From Woman to Goddess

*Pendra Gadhien: A Contested Discourse of Gender in Tribal Religious Cult*

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Abstract

Goddess *pendragarhien*, also known as Pendrani is worshipped by the tribal people of Western Orissa and the bordering districts of Chhattisgarh. It has a history of last 400 years. A myth of origin of Goddess Pendrani; followed by a complex ritual, is found in these areas.

The focal theme of the myth was about a Gond bride Pendrani; whose husband (bride service) was killed by her seven brothers in order to get good harvest by offering human sacrifice to Earth Mother Goddess. *Pendra*ni, searched for her husband and finally found that her own brothers had sacrificed her bride service-husband. While wondering in the forest a tiger ate her and after that her spirit became a Goddess. Over a period of last 400 years she has transformed from a revengeful goddess into a blissful goddess. She is now worshipped as the Goddess of wealth in Western Orissa and eastern Chhattisgarh.

The purpose of the article is to explain how an ordinary woman became a Goddess and contested against the male predominance. Her creation myth became so popular that she became a popular Goddess and thus a new cult emerged as Pendrani Goddess cult. Though originated as a tribal Goddess she became the Goddess of both tribal and non tribal communities in the socio historical process of the region. The cult represented with the religious faith and belief explores that now Pendrani is one of the most popular and prestigious Goddess. A huge temple is constructed in Umerkote town, in addition to installation of her cult in thousands of villages in tribal areas.

An attempt has been made in this paper to examine the socio–historical processes of the indigenous communities and the dynamics of transformation of a woman to goddess in the collective memory of the communities. The ritual performance of the celebration and adoption of the Goddess in a house or in a village is a complex ritual process that captures the socio–psychological phenomena. Male shamans use to play the role of the Goddess and the divinization of Pendrani Goddess is established.

The inference of the Pendrani cult is a contestation of male predominance over the women and the whole ritual system adopted in the cult, celebrated by the males playing the role of female goddess signifies the males subjugation to the woman Goddess, thereby compensating the injustice inflicted on Goddess Pendrani when she was an ordinary woman; before her deification.

Introduction
Maa *Pendrani*, otherwise known as goddess *Pendragadien* in region of, adjoining south western Orissa is a cult found most popular during last 50 years. The Goddess has emerged from the village of *Pendravan* in Bastar district of Chhattisgarh. She is worshiped as a Goddess of wealth among the tribal people and also by the non Brahmin occupation caste groups of the locality. Gradually; crossing the political boundaries of Orissa and Chhattisgarh this cult has created a culture area.

**History**

According to the present Gond priest Sri Dambrudhar Netam, Goddess Pendrani had taken her birth more than 400 years ago. The origin myth related to Goddess Pendrani is found in Bastar region. The same myth has been disseminated to other localities.

**Myth**

There were seven Gond brothers in a village called Pendarawan in Bastar. Their only sister was *Mitki*. She fell in love with Mangtu. She was the only sister so they had adopted Mangtu as Gharjia (bride service) for their only sister. *Mangtu* lived with his wife’s brothers and helped them in cultivation of land.

One day the seven brothers apprehended that their sister’s husband might demand his share of cultivable land from them. So they decided to kill him. They sacrificed *Mangtu* and buried his dead body in the field. Simultaneously they thought they appeased the Earth Goddess to get ample harvest. Then they came back home.

*Mitki*, their sister found that her husband had not returned with her brothers from the field. She enquired from his brothers about him, but they pretended that they knew nothing about him.

*Mitki*, out of anxiety started searching for her husband in the forest. She had taken a dagger and a bamboo basket while coming from home. She searched all over the forest but could not find her husband. Finally she sat under a Pendra tree and started lamenting on him. She had left her hair untied; since she was in her monthly cycle. Meanwhile a tiger appeared from the forest and sprang at Mitki and ended her life. Since she had been a disgruntled spirit; she took shelter in the *pendra* tree. The spirit became violent and started eating the passers by on the way close to that tree. Like wise she ate up many people. She ate a *Kalaren* (liquor selling women), a *Saaren*, a *Doli mai*, and a called *Nimgaman* and a shepherd called *Jhitku*.

All these victims also became spirits and formed a consortium of gods and goddesses subordinate to the spirit of Mitki; later popularly known as Pendragadien.
When pendragadien became violent in that locality, the Gond priest understood that this was the wrath of the discontented spirit of Mitki. So, out of fear and devotion the community started worshipping her along with her associate gods and goddesses. The priest suggested the family to worship Mitki – the Sati and get rid of her anger.

Since the Goddesses took shelter in the Pendra tree she was known as Pendra gadien. The deceased husband Mangtu also became a Duma. Rest of the Duma spirits were Kotgadien, Doli mai, Lakren, Kalaren, Saaren and the male gods were Nlgaman and Jhitku. All these gods and goddesses were worshipped after their institutionalization in her village- Pendrawan.

From a tribal woman to Goddess

The process of deification of human being after their death is a common religious belief. Not everybody who dies can be a deity. Tribal religious systems have four kinds of Gods and Goddesses. They are-1. Supreme God/ Goddess, 2. First progenitor, 3. Tutelary deity, 4. Evil spirit.( Das: 1975)

The spirit may be benevolent or malevolent. It depends on the kind of death s/he had witnessed. Nobody is intentionally evil or bad, but it is the treatment by which a person faces death turns him/her into a good or a bad spirit. This is again validated by the priests based on their experience and convention. The unnatural death, unwanted death, and accidental deaths of a person is resulted with a spirit and sometimes they become ghosts. It depends on the activities of the spirit perceived and acceptance of the community.

Divinization of spirit is a major phenomenon in the tribal religious practices. Whether the spirit is a supreme God or a tutelary deity or an evil spirit- that does not matter, rather the purpose and function of such Gods and goddesses in the context of the community determine the nature of worship. In the calendar year tribal people use to observe many fairs and festivals; and rites and rituals. Many fairs and festivals are nominated to forest and agricultural activities. For example; offering of forest products and the agricultural produces to the gods and goddesses before they are consumed by the community, is a common practice. Without the offering of the first produce the community never consumes it.

The rituals and festivals are therefore two fold. One is directly connected to the vegetation and natural resources. Priests and community use to show their gratitude to their gods and goddesses through this. But the purpose of worshipping Goddess Pendrani is different. She had been a local goddess confined to the village at first and then became a regional goddess in Bastar. But during last 50 years she emerged to be the goddess of wealth not only among the tribal groups but other occupation caste group also invoked Goddess Pendrani to their homes through a complex ritual process which takes place over four days. The devotee who wants to invite the Goddess to his home
and acknowledge her as a deity uses to spend 25,000 rupees. The priest and the staff consist of 1-15 persons, which includes all the associate deities and the musicians. This whole group is invited by the devotee to institute the ritual and install the Goddesses and the Gods in the new devotee’s home.

**Historicity of Goddess Pendrani in Bastar and Koraput**

According to the priests’ genealogy of the Goddess, it was revealed that the first priest of Goddess Pendrani was Bogadi Netam. The most important point in the worship of Goddess Pendrani was that after the event (myth) had occurred the family members of Pendrani were her first worshippers.

Three uncles and three brothers of Goddess Pendrani started worshipping her in a hut. The uncles were Bagadi Netam, Jawa Netam, Maharu Netam. The three brothers were Junga Netam, Bagadi Netam and Sagram Netam. It is not known how and why these three brothers became the worshippers and why other three brothers were not involved in it.

It is most important to note that the caste genealogy of Goddess Pendrani has retained the history of the Goddess (Mitki). When she became a Sati, her own family members realized her divinity and started worshipping her. Presently it is not a usual practice in any of the tribal family to divinize a deceased woman. But this case was uncommon. It is believed that when a woman or a man has a natural death, they don’t take a form of ghost spirit and live happily as a Duma-ancestor spirit and after seven generations they cease to be a Duma. But in case of a person who faced an unnatural death, it is believed that he had not enjoyed his fullest life. Therefore his or her unfulfilled desires keep him/her as a spirit or ghost. It is also believed that if a person’s life is lost/taken away in an unjust way, he/she becomes malevolent in order to avenge the injustice inflicted on him/her. Pendragadien was the victim of her own brothers, so was her husband. Therefore her discontented spirit caused harm and killed many people.

Killing of Pendrani’s husband by her own brothers and herself being devoured by a tiger, were two events which contributed her to becoming malevolent. The myth makers must have considered it that; since the couple became the victim of the conspiracy of selfish humans (the brothers) and death came by fate (being eaten by tiger), they would get sympathy and support of community. A proverb runs that *Kale kalet Dose Nang, jog naithile nai khae bagh.* The meaning of this proverb is that if someone’s destiny-appointed hour of death arrives *kalet* (a poisonous snake) bites him; If someone has committed any sin or offence then the Cobra bites him. But if someone is eaten by the tiger it is his/her fate. One offence is created by human cruelty and greed and another is accidental. Both the events contribute to the destruction of an innocent and good family which a community can not approve of in terms of ethics.

Therefore, it was the myth maker who validated the community ethics through sanctioning the couple transformation from human to divine such as to compensate the loss. This validation is made through a complex ritual in which *Maa Pendrani* is invited with all her associate gods and goddesses. This again validates that the myth maker has not only sympathized the victims but has
also given justice to rest of the victims and validated the community ethics. Therefore when a family member wishes to invite the Goddess into her home and install the idol, he arranges to invite all the gods and goddesses and the priests and musicians.

The team of Pendrani has the set of ornaments, and dresses made of costly cowries, red clothes, winnowing bamboo materials, the twinkling bell and all sundry items for ritual performances; along with the musical instruments are taken to the devotee who wishes to worship the Goddess. Worship means to install the Goddess as the family goddess (Ista devi). This whole process; comprising of a number of customs and rules-laid upon by the priests-takes four days. This may be a ritual drama for a scholar, but it is a reality for the family members to invoke and install the goddess as their Ista devi.

There is no concept of God without the concept of a human in tribal religion. It is true that in Hindu religion God is unreachable for the man and there is a huge gap between god and man. But in tribal religion, man is close to the Gods and Goddesses. They even stay together. A deceased person becomes Duma - spirit and is allowed to stay in the kitchen for seven generations and then only he is subjected to immersion.

Another instance of a Kondh maiden married to Bhīma – a rain God in the village Mahulbhata in Kalahandi. This marriage was instituted to bring rain; since Bhima is considered to be the rain God. After the ritual marriage was over the Kondh maiden remained spinster and was honoured as the divine wife of her divine husband (symbolized in a stone). She remained as Gurumai (spiritual mother) till her death. After her death she was also worshipped in a stone symbol. Hundreds of Gods and Goddesses have emerged from similar events in many tribal villages. Unfortunately not all deities have the same fortune like that of the goddess Pendrani. Her cult has been institutionalized and socially so broadly accepted across the states of south Western Orissa and south east Chhattisgarh.

**From local Legend to Universal Myth**

Pendrani is a cult of recent past. The place and time of her emergence and events are known to the people and there is the evidence of her existence. She is not an imaginary goddess, rather a legendary goddess. The question is why this goddess got a name and fame in her own locality for about 300-350 years and suddenly became a popular goddess in other parts beyond the place of her origin. It was found that prior to 1965; the year that the drought occurred in Kalahandi in Orissa and Bastar in Chhattisgarh, Goddess Pendrani was not much popular. The worship of the Goddess spread after the drought, since the people wanted to compensate the loss of their property during the drought resorting to supernatural powers. Since the society of western Orissa and Bastar is thickly populated with the tribal communities and agricultural communities, they depend on the rain God as well as rain water for cultivation. Unless the Goddess is appeased, there is no prosperity. The community also felt that drought is also a divine event due to decay of values in the human society.

It is believed that violating the social values and ethics brings about disasters in the community. In tribal community the priest is supposed to be responsible for this. The priest plays a major role for the
well being of the community. The shaman is the mediator of man-spirit communication. Therefore the social values are manifested in the rituals and festivals. The whole community trusts in values and rejects the evil. The acceptance of Goddess Pendrani is the social approval of the tribal community; which was initially not so complex but attributed by the people to the cult, in course of time. Gradually Pendrani became the goddess of wealth during the drought period and after that people started worshipping her to beget a progeny.

**Process of Inviting the Goddess:**

The jajman – family head invites the Priest and the shaman of the cult and the team reaches his house. A complex ritual takes place for 4-5 days. The preparation takes place for 10-15 days. Day wise distribution of ritual process is as follows

**Text and Interpretation**

The purpose of the pendrani cult is a contestation of male predominance over women. The whole ritual system adopted in the cult, celebrated by males playing the female goddess signifies the males’ subjugation to the woman Goddess, thereby compensating the injustice inflicted on Goddess Pendrani when she was an ordinary woman.

One cannot easily accept such a simple myth of an ordinary woman (Miki) ascending to a divine entity. After all it was a true event and it was all about a woman who had been tortured and had become the victim. It was an injustice to her. The myth spells out the cruelty of males over females in a real world and in turn the myth spells out the revenge taken by the Ghost spirit (Goddess). Once she was institutionalized by the villagers (even to her own uncles and three brothers), she became benevolent. This compensation of a human death to a divine birth fetched the goddess wide acceptance and community recognition; in which the ethics violated have been resolved.

It may be inferred that the compassion of Pendrani that was suppressed in her mind due to the injustice done to her, turned into revengeful act activity during her period as Ghost spirit. Hence when she got the status of a goddess she became more compassionate to her subjects and devotes. The group psychology that has transformed the personality of an ordinary tribal woman into a dignified divine entity; has been manipulated by the desire of her priests/myth makers and the collective wish of the community.

**Regeneration:**

In 1900 AD Sri Bikram Dev Burma, the Maharaja of Jeypore, Orissa realized the popularity of the Goddess Pendrani and constructed a temple dedicated to her in Umerkote. This was again validation
and reinforcement of a tribal goddess gradually gaining her ground in the region. The construction of temple by the maharaja was a historical event for the Gond community to feel glorious that their local goddess (of a different kingdom) has been recognized by the Maharaja. The priest of this temple was a Bhatra and his family members had been worshipping the Goddess over last 100 years in Umerkote.

In 2001 the temple dilapidated and there have been no efforts since, to rebuild it. However the Goddess has been installed as the family deity (ista devi) by millions of people in the said areas. Even the nontribal occupation castes have also adopted this cult for their progeny and prosperity in wealth.

**Interpolation of Pendrani with Hindu Myth:**

It was in 2001, that a political leader of Umerkote had a dream from the Goddess Pendrani and initiated construction of a temple for her. He was the Block Chairman and also a contractor. He became the cultural leader of that locality by forming committees for Durga Puja, Pendrani festival etc. He collected funds from various sources the committee started constructing the temple of Pendrani in 2001 and completed the temple in 2011 over a period of ten years.

The symbiotic relationship of power and religion is a common phenomenon in Indian culture. The process of approving the local goddess by the Kings and constructing a temple was to recognize the community faith. On the other hand the Brahmins universalize the local goddess branding them as the *shakti* - power of Goddess Durga/Laxmi etc cloning them with Hindu mythology.

Similar case was with Rakat Mauli- a Kondh goddess of Tribal region became the fort goddess of Khariar palace. In some cases the tribal priests continue to perform their daily worship in the temple and in some places they have been replaced by the Brahmin priests.

Interestingly, in the temple of Umerkote, a Bhatra - tribal priest was engaged in worshipping the Pendrani Goddess for over a years and now, after the new temple is constructed, Brahmin priests have been appointed to perform daily worship. The reason of such transition from the tribal priests to the Brahmin priest is justified by the committees that since the many Hindu Gods and Goddess are worshipped aside the main Goddess Pendrani, it is necessary to take Brahmin priests. The committee also finally professed that, after all Pendrani is Goddess Durga. Every goddess in this earth is a part of the power of Durga.

Thus over a period of 400 years a simple tribal woman started her journey as a human being, turned in to a ghost spirit, worshipped in her own village as a goddess, and worshipped in the Gond dominated villages of Orissa and Chhattisgarh and was later recognized as a folk goddess.

Now the Goddess is worshipped along the methods of Durga worship followed by the Sanskritic ritual system. The vicinity of the main temple is surrounded by the images of Durga, Laxmi, Saraswati,

Community perception and adaptation, transition from a simple tribal woman to a divine goddess and finally her acceptance as Goddess Durga has made her a transformative character from one stage to the other. Community’s social function and the priests’ ritual performances, their rules and practices involve ideas and ideologies. That is imagined by the myth makers and the collective social memory. A small tragic event of a village woman, thus, over a period of time, transcends into a divine power to establish how people maintain their ethics through the religious cults and performance.