) inhabiting in the Rayagada district of Odisha. The objectives of the paper are to highlight the life and culture of Dongria Kandha as well as the significance of gender roles in rituals within their culture. The present paper seeks to analyze the cultural empowerment dimension of gender identity among Dongria Kandha. The data had been collected from both primary and secondary sources. The paper has been concluded with a broader field of gender identity by offering insights into how gender and ritual contributed to the cultural identity of Dongria Kandha. The exploration of the role of rituals in shaping gender identity within contemporary perspectives reveals a dynamic and intricate interplay between cultural practices and the construction of individual and collective gender identities. The Dongria Kandha women have made a tremendous contribution to their culture, showing the autonomy of gender. From the perspectives of feminists and gender, the Dongria Kandha women enjoy high status in socio-cultural life, which shows their gender identity within society as a whole.

KEYWORDS:

• Gender • Ritual • Identity • Empowerment • Culture

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"There are no sacred rituals or societies without women's participation in the culture and a place for them in the ceremonies"

B.K. Malinowski

INTRODUCTION

The Dongria Kandha community of Odisha, India, is the subject of this chapter that explore the complex interplay of gender, ritual, and tribal identity. The main focus is on comprehending gender perspectives within the Meriah festival, a key religious ceremony of the Dongria Kandha community. This ethnographic study, conducted in the Rayagada region, looks at the ways in which the Meriah ritual, which includes dancing, singing, and reciting sacred mantras deeps in the spiritual bonds that people have with supernatural beings. The examination focuses on the participation of the Dongria Kandha women in the Meriah rite and the cultural and religious value they attach to it. The Dongria Kandha culture's complex ideas about the supernatural being and interaction with there are reflected in the ritual's symbolism and physical gestures. The chapter emphasizes the Dongria Kandha's deeply ingrained cultural traditions and territorial identity by placing these rites within their historical and religious context. It explains how the social structure and spiritual life of the Dongria Kandha are shaped by their admiration for their land, especially the Niyamgiri Hills. Through ceremonies like the Meriah, the Dongria Kandha preserve their spiritual history and cultural purity despite of outside influences and historical interventions, such as the colonial authorities' banned on human sacrifice. Overall, the study offers a thorough analysis of the ways in which gender roles, territorial attachment, and ritual practices interact within the Dongria Kandha group, providing insights into their spiritual world view and cultural resilience in the face of changing social and natural environments.

We have started this introduction by outlining our interests in gender, ritual, and tribalism. Nonetheless, neither feminism nor the ideas of patriarchy found in the Dongria Kandha tradition are the main topics of this book chapter. Instead, we want to analyse and investigate the perspective of gender embodied within Dongria Kandhas rites de passage. The book chapter is based on an extensive and in-depth ethnographic case study of the Meriah

ritual performed by the Dongria Kandha and the experience embodied with this practice among the Dongria Kandha women of the Bissakcuttack block in the Rayagada region of Odisha, India. It is an anthropological study where we examined the Dongria Kandha ceremony known as Meriah, a religious assembly that represents singing, dancing, and reciting sacred mantras and offering with the ultimate aim of fostering closer relationship between the individuals and supernatural being.

It describes how religious and cultural ideas are expressed itself by ritual practices reflected in women's participation in Meriah festival in Rayagada areas. It demonstrates dogmatic rules and subjective experience of the members participated in these rituals which can move, alter, and coexist with one another i.e., the process of Meriah and women participation. It outlines the fundamental principles of rituals within the historical and religious context.

The author examined the intricate relationships that exist within the Dongria Kondh group between cultural practices, gender roles, and territorial identity. He had painstakingly documented the role that blood plays in Dongria Kondh rituals, showing how it is a powerful symbol in a number of ceremonies pertaining to cultural life. The tribe views blood as a sacred substance that is essential to their understanding of the life-giving and sustaining forces of the natural world. In DongriaKondh society, women play a major role in economic production, ritual leadership, and communal governance, in addition to their responsibilities within the home. He examines how the tribe's attachment to their land influences their social structure, religious practices, and resistance to external encroachments. The Niyamgiri Hills are regarded as sacred, embodying their deities and ancestors, and are central to cultural and spiritual life. The ethnography underscores the tribe's strong sense of place and the critical importance of their land in sustaining their way of life and cultural heritage (Nayak, 1989).

The authors explores the tradition of human sacrifice practiced by the Kondhs of Odisha. He looks into the historical background of human sacrifice customs in tribal communities, demonstrating how these rites, which are sometimes misinterpreted and vilified by outsiders, have their roots in cultural and

religious beliefs. The book pointed out the idea that tribal people are violent and primitive, particularly when viewed through the prism of human sacrifice, has been used to justify interventions made during the colonial and postcolonial periods. He draws attention to the ways in which these interventions, disguised as development initiatives or missions aimed at promoting civilization, have resulted in the serious exploitation and marginalization of indigenous populations. He pushes readers to reconsider stereotypes and promotes a more considerate and fair treatment to tribal by offering a comprehensive knowledge about tribal culture (Padel, 2010).

Religion is an essential component of anthropology discipline as a human construct that highlights how religious beliefs and practices are developed and how human beings deals with it to fulfil desires and basic needs. In the discourse of knowledge two pioneers in anthropology who studies evolution of the religion in human society (Frazer, 1922).

People realized that they do not have control over many things and fairly helpless there is something called super human and super natural beings that controls the universe. According to E.B. Tylor (1871), a British Anthropologist, it is a gift to the gods to secure their favour or minimize their hostility. According to Rappaport, an American Anthropologist, in his book "Pigs for the Ancestors: Ritual in the Ecology of a New Guinea People". 1968, explained that the interlinked and dependency of human ecology, culture and ritual.

Tribals are nature worshiper. During different festival they worship certain flora found in the local region. Hence they are directly or indirectly responsible for protect, reproduction, survival of the plants (Oraon, 2021). Tribals mostly live in and around the forest and always maintain cohesion with the natural environment. They are the protectors of the nature. The rituals they practice are primarily associated with nature or natural objects. They perform their rites with utmost power and emotion (Sarkar & Modak, 2022). They worship nature because they believe in the presence of divinity within it. The emphasis is given to three elements, such as earth, sun, and water. The prime objectives behind the rituals are: **i.** seeking blessings, **ii.** strengthening economic pursuits,

iii. prosperity of the community, **iv.** worshipping of forefathers, **v.** recreation; **vi.** protection of nature, **vii.** solidarity among members, etc. (Dash, 2016).

Tribals believe that natural calamities like floods, epidemics, crop failures, etc. occur due to the wrath of certain deities, not offered ritual sacrifices, or misconduct by members of the community. Due to such belief, Garo of Arunachal Pradesh performs some ritual activities on various occasions. The main motto behind these rituals is to protect the people from the unseen happenings caused by supernatural spirits (Doye, 2015). Tribal religion is significantly manifested by the rituals of belief and practices cantered around natural objects interwoven with social structure, and culture within a particular ethnic group (Das & Pattamajhi, 2022). Puja is the appropriate form of devotion towards the god and goddesses, ancestors and spirits to fulfill the needs. In tribal community, people worship a number of deities who are getting reverence in different festivals and somehow related to agriculture, diseases, bumper harvest etc. (Das, 2019). Tribals have perceptions that by satisfying gods they can obtain peace, prosperity, and harmony. The festivals are complete with traditional dance, offering, sacrifice, song, and chanting etc. (Konwar, 2019).

Festivals are an important date or time, reflected by a number of rites, rituals, beliefs, traditions, that is celebrated by society. It bring social, religious, economic component together and unite the members in a bond (Sharma, 2022). Festivals form an intrinsic part of tribal life, reflecting references to supernatural power and fostering solidarity among members. Fairs and festivals are the occasions that express the tribal traditions to the fullest. These festivities strengthen we feelings within the community and encourage one to progress in economic and social life (Shaktiprasad, 2015). Fairs and festivals in India play a vital role in community cohesion and economic growth by showcasing cultural heritage and attracting tourism. These events not only preserve traditions but also stimulate local economies and promote social unity, making them essential for both cultural preservation and economic development. Festivals offer an array of rational celebrations marked with a joyful temper and a plethora of enthusiasm (Thomas, 2021). For tribals the concept of festival is more often a mode

of pleasure intertwined with delightful and entertainment in certain day in 365 days when they relax and relieve from hard chore of life (Das & Bhol, 2008).

Tribal communities worldview of societal and spiritual relationships incorporates a great admiration for oneself, others, and the totality of nature, emphasizing an exceptional reverence for land and water (Rowkith & Bhagwan, 2020). All rituals followed by the tribals are governed by the rules of religion. Rituals serve as a bridge to communicate with the supernatural spirits, whom they comfort with incidents (Chatterjee & Sharma, 2018). In tribal societies, a dedicated fellow called a priest performs during rituals and ceremonies at the village level. For example, in the Santal community, priests (Naike) perform in different rituals and festivals, but in some cases, like during epidemics, chicken pox, diarrhea, or unnatural deaths, it is the shaman who worships the deities and natural spirits for the welfare and prosperity of the villagers (Murmu & Pramanik, 2018). Festivals and fairs are always considered as the two important facet of cultural life. The physical environment, tradition, belief, custom and local resources are the factors of emergence of festivals of a particular group of people. Festival is considered as sacred. The Meriah festival is one of the important festivals of the Dongria Kandha society. It is symbolize the significance of blood and sacrifice among Dongria Kandha. This festival is popularly known as "KudruParab" among the Dongria Kandha. Sacrifice is an offering of things in the name of a deity in order to seek blessing. Human sacrifice was practiced by the Kandhas since long intertwined with their culture and tradition. But after Meriah Sacrifice Act-1815 passed by the Governor General of India, which prohibited Kandha from practicing such ill practices and mobilized Kandhas to sacrifice buffalo instead of human beings. The astonishing assortment of unity, belief, philosophy together composes and energizes the tribal religion. The authenticity of tribal religion is preserved and maintained through age-old practices, each and every aspect of their life covering activities throughout the year is intricately linked with religion (Mohapatra, 2008). The authors provide a thorough analysis of the Dongria Kondh tribe, paying special attention to their distinctive cultural customs, such as the historically significant practice

of human sacrifice. The Dongria Kondh is renowned for their convoluted customs and strong ties with the earth. The authors also discuss how the custom of human sacrifice, or "Meriah," was an essential part of both agricultural and spiritual rites, acting as a way to appease supernatural power amplify the fertility of their land. The authors also highlights how these practices, often viewed as irrational and incomprehension by outsiders, were embedded in the Dongria Kondh's worldview, reflecting their beliefs in the reciprocal relationship between human and nature (Jena, Pathi, & Dash, 2002).

Significance of the Study

The cultural, social, and historical aspects of gender can be examined by the role rituals play in forming gender identity from an anthropological perspective. This can also contribute to larger conversations on gender equality and social inclusion. So the researchers put one research question: How do Dongria Kandha women involve themselves in different rituals and activities during the Meriah festival? The study is an endeavour to explore the above research question, which is related to ritual and gender. The study focuses on the culture of the Dongria Kandha, a sub-section of the Kandha tribe of Odisha. The study attempts to highlight their culture through their ritual practices, festivals, and the role of Bejuni (Female Shaman) within the Dongria Kandha community.

Objectives of the Study

The below objectives offer a complete framework for looking into the symbiotic relationship that exists between gender identity and rituals from an anthropological perspective. Through an anthropological lens, this chapter seeks to analyze the complex function that rituals play in forming gender identity. It looks at how rituals can be modified or rejected to take into account shifting gender perspectives as well as how they function as mechanisms for the transmission of gender norms.

The objectives of the study are:

- To study how rituals contribute to the construction of gender roles within specific cultural contexts.
- To highlight the contribution of Dongria Kandha women in terms of labour and

ritual practices at the Meriah festival.

Geo-Ethnic Profile of Dongria Kandha

The Indian Constitution created the term “scheduled tribe,” and as a result, 62 ethnic groups have been classified as Scheduled Tribes for the state of Odisha since the Scheduled Tribes Order, 1950, was enacted. In the academic literature, they refer to people as “Aborigines,” “Autochthones,” “Vanyajati,” “Adibasi,” “Girijan,” “Janajati,” etc. in different regions of India. The Indian government have included two communities namely Muka Dora and Konda Reddy to the Odisha’s Scheduled Tribes (ST) list on 15th February, 2024. The inclusion of the Scheduled Tribes in the list helps to protect the rights and customs of indigenous populations. At present there do 64 Scheduled Tribes (ST) inhabit in Odisha. The Dongria Kandha is one of the sub-sections of the Kandha Tribe. They are mostly inhabitants of the Niyamgiri hills, which come under the Rayagada and Kalahandi districts in southern parts of Odisha. They are classified as per their agricultural land, which is known as Dongar in the local language. They live happily in the Niyamgiri ranges, where they have been practicing their agricultural practices since long. Dongria Kandha is swidden cultivators. They take various millets, grains, vegetables, and forest produce collected from the forest as food. The study was conducted in the Niyamgiri area, i.e., KurliPanchayat, coming under the Bissamcuttack block of Rayagada district. The Dongria Kandha villages are basically located on the hill slopes. The shape of the house of Dongria Kandha is rectangular, and the roof is made up of two slopes thatched with straw or asbestos. The Dongria Kandha spoken language is known as “Kuvi”, which falls under the Dravidian linguistic group. In the local language, a clan is known as Kuda. Clan maintains exogamy. The adult women and girls usually put on white or off-white cotton sarees. Dongria Kandha called it Ganda. Both men and women are very fond of “Kapdaganda,” an embroidery shawl woven by young girls and women. The Kapdag and ashawl, which has recently got GI tag status, is a symbol of the Dongria Kondh tribes’ rich tradition, culture, and identity. The Dongria Kandha men and women both love to adorn their bodies with different ornaments, such as sipna (hair clip), andu (anket), kakodika (necklace), khagla (neck band), murma

(nose ring), and siren sapar (finger ring).The Dongria Kondholders educate teenagers and young people about traditional and cultural values in the villages through traditional institution called as youth dormitory. The Dongria Kandha women receive equal status in the community with regard to things like decision making property ownership and widow remarriage.

I: Portrait of a Male Dongria Kandha (Dhangda)



Source: Fieldwork, 2018

II: Portrait of a Female Dongria Kandha (Dhangidi)



Source: Fieldwork, 2018

Methodology of the Study

This chapter is based on fieldwork carried out among Dongria Kandha in the village of Khambesi, in the Rayagada district of Odisha, India. They are mainly confined to Bissamcuttack, Muniguda and Kalyanisinghpur blocks. They are inhabited in 100 revenue villages and hamlets in Rayagada district. The total population is 9659 out of which male is 4104 and female is 5555 (Ota, Mohanty, 2020). The study was conducted in Khambesi village of Kurli Gram Panchayat

of Bissamcuttack block. The study included a sample of 104 households, comprising a total population of 578 individuals, with 271 males and 307 females. Anthropology is well known for its first hand data collection as it a science of field work, the researchers involved intensively in the study area for collect primary data from the community people and secondary data from different sources. The researcher also explained the role of rituals in shaping gender identity from an anthropological perspective, which typically employs qualitative methodologies such as ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation. These methods provide an in-depth understanding of cultural practices and their impact on gender roles.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Tribal world views not only confined to spiritual activities but also a medium of adopting specific procedure and application of traditional knowledge to get rid of certain problems and issues. The Dongria Kandhas agricultural method is emphasizing the importance of environment and culture. A patch of land is cultivated by clearing shrubs and plants and then allowed to regrow for 3-4 years, a technique known as "slash and burn" or shifting cultivation. This approach is sustainable because it increases soil fertility and biodiversity. During the practice of shifting cultivation, the Dongria Kandha incorporates certain religious and cultural rituals. The farming practices facilitate by the religious experts like the Beju and Bejuni. They carry out ritual before cutting the trees and please the local gods and guarantee an abundant crop. These custom, which call as offering and sacrifice, are crucial to maintain harmony and spiritual balance with the help of religious specialists. Where Bejuni carried out all the rites to appease the forest and Hill/Dongar deities by presenting pigeon, hen, or fowl (Sethi & Naik, 2020). These tribes have always protect the forest, depending on it for their food. Through practices like animal husbandry and shifting cultivation, Dongria Kandha women are playing vital role for the maintenance of family livelihoods and cultural traditions. Dongria Kandha's social, cultural, and economic growth is still heavily reliant on the forest, and women are essential to the maintenance of traditional subsistence patterns and family units (Sethi & Acharya,

2019). The Kapdaganda Embroidered needlework shawl has confined to only women folk and has developed within their sociocultural environment. This craft is passing down through the Dongria Kandha women, emphasizing the role that gender plays in its creation and continuity.

They are known for their traditional skill and sense of style, which support their cultural legacy through crafts including wall painting, and needlework as additional support to their economy. These handicrafts have high demand within the country and abroad as representations of their rich cultural heritage (Sethi & Naik, 2020).

The preliminary work of Meriah starts almost one year before the scheduled date and time. For Meriah festival, the villagers clean their houses and paint with white colour. The Kudiis painted with white colour and different motifs such as triangle, line, and circle as embroidered on shawl are drawn on it with red, yellow, green and brown colours. The boundary of the village is prohibited for evil spirits as Jani, Beju and Bejuni's dig the soil and put herbs and roots as protective measures. The villagers of other Padars like Sikaka, Pusika, Jakesika and Nisaka clans are invited by the host clan as they are not allowed to kill the buffalo. Each family of the village invites their relatives residing in other villagers. The male members of the village are bestowed with the responsibility of preparing wooden post (Kudrumunda) for tying buffalo. The male members collect branch of Dhamana tree from the forest. It is Jani who install the Kudrumunda near to the Sadarghar. The post is decorated with colours and engraved design to give an attractive appearance. Bejuni perform a small ritual by offering a fowl during the installation of Kudrumunda.

III: An aerial view of khambesi village



Source: Fieldwork, 2018

IV: An Entrance Point to the Village



Source: *Fieldwork*, 2018

Once the day of Meriah festival is finalized, the Jani along with Disari, Beju, Pat Bejuni, Bejuni, Gurumei, BisMajhi, Mandal and Pujari go to the market for purchasing two buffalos. One for sacrifice and another for feast or gift to the other villagers. It is very important to examine the buffalos, good health and wound free buffalos will be purchased. When the buffalo is entered the village, Bejuni perform a ritual to purify it. She wash the feet with turmeric water and blood of fowl put vermilion on the head and smear castor oil, and red soil in the body of the buffalo. Then it is tethered in Jani's house and Barik (SC, Domb Community) has given the responsibility to look after the buffalo. The buffalo is fed and bathed daily with turmeric water.

V: Two Buffalos for Meriah Sacrifice



Source: *Fieldwork*, 2018

Before one month of Meriah festival, the buffalo is taken to clan villages by mamatadi group for example, Khambesi is coming under WadakaPadar. So the buffalo is taken to other Wadaka villages like, Khajuri, Gartali, Panasa

Padar and Kudu Wali Padar. Here in every village the buffalo is taken to Jani's house first. Jani's wife, wash the feet with turmeric water put vermilion on head, smear castor oil on his back and offer cooked rice to the buffalo. Then other houses of the village also welcome the buffalo in a similar manner.

After visiting to all villages the buffalo return to the Khambesi village. Before the day of sacrifice it is taken around the village and every household embraces the buffalo and expresses their sadness as it is going to die for their prosperity. Each household plant a banana tree in the entry point of the house. The other clan members of different villages come and make Salabeda i.e., the boundary of the village is surrounded by bamboo splits, only two ends of the village is opened for movement. On Friday when the villagers come to the village, the elder members of the village tie a type of bracelet made up of thread, mango leaves dip with turmeric in the right hand wrist of the guests and take a round near the Sadargharas a symbol of welcoming them. The women folk of the village are busy in serving the guest. The hospitality of clan member's is bestowed upon the shoulder of the women. The young girl, women and boys are busy in dancing and singing. On Friday the axe used during the days of human sacrifice is brought from Jani house. A grand procession taken place, leading to the axe being placed in the Sadarghar near Jakeri. The knife used in the days of human sacrifice is also brought to the Sadarghar and placed in a copper plate.

VI: A Group of Villagers Enter the Village



Source: *Fieldwork*, 2018

VII: Welcome Bracelet for the Villagers



Source: *Fieldwork, 2018*

The Sataripenu (umbrella) is brought in front of each house. The Satari is made up of bamboo with a brass figure at the top covered with cloth. The umbrella is taken to each house and offered goat, fowl, pigeon according to the economic status of the household, and also each household cover it with cloth on it. The Bejunis and Pat Bejuni perform certain ritual in the name of Sataripenu, offer sacrifice and appease the deity to bring happiness and prosperity for the villagers. The Bejunis of all other villages also join the Bejunis and all are performing under possession. On Friday mid night the Janis start reciting mantras and it continues over night. The recitations are continued without break till Saturday night and in between pig, fowl, are offered to the Dharipenu.

The buffalo is tethered in the Kudrumunda. The area is covered with bamboo splits where the villagers, watch the crowd to see no body succeed to kill the buffalo before the appropriate time. The villagers used to dance, sing and make noise holding axe in hand. In the early morning of Sunday in between 2-4 a.m., the Jani sprinkle water in the buffalo from the hole in the Sadarghar and after that the crowd rush towards buffalo, make noise holding axe in hand. They make every possible attempt to kill the buffalo. The invited clan members try to cut mark the body of the buffalo. A noisy atmosphere is created in the village. During this some of the clan members also injured by axe. The buffalo head is being placed near the Dharanipenu and sprinkle blood on Dharanipenu. And villagers take a piece of sacred meat to keep with them. On Sunday, a lavish feast is arranged. Everybody enjoy the feast. It is an occasion in which the boys and

girls (marriageable age) got a chance to choose their life partner. They pass on jokes to each other, spend quality time and propose each other for marriage. On Monday the buffalo head is taken out from Dharanipenu. The head of the buffalo is cooked and served to all kin's and relatives. A hen is offered by the Bejuni to the Dharanipenu. The celebration lasted for eight days with great pomp and pleasure.

VIII: Sacred Buffalo Head Placed In Front of the Earth Goddess (DharaniPenu)



Source: *Fieldwork, 2018*

Role of Bejuni (Shamanin)

Shamanism is a dynamic mechanism that the Shaman and Shamanin considered as the most powerful and honored person. These magico religious specialists perform certain rituals obligation to appease different deities and spirits. In Dongria Kandha society male shaman is called as Beju and female Shaman is called as Bejuni. Bejunis are doing ritualistic performance to serve individual family and community as a whole. Bejunis have the power to interact with supernatural beings and seek blessings for the welfare of the people (Gomango & Mohanty, 2008). Bejunis (Shamanin) are playing an important role in rituals and festivals. They enjoy a high status among Dongria Kandha society. It is believed that they go into trance and communicate with the supernatural power of other world, protect the individual and community from the wrath of deities and appeased them by different means of offering. The number of Bejuni in Khambesi village ranges from 05 to 30. Pat Bejuni is the head Bejuni among all the Bejuni who train them to become an expert. Sanari Wadaka is Pat Bejuni of Khambesi village. Besides the community festivals she protects and gives solution of different misfortunes such as prolong illness, unnatural death in the

family, disease of animals etc. to the individual. By examining the severity of the situation she performs ritual and offer different animals such as fowl, pigeon, hen, goat, pig etc. to the deity.

IX: Shaman (Bejuni) is sitting in front of the Kuteibali



Source: Fieldwork, 2018

X: Shamanin (Bejunis) are Dancing Infront of the Kuteibali



Source: Fieldwork, 2018

The in-depth nature of the paper helps in understanding the complex interplay between gender, rituals, and the socio-cultural fabric of the Dongria Kandha tribe. All the frameworks not only illuminate the ways in which ritualistic practices reinforce social structures but also highlight the detailed ways in which gender roles are both constructed and perpetuated through embodied practices and symbols. Through these rituals, the Dongria Kandha maintain their cultural identity, spiritual beliefs, and environmental practices, ensuring the continuity of their traditions even amidst external influences and modern challenges. In the structuralism theory (Levi-Strauss, 1963), it is posited that rituals function as structural binaries, embodying oppositions such as male/female, sacred/profane, and human/nature, which are pivotal in maintaining social order and cohesion. In the context of the Dongria Kandha, gender roles are profoundly

reinforced through ritual participation. For instance, during the Meriah festival, women assume central responsibilities related to communal and familial duties, such as the preparation and serving of food, while men are entrusted with more physical tasks, such as the preparation of the wooden pole for the buffalo sacrifice. These roles not only reflect the division of labour but also symbolise the broader structural opposition of sacred and profane roles assigned to each gender. Furthermore, the distinct roles of the Beju (male) and Bejuni (female) in religious practices exemplify the structural binary of male and female in Dongria Kandha society. This symbolic differentiation serves to reinforce gendered identities, contributing to the maintenance of social order and cohesion within the community. From the symbolic perspective (Turner, 1969), highlights the rituals are rich in symbols that express collective beliefs, and through them, social expectations of gender roles are solidified. In the Dongria Kandha community, the Meriah festival serves as a prime example of this. The buffalo sacrifice, a central symbol in the festival, is not only a symbol of fertility and prosperity but also reinforces social hierarchies and gendered roles. Women are responsible for the cultural preparation of food and hospitality, while men are involved in the sacrificial rites. These symbols within the rituals shape and reinforce the social expectations placed on each gender within the community, where women maintain the cultural traditions and men perform the sacrificial rites. The buffalo's journey to various villages symbolises the movement between different social and cultural domains, showcasing how symbols and rituals are used to communicate and reinforce the tribe's values.

From a feminist view (Ortner, 1974), women are often tasked with the invisible labour of maintaining the social fabric through nurturing roles, even while men take on the more public and authoritative roles in rituals and sacrifices. While these gendered roles appear to perpetuate patriarchal structures, they also provide opportunities for women to assert their cultural identity through activities such as the creation of the Kapdaganda embroidered needlework shawls. This symbolic craft preserves cultural heritage, and through its transmission, women participate in shaping and preserving their community's

legacy. The practice theory (Bourdieu, 1977) emphasises the embodied practices within rituals and how they reinforce the habitus, or the internalised dispositions, that guide behaviour within a community. The rituals surrounding the Meriah festival are a powerful example of how embodied practices reinforce gender identities and social roles. Women's roles in food preparation, hospitality, and cultural expression through crafts (such as the Kapdaganda shawl) contribute to their embodied sense of gender identity within the community. These practices are passed down through generations, shaping the habitus of the women in the Dongria Kandha society, who, through their participation in these rituals, maintain and reproduce traditional gendered roles. Furthermore, the ritual acts performed by the Bejuni, particularly their trance-like states and communication with supernatural forces, suggest how spiritual practices also function as a mechanism to regulate social behaviour, especially concerning gender relations and social hierarchies.

CONCLUSION

The present study made an effort to present a clear picture of the Meriah festival and role of Bejuni (Female Shaman). The paper has been concluded with an optimistic note that Dongria Kandha women have made tremendous contribution towards their culture and showing the autonomy of gender. In the perspectives of feminist and gender, the Dongria Kandha women are enjoying high status in socio-cultural life. Dongria Kandha culture is associated with supernatural power, benevolent spirit, magic, which are regulated by Beju and Bejuni. Kudru Parab plays a very important role in the rituals which is the basis of their magico-religious institution through sacrifice of blood to the supreme deity i.e. Dharani Penu. This study also representations of the religiosity of the Dongria Kandha, where they offered sacred food to the earth goddesses.

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