

CHAPTER-V

RELIGIOUS LIFE OF THE MENDHE DHANGARS

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CHAPTER-V

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1) Introduction :

India is basically a country of the religions. Here every aspect of life is governed by the religion. Farmers who form the 60% of the Indian population are basically religious and conservative in outlook. This makes people more religion minded. Apart from it, there is dearth of education in Indian village society and it makes people more religious and conservative. Religion according to Indian way of life is that force which controls various aspects of our life. It is a set of beliefs and faith that also controls and guides our actions. According to Indian concept of religion, the whole life is based on religion.

Religion influences various aspects of culture and civilisation. Many of the things that form part of the culture in urban life become part of religion in rural life. Religion is an important agency of the individuals and ultimately of the society. It is also an important agency of socialisation. It influences all aspects of life, intellectual, emotional, cognitive, economic and social etc. It also influences various aspects of social life.

Religion influences man's philosophy of life. In other words, a man's philosophy of life is profoundly influenced by his attitude towards religion. In the back-

ground of every activity and every movement, man's philosophy of life is functioning. Due to the profound influence which religion has upon the life an Indian village, the study of Mendhe Dhangar's religion is necessary for the understanding of their philosophy of life.

Mendhe Dhangar's religion contains their views about magic, sorcery, taboos, spiritualism, concept of dead, ancestors, mythological stories etc. According to Hindu religion, the sin is the root cause of pain, while good deeds are helpful to our progress. These things are more to be found in Mendhe Dhangars of Hatkanangale Taluka. In fact all aspects of life in the Mendhe Dhangars are governed by religion and religion provides answer to all things.

The religious beliefs of the Mendhe Dhangars are all pervasive. Many are institutionalised through various religious practices. On all important occasions of life, Mendhe Dhangar families conduct religious ceremonies which may take the form of 'Puja' or 'Katha' and involve the community.

The Mendhe Dhangars are religious minded. They have a strong belief in the existence of deities and spirits. The Mendhe Dhangars of Hatkanangale Taluka believe in various gods and goddesses and in different sets of dieties. They believe in a supernatural being also. Religion plays an important role in the regulating their social life. Religion

also plays a vital role in giving them some cohesion. The life of the Mendhe Dhangars is bound up with various kinds of religious activities right from birth to death.

The Mendhe Dhangars worship two types of deities, the general ones like Laxmidevi, Maruti or Hanuman, Mhaskoba, Khandoba, Biroba and their own particular deities also, belonging perhaps to a aboriginal part. These deities are worshipped with the articles like sweets, Betel-nuts, and vemillion, 'Agarbatti' and 'Dhup'.

All deities are worshipped either at the appointed time or on special occasions like births, marriages, festivals _ and deaths. The deities are also worshipped by them due to vows made on difficult time. Their secret specialist is known as the 'Pujari'. The Pujari is generally of the same caste.

The details of their deties, rituals and sacred articles used in the worship of particular deity are given below :

1) Shri Biroba God :

Biroba is Mendhe Dhangar's God. This God is very famous in the Mendhe Dhangars. The place of 'Biroba' is situated in the Mendhe Dhangars 'Basti'. Every Sunday, this particular God is worshipped. The worship is of offered with sweets, dhup, agarbatti, and other 'Puja' articles. The

worship is offered with the sacrifice of goats and sheep at the time of festivals, marriages, religious, activities and deaths.

2) Hanuman Puja :

This God is generally enshrined at the middle of the village. This god is very famous in every village in the Hatkanangale Taluka. Hanuman or Maruti is worshipped for protecting the village from all calamities. He is not only worshipped by the Mendhe Dhangars but also all the other villagers as well.

3) The Village God :

The village God is situated outside of the village. In Ghunaki Village, the village God is Mangoba and in Pattankodoli the village god is Biroba. These gods are worshipped on every Sunday. The people belonging to the Mendhe Dhangars as well as the other castes also worship the village God.

4) Natural Deities :

The people belonging to the Mendha Dhangars worship some natural deities, like 'Wayu Deota', 'Jal Deota' for peace in the family. Goats, sheep, and hens are offered as sacrifices to these deities.

Thus, we find that the dominant factor in the religious faith of the Mendhe Dhangar people is a belief in spiritual beings who control and influence the destiny of man.

2) Religious Heads :

Among the Mendhe Dhangars no special religious heads are found as among the Tribals and Hindus. The head of a family becomes the religious priest among the Mendhe Dhangars. The wife has also the same right but she worships the household deities only. She cannot sacrifice goats, sheep and hens. She simply drops a few pieces of rice, meat, etc. on the occasion of festivals inside the house where household deities are worshipped regularly.

3) Ghost, Witch, Craft and Magic :

Magic, witch-craft, ghost and other superstitions are an essential part of the beliefs of most of the Mendhe Dhangars in Hatkanangale Taluka. Their belief in these superstitions is so strong, that they ascribe the causes of all the diseases accidents or natural calamities to magic, witch-craft, bhoots and other superstitions. The Mendhe Dhangars consult the witch-doctor first in any disease. Only when the patient's conditions takes a serious turn, do they have recourse to Auravedic, Homeopathic doctors.

1. Belief in Ghost :

Most of the Mendhe Dhangars of Hatkanangale Taluka, believe in Ghosts. They also believe in Atma, Moksha and Karma. In order that Atma after the death of a person may get a suitable abode and not roam around and become a ghost, a few rituals are observed by the relatives of the deceased. Regarding 'Bhoots', they believe that those persons, who die before their scheduled time by any accident, suicide or death caused by witch-craft etc. become ghosts. The persons who are not good-natured also become ghosts. A ghost does not respect age and sex in casting its evil eyes, when it goes a haunting. A ghost roams about in the place where the ghosts reside. There are some trees, which are considered to be the favourite dwelling places of ghosts, i.e. Pipal, Babhul, Jambhul etc.

2. Beliefs in Witch-Craft :

The Mendhe-Dhangars of Hatkanangale Taluka, believe in witch-craft. The interested person or woman of the Mendhe Dhangars goes to the 'Smashan Bhumi' and there he or she is taught the Mantras. This is generally done at night, on the occasion of 'Amavasya'. After his or her training is over he or she is asked by the 'Mantrik' to practise his or her witch-craft on any one of his or her nearest relatives. As the result of his or her witch-craft one of her dear relatives falls ill and ultimately dies.

3. Belief in Magic :

The Mendhe Dhangars of Hatkanangale Taluka, believe in black magic, which is performed by some 'Buva', 'Mantrik' or 'Pujari' or a witch-doctor. When children are sick, the Mendhe Dhangar's women consult the 'Buva' or 'Mantrik' for the ceremonies to be performed for warding off the evil eye or the evil influence. The witch-doctor is a specialist in the art of magic and witch-craft. He plays an important role in the life of the Mendhe Dhangars of Hatkanangale Taluka. Witch-doctor is a person who has the power of 'Mantras'. His place in his society is very useful and respectable.

4. Festivals of the Mendhe Dhangars :

The Mendhe Dhangars of Hatkanangale Taluka, celebrates a number of festivals. Festivals is generally tied with some religious occasion, but is a great means of recreation too. Many festivals have a religious significance and they are connected with religious belief. The other kind of festivals are connected with natural phenomena.

The following festivals are celebrated by the Mendhe Dhangars of the Hatkanangale Taluka.

1. Gudhi Padva :

The first of Chaitra is called Gudhi Padva, it being the New Year Day. It is ushered in by house holders by setting up in front of their houses a 'gudhi', a bamboo pole

capped with a small silver or brass pot and a new piece of cloth and a string of flowers hanging to it as a flag. The Mendha Dhangars bathe early in the morning; eat a mixture of gul, gram and neem leaves, have a symptuous meal at noon and in evening, visit the temple with their 'Palakhi'.

2. Nag Panchami :

The bright fifth of 'Sravana' is observed as 'Nagapanchami' day by the Mendha Dhangars, upon which the many a houses a clay naga (Cobra) is worshipped and feast enjoyed. This worship is performed with 'lahya' and 'milk'. The Mendhe Dhangars have the belief, that snakes will not bite them because they worship them. At this time the Mendhe Dhangar's women dressed in their best, dance round in a ring keeping time to a song when they sing in chorous.

3. Ganesh Chaturthi :

Ganesh Chaturthi is celebrated on the Bhadrapada. Painted 'Ganapati' specially bought for the day is worshipped and offerings of 'Modaka', a dish of rice flour balls stuffed with coco-kernel scrapings and gul, are made to the God. On the third or fourth day after chaturthi, women hold a feast for three days in honour of Parvati or Gauri, the mother of Ganesh. The image is kept 7 days or as may be the custom, with the family and then ceremonially immersed in a well, a pond or a river.

4. Navratra and Dasara :

The Mendhe Dhangars celebrate, 'Navratra' and 'Dasara'. The 'Navratri' festival begins from the first day of 'Asvina' and lasts for ten days, the first nine being known as Navratra' (Nine nights) and the last as Dasara. On the 10th day, Mendhe Dhangars workship weapons and field tools. In the afternoon villagers go in a procession as far as the 'Gaori-Siva' (village boundary). Here the village headman workships the 'Apta' or 'Sami' tree with the help of the village Brahmana and on their return they interchange the 'Apta' or 'Sami' leaves or 'gold' as they are called, that day with their relatives and friends.

5. Diwali :

Diwali, which is the festival of lights, is a very popular festival all over the country. This festival falls on 'Amavasya' of 'Kartik'. The Diwali festival signifying "a feast of lights" starts from the 13th of the dark of Asivina and lasts for five days. During the period each evening 'Panati' lamps are lighted in all frontages of the house. On Diwali day they prepare sweet dishes and visit each other. In the evening small earthern lamps are lighted and rows of lamps are put at the main doors. Children enjoy Diwali, for they get candies and crackers. The goodess Laxmi, goddess of wealth is worshipped at night.

The last day of the festival is Bhaubeeja, when sisters invite their brothers, feast them, ware 'an arati' and receive presents. On this day Mendhe Dhangars run their sheep and goats on the 'Mal', with Drumming and Singing the 'Dhangari Ovy'a' they pass the night.

6. Holi :

This festival is celebrated on the 5th day of Chaitra. It lasts for two days. Young men and Children of the Mendhe Dhangars collect wood and cowdung, cakes infront of the Biroba's temple. The night before the Holi, the fire is set an the collected wood and cow-dung cakes by a 'Pujari'. On the next day Holi is celebrated. Its called a 'Dhulawada', which is also observed as a holiday.

The other festivals celebrated by the Mendhe Dhangar of Hatkanangale Taluka are Bendur, Makarasankrant, Jatra or Yatra etc. These festivals have a great social significance. Festivals occupy a definite place in the life of the people. They are open to all without any hindrance. Social unity and solidiarity is expected to its maximum during these festivals, because these are the occasions when all in-hibitions are shed and people mix freely.

The fundamental idea underlying all the religions rites, rituals and ceremonies is to ensure the well-being of

a individual family, its cattle and the property of the village and of families of the whole community and to protect them from unforeseen or imminent dangers and hardships.

5) Religious Centres of the
Mendhe Dhangars :

Arewadi, Chinchani, Washi, Pattankodoli, Jejuri etc. are the religious centres of the Mendhe Dhangars. These centres are also good market centres for the Mendhe Dhangars. These centres are also good market centres for the Mendhe Dhangars. Relatives and other castemen of Mendhe Dhangars come from different parts of Maharashtra, specially to Washi and Pattankodoli which are in Kolhapur district. Many a times marriage relationships are fixed up here in these centres.

During the fair time, special type of dance is arranged which is called 'Gaja-Nrutya'. This dance is very attractive. During this period they do drumming also.

6) Birth and Taboos - Period
of Pollution :

The Mendhe Dhangars of Hatkanangale Taluka, are very superstitions. This is why they are always afraid of witchcraft and evil spirits. They try to protect pregnant women from evil influences of witches, ghosts all other evil agencies. The Mendhe Dhangars believe that pregnancy is the

most crucial period for a woman. If she gives birth to a child without any difficulty, it is a matter of grace. A woman has to face so many restrictions on her daily life in this period.

A pregnant woman is not allowed to do any work. She is not allowed to cut anything with a knife or 'Koyata'. She is not allowed to cross river or big 'Nalas'. A 'Smashan Bhumi' or a place where there are possibilities of ghosts or witch-craft, is strictly prohibited for a pregnant woman. It is noticed that a pregnant woman does not do any hard work, like drawing water from a deep well, or carrying a heavy load.

Regarding these taboos, the Mendhe Dhangars are of the opinion that if a pregnant woman works hard and does not take rest, the child in the womb may be affected badly and sometimes an abortion may take place. The Mendhe Dhangars believe that if a pregnant woman does not follow these traditions, then her child will be either deformed or mad. But in the nuclear family the Mendhe Dhangars compel a pregnant woman to do all types of work, either light or heavy. The Mendhe Dhangar's women in Hatkanangale Taluka can be observed bringing water from the pitches on her head, and doing the hard work of harvesting etc.

7) Pollution :

The birth pollution lasts eight-days after child birth. The mother of the child is neither allowed to cook

or allowed to offer food to the other members of the family. The people will not accept any cooked food from her. The birth pollution is brought to an end of the expiry 12 days by a purification ceremony when both the mother and child are bathed. The materials and clothes used by the mother and child and washed by condung mixed with water.

Ritual impurity starts at the birth of the child and ends with the completion of 'Barase' rites. As a rule 'Barase' should take place on the 12th day of child birth. It is the ritual purification ceremony of the new born baby. During the 'Barase' ceremony the relatives and neighbours of the parents of the new born child are invited to the house. A feast is arranged and inviees are served with sweet meal. This ceremony also called the name-giving ceremony. Both the child and the mother are surrounded by so many 'Taitis', 'Gandas', black threads and other 'Mantras'. A child's eyes are marked by 'Kajal'.

8) Death :

The Mendhe Dhangars believe that death is natural and the goes to either heaven or hell according to one's deeds.

On the death of an individual an announcement is required to be communicated to the relatives. As a matter of fact, the loud chorus of lamentation of females in the

deceased's house is enough to give an idea of the sorrowful occasion. The relatives gather there, if there are any. If the near relatives are in the neighbouring villages a word is sent to them while a bamboo or wooden beer is prepared by some people. All male and female members and grown-up boys of the Mendhe Dhangars, the local group and friends who are present on this occasion, go in a procession to the grave yard.

Mostly the Mendhe Dhangars bury their dead in their respective grave yard. The local term used for the grave yard is 'Smashan Bhumi'. The woman who dies in child-birth is not buried in the 'Smashan Bhumi'. She is buried away in a lonely place or near a Nala.

When the funeral is over all the Mendhe Dhangar people take their bath, wash their clothes and return to the village in a group. They do not take meal on the day of the occurrence. They also do not light a fire-for cooking etc. on that day.

"On the death of a Dhangar, his son performs ceremonies for his propitiation on the thirteenth and fourteenth days. He also performs 'Shradha' every year on the anniversary of his father's death, and 'Mahal' or 'Mahalaya' for the propitiation of ancestors in general, in the dark fortnight of 'Bhadrapad', on the date of his parents' death. At each 'Shradha' he gives money and grains to the

officiating Brahman priest, and invites his castemen to a dinner. In some places, on the third and twelfth day after a death Dhangars perform what is called, 'the ceremony of giving water'. In Khandesh, a little cooked food is buried underground where the deceased breathed his last. On the tenth day they send for a potter, who prepares small images of human forms made of flour and water. He carries these flour images with him and places them in flowing water. The potter also says prayers, playing on drums and bells."¹

The Mendhe Dhangars believe that the soul is immortal. When a person dies his soul goes to some other animate object. When a man sleeps his soul goes out from his body and wonders about.

The Mendhe Dhangars of Hatkanangale Taluka further believe in rebirth. Rebirth may be possible even in the forms of animal, bird or any other animate object. It depends on the work or 'Karma'. If a man has committed some sin in his life, he will not be born again as a human being, but as something else, but if he spends his life in performing good deeds he may once more be born as a human being.

9) Sanskritization of the Mendhe Dhangars :

Sanskritization is the process by which a low Hindu Caste or tribe or other group, changes its customs, ideology

1. Enthoven, R.E. : "The Tribes and Castes of Bombay", pp. 320-321.

and way of life in the direction of, more frequently, or twice-born caste. Generally such changes are followed by a claims to higher position in the castes by a community. It has been observed that this process is more active at some period than at others, but it is accepted that the processes has been universal.

Sanskritization is a process of cultural contact which brings about change in the cultural pattern and set-up. The changes that take place in the people of the most backward villages, or the tribes in connection with education and other factors, can be called 'Sanskritization'. Sanskritization is another name for 'cultural change'.

"Culture particularly in a sophisticated society is considered to be the property of the people of the upper class. Upper classes have their own values which are higher than the values of the people of the lower castes. As a result of certain developments, these values and norms that once belonged to the members of the so-called upper castes are now becoming the property of the members of the lower castes. This is all due to the industrial development, development of education, urbanisation etc. Because of these factors, the rural culture is constantly changing. The traditions have been taken-up. This is known as 'Sanskritization'.²

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2. Singh, K. : "Rural Sociology", p. 244.

The two villages, Pattankodoli and Ghunaki, under study are also no exception to this Sanskritization may be observed in Pattankodoli and Ghunaki villages also, but its tempo is slow and gradual.

Prof. Srinivas is of the opinion that Sanskritization results only in positional changes in the system and does not lead to any structural change. He has defined sanskritization in the following words :

"Sanskritization means not only the adoption of new customs and habits, but also exposure of new ideas and values which have found frequent expression in the vast body of Sanskrit literature, sacred as well scholar. Karma, Dharma, Papa, Maya, Santosh, Moksha are examples of source of the most common sanskritic theological ideas and when people become sanskritized, these words become frequent in their talks. These ideas reach the common people through sanskritic myths and stories."

Sanskritization, therefore, means explanation and adoption of the new values. These values are said to belong to the members of the so called upper classes.

In the present study, an attempt has been made to find out the effects of Sanskritization among the Mendhe Dhangars in the Hatkanangale Taluka. A number of the Mendhe

Dhangar people work with the people of other castes. So they see the standard of living of the upper caste people and they also try to imitate them. Educational centres are scattered all over the area. The Mendhe Dhangars come in contact with the people of other castes and places and it thus helps them to up-lift their socio-economic status.

The Mendhe Dhangar's growing literacy, deviation from their traditional occupations and adoptions of the dresses and customs of the higher castes, show that the process of 'Sanskritization' is active in Pattankodoli and Ghunaki village.

In this way at present the Mendhe Dhangars are coming closer and closer to the people of the higher castes. If we go today to an educated Mendhe Dhangar's house we would be surprised to see their standard of living. Their houses are well decorated, neat and clean. During my investigation, I met a family at village Pattankodoli, whose members were educated and the Head of the family was the Police Inspector. The members of the family are well educated and their life was very peaceful and without any care.

Although, the Mendhe Dhangars are still engaged in their traditional occupations yet some of them have developed their traditional occupations on modern lines. Now

a days, some Mendhe Dhangar's standard of living has also developed. Mr. Bhagawanrao Shelke, L.R. Hajare (Primary Teacher) are of the well known leaders among the Mendhe Dhangars in the political field in Kolhapur District. Mr. Bhagwanrao Shelke is well educated and has been appointed as a organiser, Kolhapur District Dhangar Samajonnatti Mandal, and he is elected, as a President of Karveer Taluka Khadi Gramodhyog Sangh, and is also appointed as a member of some co-operative societies and Banks. He is a heart of the Mendhe Dhangars in Kolhapur District. He solves any problem of the Mendhe Dhangars of Kolhapur District applying his head and heart.