

Religion of the 'Gond' Tribes of Middle India

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Introduction

India has the largest tribal population compared to any other country in the world. There are 688 scheduled tribes in India and among them 'nine major tribal groups constitute about half of the central, western, and eastern parts of India. Among these nine the 'Gonds' form a major tribal group. They are concentrated in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattishgarh, Maharashtra, Telangana, Orissa and Jharkhand states of India. According to the 2011 census, they account for 109 million and represent 8.6 percent of country's total population. An attempt has been made in this paper to highlight the religion of the 'Gond' tribes of middle India. The study is based on actual field visits and material collected from archives. Most of the arguments are based on oral traditions, myths, legends and folklores that are still preserved by the 'Gond' community.

Every society has religious beliefs, rites and organization. Religion very often influences one's understanding of everyday life. In many societies, religion affects the way one relates to each other. Religious beliefs often guide our social interaction. Religion can be a unifying factor in some societies. The 'Gond' tribes in middle India invariably had oral religion. That was, the theory and beliefs about religion were not written in any language. The beliefs were transmitted by word of mouth and were passed on as tradition from one generation to another generation. They are still reflected through the myths and legends popular among them. In 'Gond' society religion was an integral part of the total ongoing way of life. The attitude of the primitive's mind was very different from that of the civilized man. The natural world they lived in was itself a quite another aspect to them. All its objects and all its entities were involved in a system of mystic participation and exclusions; it was these, which constitute its cohesion and its order.¹ In general terms, the word religion is understood as a set of institutionalized beliefs and practices that deal with the ultimate meaning of life. Religion, like the essence of culture, provides a blue print for the behaviour of the individual member of society on the basis of principles sustained by divine, supernatural or transcendent order of morality. Religion is something that human beings follow as members of social groups and therefore the study of religion invariably leads to the study of people and culture.

The Nomenclature 'Gond'

The word, "scheduled tribes" is a constitutional identity for all the tribes in India. The 'Gonds' are one of them. The 'Gond' is used as singular and 'Gonds' is the plural term which

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represents the whole community. The origin of the word is hazy, but Indian historians seem to agree that it was used by the Hindus or Mohammedan traders in around 11th or 12th centuries.² It is pertinent to see that they do not call themselves 'Gond'; they called and still call themselves 'Koi' or 'Koithur' (plu. Koitur).³ The word 'Koitur' means 'man' or just 'warrior', and was perhaps associated with the Aryan word 'Kshatriya'.⁴ According to 'Gondi' scholar, Dr. M. Kangali, the word 'Gond' does have a very specific and definite meaning. In 'Gondi' language '*Gondola*' means 'community', and the people living in these communities came to be called 'Gonds'. The 'Gond' tribes inhabited a vast region in middle India. During the many centuries of history, they had occupied several areas which became their tribal habitat. The territory occupied by the 'Gonds' was named as 'Gondwana'. 'Gondwana' is not merely an ancient name; this region has drawn the attention of geographers and explorers in more recent times too. A theory was propounded in 1885 by an Australian scientist, Edward Suess, that "Antarctica, Australia, India, South Africa and South America once formed a single continental land mass which is now called Gondwanaland or the Gondwana region of India". It is stated that "Possibly in early Mesozoic times, about 200 million years ago, Gondwanaland presumably broke into separate continents which drifted apart like giant terrestrial iceberg on the plaster mantle of earth."⁵

The original groups constituting the 'Gonds' may have existed as small clans in isolated forests and hilly regions as gatherers, fishermen and hunters. Due to the absence of roads and communication, the earliest migrations must have taken place due to compelling reasons of survival in times of disease, calamity, war, food-shortage and a search for females. Thus the 'Gonds' in different parts of the entire land began to call themselves by different names. They were 'Raj-Gonds', 'Khatola-Gonds', 'Madia Gonds', 'Dhur Gonds', 'Dadve Gonds', 'Mokasi Gonds', 'Gaita Gonds', and 'Koyas' etc. Amongst these the 'Raj Gonds' were rulers in medieval period. The four major 'Gond' kingdoms which ruled over Madhya Pradesh were i.e. Garha Mandla (1300 AD. to 1789AD), Deogarh (1590 AD to 1796AD), Chanda (1200 AD to 1751 AD) and Kherla (1500 AD to 1600 AD). The Garha-Mandla Kingdom in the north extended control over present Chhattisgarh & Madhya Pradesh. The Deogarh-Nagpur kingdom dominated over Nagpur plains. While Chanda-Sirpur covered parts of old Chandrapur & Bhandara. Kherla lies in Satpura terrains. They maintained a relatively independent existence until the middle of the eighteenth century.

Origin of 'Gond' Religion

The 'Gonds' were not included in Hindu religion by Hindus as they were very much different to the Hindu people and were different to the untouchables of Hindu society. Hindu religion did not consider them untouchable; neither had they been marginalized in any other religion.⁶ The background of 'Gond' religion might have existed in the early religious life of the 'Gonds'. The 'Gonds' are primarily animistic. Animism is centred on the belief that non-human entities possess some kind of life-principle.

¹ John R. Swanton, Three Factors in Primitive Religion, in the Journal of American Anthropologist, New series, Vol.26, No.3, (Jul.-Sep., 1924), p. 359. ² www.thestudy.net/all access on 10.11.2208 ³ Irawati Karve, 'The cultural process in India', Man, Vol.51, (Oct., 1951), p. 232 ⁴ L. Srivastav and Stefano Caldirola, The Tribes of Narmada Valley, Shree Publishers, (New Delhi), 2005, p. 59 ⁵ Anuradha Pal, The Gonds: Genesis, History & Culture, National Book Trust India, 2013, p.viii ⁶ Govind Gare, Adivasi Prashna, (Marathi), Gramvikas Prakashan, Pune, p.2.

Durkheim in his elementary forms of religious life traces the beginnings of religion to man's emotional response to nature. What was the 'Gond' response to nature? In their perception, both the static and living dimension of nature had their respective place of significance.⁷ There was a common myth accustomed to and famous among all the 'Gonds' of middle India. It was said that before man inhabits the world, all the space in the sky, all hills, plains, the rivers and the oceans were inhabited by the Gods. It was also believed that *Bhagwan* (God) created the Gods and that the deities never left the spots assigned to them. They used to perform their ancient functions. There were several field and hill spirits. However, with the advent of man on the earth, the Gods became invisible and hid themselves in their assigned places. It was only when they were offended or invoked that they manifested themselves in some form or other. Why the gods disappeared or became invisible, when man came, no legend had been revealed so far.⁸

The Legend of Pahandi Pari Kupa Lingo

Several thousand years ago, during the reign of Sambhu-Gaura, a son was born to a 'Gond' kingdom's chief, Pulsheev. The son was called Rupolang Pahandi Pari Kupa Lingo. He became the leader of the Koya race, and served for the welfare of the 'Gondi' community, established the code of conduct the 'Gondi Punem', which teaches the lifestyle values that are followed by the 'Gonds' to this day. In fact, the traces of the code of conduct can be found through their religious stories, legends, myths, songs and dances i.e. the oral tradition in its various forms of dissemination. It is said that Lingo had great intellectual powers, that he was a prodigy and a versatile genius. His 'Gondi Punem,' with its rules and philosophy and social organization structure of a people giving them a code on which was based their lifestyle, not being documented in writing, tends to get subdued by other overwhelming social influences of other civilizations. However, their ancient social and religious values of a traditional value-system of a high order are still intact. According to the 'Gonds', Lingo's thirty three disciples travelled to distant lands of the '*koyamooree*' land disseminating and preaching the teachings of their mentor, Pari Kupa Lingo. It is said that Pari Kupa Lingo founded the '*Koya-Punem*' ('Gond' religion) thousands of years ago. He framed that religion with an aim to develop full humanity in the human society during ancient days. Lingo's philosophy behind the framework of this religion was that nature was created from zero and gave human beings the power of brain and perseverance to move ahead in the life on the earth with the truth of nature. He gave the message of racemic science and humanity to the society and framed '*koya-punem*' into a natural, truth seeking and intellectual religion. It was only after Lingo that the other major religions followed, like Aryan-vedic Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism etc.⁹

The Teachings of the Gondi Punem

In the 'Gondi' language, the Philosophy of non-Violence is called '*Munjok*' philosophy. To understand 'Gondi' philosophy of non-violence, it is necessary to understand the action-

⁷ Ajit Kumar, The Clan-Caste Gond society and its Religion: Past and Present, *Sandhan*, Journal of centre for studies in civilizations, Vol. XI, No.1, January-June 2011, p. 20

⁸ Durga Bhagvat, Tribal Gods and Festivals in Central India, in the journal of A. F. S., Vol.27, No.2, (1968), pp. 30

⁹ Anuradha Pal, The Gonds: Genesis, History & Culture, National Book Trust India, 2013, p.5

reaction of nature's forces and its influence on the physical world, creation in nature, its actual state etc. The character of nature is that it is dynamic, which at times advances and at other time regresses, sometimes it is conducive, sometimes non-conducive to man, and this is an on-going cycle. Creation takes places in the course of the good, and destruction and ruin in the course of the bad. This is the result of the action- reaction of 'Salla' (-) – 'Gangra' (+) action reaction forces. In this dynamic situation, human beings, in order to retain their identity, have to adapt to nature's environment in an organized way because, despite their intellectual abilities, they cannot fight the forces of nature or maintain cordiality with it.¹⁰ Man has to remain as a team, leading an organized community life where he has to maintain love, friendship, cooperation and coexistence, while keeping away from injustice, exploitation, violence, quarrels, arguments, strife and fights. This is the supreme duty of the intelligent being.

Lingo realized that the root causes of misery were man's bad words, bad thought, bad sight, bad actions, bad deeds, self-interest, selfishness, illusion and ill feelings towards others. Due to these reasons, arguments, fights and violence made the lives of man unhappy. To convert these to a happy life he had to live in an organized 'Phratral' society. That meant every organism had to depend on the other for proper integration and adjustment with nature. In this sense, where each was dependent on the other, Lingo opined, there was nothing wrong in consuming the flesh of another being. Based on nature's law, therefore, such killing could not be regarded as a sin. It could not be regarded as violence if any living organism that could not adjust with nature and retain its identity, was killed. On the other hand, it was fitting to serve such living beings that adjusted well to natural laws. On one hand, while one should not harm other living beings, there was no need to save such living beings that were capable of harming the values of the 'Phratral' community. On the other hand, those who were useful to the 'Phratry's' well-being were to be preserved. Lingo allowed for violence if it was necessary and beneficial to the 'Phratral' society. Similarly, enemies out to harm the 'Phratry'" were to be penalized with capital punishment, and those who were inclined to sacrifice their lives for the 'Phratral' society were to be protected.¹¹ In short, Lingo's philosophy was that peaceful people should not be hurt or harmed and harmful beings must not be protected. Lingo's philosophy of non-violence was based on the natural laws where consuming flesh was not taboo, because one organism was dependent on another. This was to be practiced keeping in mind not to consume the flesh of the animal or bird representing one's own clan totem but the animal or bird of another's clan totem. This, in fact, retained the balance in nature and one's own identity remained intact. Just as natural law is not violent or non-violent, so is the 'Munjok' theory of Lingo. Although 'Punem's' philosophy is not documented in any written script, it is prevalent in the conduct and lifestyle of the 'Gonds'. Some scholars believed that un-deciphered script of Indus civilization might belong to the 'Gonds', which could reveal the truth.

Nature of the 'Gond' Gods

Animism was most commonly used to characterize 'Gond' religion. Broadly the term signifies the attribution of a broad spectrum of natural phenomena like earthquakes, rain, fire, the wide variety of life to mention just a few, to the activities and machinations of intelligent,

¹⁰ Anuradha Pal, op. cit. p.59

¹¹ Ibid

personal, superhuman powers, the 'spirits'. The manifestation of the spirits as visible and familiar objects to that 'Gond' community would mean that the plant and animal kingdom, stones, mountains, astronomical phenomena – all assume religious significance and were worshipped. These were also termed 'fetish objects'.

In the 'Gond' cosmology, these fetish objects normally inhabit the spiritual world inhabiting a lower order in the cosmic hierarchy. But it was these that command the awe and fear of the local community. The entire religious life of the 'Gonds' was born out of their belief in a certain un-understandable, supernatural, impersonal and non-material power which took abode in all the objects (natural phenomena) that exist in the world. It lies more or less beyond the reach of the senses. It may differ in intensity, the degree in which it was present in a person or an object, but in essence it was always the same. In the animistic religion of the 'Gonds', the dead were believed to be greatly interested in the affairs of the living. There was a keen desire to maintain contact and to solicit the presence of the dead to minimize the difficulties of the living, and to help to bring rain and aid the crops to thrive. Thus, the 'Gonds' believe in life after death.

The 'Gonds' felt and contended that the deities were beings of divine dignity. No idol or temple was well defined for them, however the rudiments of idolatry in the worship of unworked stones and also rudiments of the concept of the temple in the institution of the sacred grave.¹² There was however, no erection of a sacred shrine inside a house for the deity among the 'Gond' tribes. The general belief among them was that they were higher in honour than the human beings and hence they should not be housed in human homes at the same or lower level of their worshipping men and women. They, therefore, install them in shrines i.e. deities on the trees or separate houses for gods. Thus the trees whereon deities reside were considered sacred and were also worshipped as the sacred shrines.¹³ In the mind of the 'Gond' people, the world consists not only of human beings, animals and the tangible and visible objects of nature, but also of a multitude of beings that were not normally visible, though on occasion 'Baiga' or 'Bhumka' or 'Perma' could see and hear them in trance and in dreams and their impact on human life was felt in a number of different ways. The 'Gonds' consider them as part, and indeed a vital part of nature.¹⁴ 'Gond' thinks that the same sphere in which they move, which was the orbit of men and that invisible world, was an extension of the visible world.

'Gonds' were conceived of powerful beings. Hymns were chanted in praise of the deities to invoke and invite them at the shrine for worship. During the worship, animal sacrifice and liquor were essential part of the rituals, and magic and witchcraft predominate.¹⁵ There was no concept of 'heaven' or 'hell' or of rewards or punishments for moral or immoral acts. The soul was called to join the ancestral spirits in the sacred domestic spirit only in case of an unnatural death, who could turn into an evil spirit.¹⁶ The basic concept was by no means incompatible with a wide range of emotional attitude evinced in the cult of different deities and in the distinction

¹² Surjeet Sinha, The tribal cultures of peninsular India as a dimension of little tradition in the study of Indian civilization, in the journal of American Folklore, Vol.71, No.281, July-sept.,1958, p. 512

¹³ S. R. Murkute Socio-Cultural Study of Scheduled Tribes, (New Delhi: 1990), p. 120

¹⁴ C.Von-Furer Haimendorf, The Gonds of Andhra Pradesh, 1979, p. 426

¹⁵ Ibid; also in S. R. Murkute, op. cit., p. 122

¹⁶ Surjeet Sinha, Tribal culture of peninsular India....., op.cit., p. 512

between those gods who were invariably benevolent and those whose evil designs must be brought off by heavy sacrifices. For approaches to gods and spirits, 'Gonds' do not always rely on ritual experts and many of the times a householder himself addresses directly a deity whose favours he hopes to win. But there were other occasions when a ritual has to be performed by a sacerdotal functionary specially endowed with the knowledge and power to establish with invisible divine beings. The three functionaries most prominent in 'Gond' ritual were the village-priest ('Baiga') the clan priest ('Bhumka') and the 'Patel', headmen of village ('Kaser-Gaita')

\Various Gond Gods

One of the gods is Bhagvan (the Creator). The 'Gonds' believed in a supreme being. They used to say '*pen*', (Singular) or '*pennoo*' (plural) to refer to the god they worship.¹⁷ The 'Gonds' also believed that this god was eternal, all-knowing, all-present, and the lord and maker of the world and of man. He imposed certain sanctions for the observance or breach of the moral code. He was the ultimate master over life and death. 'Bara-Pen' (the Great God) or 'Budhal-pen' is another most important of all 'Gond' Gods. The 'Gond' pantheon was extremely varied and elastic. Budhal-Pen was the only god who was respected and propitiated by the 'Gonds' of all parts of Madhya Pradesh.¹⁸ Bura-Pen had always been regarded as the chief deity of the 'Gonds'.¹⁹ However, Bhudal-Pen was the supreme deity though Mahadeo, another very important deity who was regarded with great respect, had almost eclipsed Budhal-Pen. Mahadeo was known in all 'Gond villages'. The god also had a respectable position in the myth of the Lingo, another religious symbol of their 'Gonds', captured in oral narratives of the 'Gonds' of Madhya Pradesh.

Dulha-Pen (bridegroom-god) or the bridegroom-god was one of the most cherished deities of the hearth, among the 'Gonds' of Madhya Pradesh. He was also supposed to be a marriage godling,²⁰ which presides not only over the wedding but also over the marriage bed, its happiness and its fertility.²¹ The worship of Dulha Pen was widely spread among the 'Gonds'. He was represented by a stone, or a man riding on a horse, as well as battle-axe.²² Gansam was a popular village god, who protects the village from the tiger. He was either represented by a stone on the village boundary or by a platform and a pole.²³ The image of tiger was often seen on the outskirts of a village. He was propitiated once a year regularly when the autumnal harvest festival took place. He was offered only a fowl by the village Baiga. Special worship was also offered to the god when the village fowls, pigs, cattle etc. were stolen by the tiger or many men were killed by the beast.²⁴ Hardul (God of Wedding) was one of the defiled hero who was worshipped widely in Madhya Pradesh as a village god. Hardul was worshipped in the Vindhyan districts of Sagar and Damoh, the Narmada and Tapti valleys' the Chhindwara

¹⁷ T.H. Holdich, The Mardian Hills and the Lower Indravati in the Buster dependency, in the Proceedings of the Royal Geographical society, New Monthly Series, Vol. I, No.6, (June 1879), P. 379

¹⁸ Durga Bhagvat, Tribal Gods and Festivals...., A. F. S., Vol. 27, No.1, (1968), pp. 36-37

¹⁹ Verrier Elwin, The Baiga, O.U.P., 1939, p. 56

²⁰ Durga Bhagvat, Tribal Gods and Festivals in Central India, (1968), pp .47

²¹ Verrier Elwin, The Muria and their Ghotul, (reprint) 1991, p. 183

²² Hislop, Papers, Appendix II

²³ V, Elwin, The Baiga, p. 59

²⁴ W. Crooke, Folklore in Northern India, II pp. 34-35

²⁵ Durga Bhagvat, Folktales of Central India' in Asian folklore Studies, Vol.31, No.2 (1972), p. 15; Hivale and Elwin, Songs of the forest, (London : 1935), pp. 232-4

plateau, Chhattishgarh and slightly in Bastar.

Bhivsen or Bhimal was the most popular god among the 'Gonds' of Madhya Pradesh. He was an embodiment of strength, and he was associated mainly with rocks, mountains and rivers. Several rocks were pointed out as the loads Bhivsen used to carry. Many hills were again pointed out as relics of Bhivsen.²⁵ Nat Awal or Dharti Mata (Fertility Goddess) was loved as well as worshipped by 'Gonds.' The earth or 'Bhum' was the ultimate source of life and power that manifests her in all the other deities.

Men were the children of earth, fed and loved by her. She was also called as *Nat Auwal* (the village mother). Mother Goddess must be worshipped whenever the village community as a whole embarks on any ritual activity; be it one of the seasonal rites and festivals or a sacrificial rite aimed at averting any impending disaster.²⁶ Apart from these, there are other minor gods i.e. Thakur Deo (Male Guardian deity of village) Hulera-Pen (protector of the cattle); Matiya Pen (devil or whirlwind); Narayan Pen (Sun god); Kodapen (Horse god); Maswasi Pen (hunting god); Kanya (Watery Spirits) etc.

Assessment

The 'Gonds' of the Madhya Pradesh had a religion of their own, which was practiced widely in the central part of India. It was still known to them as *Koya Punem* in 'Gondi.' However, with the changing time and intervention by various intruders, its originality was corrupted. The 'Gond' tribes were driven away by intruders from their original places and were forced to remain aloof from rest of the world. Thus their religion was not recognized even today as a distinct identity, instead it is considered as savage by many. The religious ideas of the 'Gonds' were no less influential than any other religion of the world. Hence, its existence and presence should be recognized to interpret the cosmic world of 'Gonds' and to understand the ethnic development of the 'Gonds' as a race. As Debarshi Dasgupta reported, the 'Gonds' of middle India are the only tribes in India who worshipped Ravana of Ramayana as a totemic figure from ancient times. The 'Gonds' have found in Ramayana's 'demon king, Ravana their patron saint. Temples to Ravana are now being billed as centres of pilgrimage for 'Gonds.' Some of them even call themselves 'Ravanvanshis' and venerate their patriarch despite opposition from right wing Hindu organizations.²⁷ According to Hindu beliefs, Ravan is synonymous with evil. Each year, a ten headed effigy of the King of Lanka is symbolically slain on Dussehra (in October) but not in the 'Gond' villages of middle India. Here, Ravan is not the villain. He is venerated as a god, the 'dharmaguru' of the tribe. According to the 'Gond' version, Ravan was a 'Gond' king who was slain by Aryan invaders. He was the tenth 'dharmaguru' of the tribe, carrying the legacy of Kupa Lingo, the supreme deity and heroic ancestor of 'Gonds,' who gave them their phratry structures and lifestyle values.²⁸

²⁶ Christoph, Furer-Haimendorf, The Gonds of Andhra Pradesh, p. 432

²⁷ Debarshi Dasgupta, 'The Gonds' Outlook Volume LIV, No.33 August 25, 2014, pp.88 to89.

²⁸ The Hindu, Sunday Magazine, Weekly Edition 2, Sunday, October 25, 2015, p.1-2

²⁹ Ajit Kumar, The Clan-Caste Gond society and its Religion: Past and Present, *Sandhan*, Journal of centre for studies in civilizations, Vol. XI, No.1, January-June 2011

'Gonds', who believe in animism, consider Lingo and Ravan to be naturally just and environment friendly deities. In fact, their narration of Ravan's story turns upside down the one in the Ramayan. This includes a contention over the geographical location of Lanka, which 'Gonds' believe is Madhya Pradesh's Amarkantak Mountain of middle India. Lanka does not refer to Sri Lanka but means a 'hilly place' in Gondi. According to the 'Gondi' legend, in ancient times, when a great devastation occurred in the Koyamooree land (the land of the children of the womb of 'Gando' mother), a mountain peak named Amoorkot (Amarkantak) was the only land that jutted out from amid the entire mass of water all around. Subsequent to the great depression, the only survivors were the couple Salla (the male) and Gagra (the female) who were responsible for the original creation of life and subsequent continuance of the world. Various noted scholars in the last century, including H.D. Sankalia, have argued in favour of this theory. Today, Ravan Mahotsavs are held in Maharashtra's Gondia, Chandrapur, Bhandara, Gadchiroli and Amravati districts. A lot is being said about Ravan. Brahmins claim he was one of them. But no Brahmin ever says that he is a Ravanvanshi. Only the 'Gonds' are proud to say that they are Ravanvanshis. Yes of course, one could find the influence of Hinduism or the other religions on 'Gondi' people also. But as per Dr. Ajit Kumar, it was the impact of *Sanskritization*, *Hinduization*, *Kshatriyaization* and *Rajputization*, which are some of the terms used to describe the complex social processes that led the tribal people into the Hindu society.²⁹

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