

Environment and Gender Concerns in Selected Rava Hymns

Dr. Kaustav Chakraborty

Assistant Professor and Head Department of English Southfield College Post & District: Darjeeling, West Bengal--734101

Abstract: Koch or Kocha or Kocha/Rava people have a discrete ethno-linguistic and cultural heritage and thus a separate ethnic identity in the 'Ethnic Museum' of North East India, North Bengal and Sikkim included. Rava culture had a matrilineal base but their social structure is gradually exploiting a matri-patri complex. The history of Rava oral literature is very old. It is presumed that even before Mahabharata Kiratas had a rich store-house of oral literature including hymnal and mythic literature. Rava hymnal literature shows an inherent tendency towards nullifying gender/sex binaries and at times the gods and goddesses co-exists with some earthly creature, as in the cosmological myth of "Ha-tangi" (genesis story). The paper analyses these symptoms that frequently blur gender binaries (contraries co-exist but exchange their power relations by turning the hierarchy into a dynamic one) and betray the environmental landscape not merely as a space of "man's" intrusion but a life giving force that can both be malevolent and benevolent, and thus stress the need to nurture it.

Ravas describe *life* in between birth and death as fragile as a drop of unsteady water on an arum leaf, but they believe that there is life even after death in "Jora Hachchhang" (the realm of spirits). They are at mercy of these spirits since these spirits are capable enough to affect their lives. In order to please these malevolent spectres or "Michhi Memang" and their ancestral souls and deities or "Baye" Hujis, Daosis, Sarengas or Gunins (both witch doctor and priests) composed hymns or mantras and plot based Panchalis and Vratkathas. And in ancient Rava culture this is how journey of literature began through hymnal literature.

Their religious culture is animistic in nature and at times appears to be an amalgam of different existing sects that they encountered throughout their settlement. They have, apart from their "Michhi Memang" and "Baye", embraced the ritualistic worship of other deities and daemons from other religious cults not only in the language of their own but of their neighbours'. For example, while worshipping "Bangalni Turuni" witch or "Per Hachu" the priest must face the west following Islamic tradition: An admirable liberal adaptive process the Ravas have. And this liberal mindset has sufficiently contributed to the making of the rich store-house of Rava hymnal literature.

Rava hymns can be divided into six types with regard to their subject matter:

- i. Hymns sung for religious and sacred rituals
- ii. For the ritualistic festivity like birth, death and marriage
- iii. To get rid of illness or sickness
- iv. For hypnotism
- v. For the success in hunting and fishing
- vi. To destroy enemies

Most of them are either in a mixed Ahamiya or in mongrel Bengali; but some ancient hymns still exist in pure Rava languages. If their motifs are analyzed properly the rich philosophy embedded in them could be revealed. Some of them seem closer to *Upanishadik* hymns, rich in images and naturalistic narration. They are not like classic mantras; meant not be recited but to be sung with the beats of instrumental accompaniment. Moreover, in these hymnal tales personal emotions get the upper hand over a total sense.

Among the Rava hymnal tales *Ha-tangi*, *Baykhu-hoymaru*, *Kanching Rempri: Kawn Bakaingi*, *Hangari or Hangaribaye*, *Mayrabaye* are especially important. But it is neither possible nor desirable to unknot all these tales here. It is better straight to get into a discussion of some of them.

Ha-tangi

The meaning of *Ha-tangi* is "significance of creation" or "theory of creation". It has been transmitted through generations purely in oral form. The complete text is collected by Dr. Rebatimohon Saha after a strenuous effort. It has been forbidden to teach a Lema or non-Rava this sacred Maichi or hymnal song. It is divided into four parts. There are 33 maichis in the first part and in the remaining parts 73, 16 and 45 maichis respectively.

The song describes the earth under an entire ocean in the beginning, and the supreme deities Boiloibuda and his wife Boiloiburi residing on thorny lotus leaf. They are the creators of this universe. After a prolonged discussion with his wife Boiloibuda or Mamaboila decided to create this universe by the soil beneath

the water and with the help of fishes and other creatures of water. They ordered a barbel fish to fetch soil and then a crab. Finally he moulded the human form made up of soil. Two demons named Hadatara and Bidatara came and crashed those sculpted figures. Then again moulded them and created dog to post a vigil on those figures. When demons came, the dog alerted god who fought with the demons and defeated them. Then came the occasion when god decided to endow those human forms with life. Boiloibuda started searching for heart of iron (immortal heart). But at that anxious moment of creation his wife ran out of patience. And she breathed life into them with the help of a drop of unsteady water on an arum leaf nearby. When Boiloibuda came back with the heart of iron he found the humans roaming around, singing and dancing in mirth. So they created the human beings and other creatures, but human life, in the stead of iron clad, remained as vulnerable as a pinch of water, itself shapeless at mercy of a quivering arum leaf.

The story begins when the flooded earth is already created and there exists creatures of water and plants. The supreme deities are unsettled by a thought of creation and ask for help from dolphin and crocodile. The soil starts surfacing with the help of fishes and crabs, and obviously by Boiloibuda's will. The foremost issue is to be noticed is that the supreme deity is always already depended on the environment. And unlike Christian Father God who is essentially a man the giver in Genesis, Rava supreme deities are a couple equal in prowess. In Boiloibuda's absence his equally powerful wife decides to endow the sculpted human forms with life and in her intuitive, impulsive effort takes a subtler decision: she gives them a fragile heart which would have to maintain a relation of dependency with the environment that holds it, like in an arum leaf nodding to the wind. The immortal iron heart fetched by her husband could have blessed the humans with immortality and summarily ended their servitude to the environment and giving them a veto to destroy anything and everything they wanted. It is also very curious that Boiloibuda does not feel deceived when his wife brings the humans to a fragile mortal life changing the course of her husband's grand design of immortality for humans. He is not a misogynistic Samson and she is neither an Ophelia marked by her frailty nor she is an Eve who gets tempted and commits the original sin. It is through her intuitive curiosity humans are caught in an organic bond with environment on the one hand and the environment 'out there' becomes an assimilated essence to reside deep within the human body on the other, and thus most importantly her 'whimsical' deed saves them from an antagonistic relation with the environment, their preserver and if not nurtured properly, destroyer too in the long run.

To balance this overtly matrilineal version another version of *Ha-tangi* (collected by Rajan Rava) existed: in this tale in the stead of coupled deities twelve Rishis or deities (presumably male) created this universe. But again they did not entirely create it alone themselves; the eldest of them Krimichung ordered Numil, the youngest to manufacture the earth. He in turn created a crab and sent him to fetch soil. Thus here again this creation myth is not entirely *manmade* but is dependent on the environmental forces.

Hymn of Hangary or Hangrybaye

Hangary is the foster child of Janak Rishi. He did not have a child, but in dream he gets the word of god that he would soon get one from the fountain the village people use for regular purposes. Hangary, the girl gradually developed into a charming young woman. A young Brahmin fell in love with her and married her. Her father in law discovered that Hangary has a huge appetite that exhausts their food store in an unnatural rapidity. Since whoever kills a woman is bound to reach hell, the family decides to take her to the woods and to chop off her ears and nose. She roams around in hunger destroying a large portion of village plantation. But she got trapped into a iron cage set up by the village people. Nobody could recognize her and the village deemed her as a witch to be buried alive. And so they did. She started groaning and her voice reached to her father who eventually rescued her. He endowed her with malevolent powers that could pester humans with extreme physical ailment. But he forbade her to kill. Her family gradually recognizes her powers and offeres her their humble worship since under her spell her husband was suffering from a terrible ailment from the very moment he had crossed her at the bathing ghat.

Hangary shares a resemblance with the Hindu malevolent deity, Manasha. Here again the power equation between sexes gets a serious jolt. The story celebrates the essentially matrilineal core of Rava culture. But it also points to the dynamism that exists between genders: Hangary's father endows her with supernatural powers that she applies to right the wrongs done by her husband and her father in law. Moreover, she is the child of nature, an emblem of the destructive energy of the environment.

The trail of these hymnal tales could be extended almost without exhaustion. But the thrust of these tales remain almost similar in each of the cases: carried along through the oral tradition and still alive in Rava rituals, they tell the story of man's dependency on his female counterpart, contraries which are equally powerful, and our eternal relation with the environment; they infallibly transmit a truth to remember that we humans are the product of this environment, not entities *above and beyond* it.

Works Consulted

Sengupta Sarthak, *Tribes of the Eastern Himalayas*, New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2001

Tayal, Poonam. *Dalit and Tribals: A Political and Socio Economy Study*, New Delhi: Murari Lal & Sons, 2007