

Rajas, Adibasis and their Goddess(es) Dasara Rituals and a Sacrificial Polity in a Former Feudatory State in Odisha

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Abstract

The article considers not only the frequently postulated link between king and goddess in India, but also the crucial alliance between Raja and Adibasis in a former princely state in north-western Odisha. The two elements together form a pivotal triangle in a wider sacrificial polity, i.e., the link between the latter is renewed and mediated through the goddess. The process is exemplified by the Dasara rituals and it is argued that these links continue despite the formal abolition of kingship. Historically, however, Dasara rituals have undergone several changes, which have left their mark on the performances. The recent industrialization in the area and its socio-economic impact are arguably driving the latest changes in this configuration.

Keywords

Adivasi, Odisha, Dasara, kingship, industrialization, India

Introduction

In India a crucial link has frequently been drawn between king (*raja*) and goddess (*devi*, Odia: *debi*). As C. J. Fuller (1992: 108) has argued, the Dasara ritual for the Goddess Durga might be considered “the most prominent ritual of kingship across India”. There are also other central and ritually marked alliances between kings and ethnically distinct communities, such as for early medieval Saurashtran states, but also for Rajasthan or Garhwal (Tambis-Lyche 1997: 39), which do not have dominant Rajput clans. Focusing on Odisha, Hermann Kulke (2001) and Burkhard Schnepel (1995, 2002) not only emphasized that tutelary deities are often linked to the Goddess Durga, they also

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included indigenous people or Adivasis (Odia: *adibasi*) as another important element in this configuration by arguing that, over the centuries, rulers of so-called “little kingdoms” have, to a greater or lesser extent, patronized and appropriated “tribal” deities as well in order to legitimize their rule.

Introducing Dasara rituals in Bonai (a former princely state, now a sub-district in north-western Odisha), this article contributes to this literature on the axis between king, goddess and Adibasi in both synchronic anthropological and diachronic historical perspectives. Bonai rituals exemplify this triangle through the visits of a goddess of the Paudi Bhuiyan, an influential Adibasi community, to the king. The practice of handing their goddess over to the king, together with the narratives in the royal chronicles, may offer evidence of a partial, but at best imperfectly achieved royal appropriation. More importantly perhaps, they may also be interpreted as the expression of a crucial alliance even extending to an element of mutual care and a fairly balanced relationship with the Bhuiyan community. The latter, which is believed to be autochthonous in the area, is powerful and represents authority over the soil (Skoda 2012).

This fundamental link between the Raja and the Adibasi community is constructed, renewed and maintained, as well as broadly mediated, through the goddess, but it needs to be situated historically. It is part of a wider ritual configuration that may best be described as a “sacrificial polity”, to borrow R. W. Nicholas’ term (2013: 6). Referring to Durga Puja in rural Bengal, Nicholas characterized it as a “social order of caste-based dominance and subordination” (ibid: 3), that was under the control of “rural magnates” (*zamindars, rajas*), who commanded certain executive (armed forces or revenue collectors) and judiciary powers (“courts”). Looking back at the old order in rural Bengal in the 1970s, he noted:

Durga Puja aligns the symbols of legitimacy with its substance. The goddess possesses weapons and uses them to destroy those who upend the proper order of heavens. Durga Puja, with a role for dependents and graded responsibilities for various castes, physically assembles the *prajas* in ranked roles (Nicholas 2013: 176).

Similarly, Dasara in Bonai used to integrate castes, as in Nicholas’ case, and to a much lesser extent still does, but historically it also incorporates relatively more autonomous Adibasi communities, especially (Paudi) Bhuiyans, in a relatively powerful and elevated position. While the sacrificial polity revolves broadly, but not exclusively, around the worship of the *debi*, empirically one finds a multitude of goddesses and an/iconic images, e.g. swords, loosely associated with Goddess Durga, who represents rather a polythetic type of ambivalent Mother Goddess that appears to have interacted with, historically

been expanded into and simultaneously been shaped by Adibasi goddesses (Eschmann 1994; Mallebrein 2004).

Almost 70 years after the formal abolition of kingship, Raja and Adibasi communities actually share, and continue to share, this ritual framework with Dasara as a primary occasion. However, Dasara rituals have clearly undergone considerable change, with royal pomp increasingly disappearing. Instead, the worship of the Paudi Bhuiyan goddess Kant Debi arguably increasingly forms what is perhaps the most popular part of contemporary celebrations in Bonai. While there have been various ups and downs in Dasara rituals, it seems that Raja and Adibasis are equally interested in maintaining this special tie, even more so in view of the on-going industrialization and mining boom that threatens the habitat of the Paudi Bhuiyans.

Bonai Raj as a former “jungle kingdom”

Whoever visits the former kingdom of Bonai and its capital Bonaigarh can hardly fail to notice roads and highways often jammed with trucks and dumpers (over-)loaded with ore, vehicles for which these roads were not originally constructed. Though it has been known for a long time that the area close to the borders of Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh is rich in minerals – iron ore has been supplied to the Rourkela Steel Plant for decades –, only in the wake of the most recent industrialization has the valley been dotted with sponge iron factories. In contrast to these new chimneys, one may easily pass by and overlook the former fort (*garh*) and the palace located slightly away from the busy main road, with a court, high school, bus stand and market.

The picture was very different when Colonel Dalton visited Bonai in 1863–64 and found “a small hilly district lying very snugly isolated from all civilization [...] for the most part a mass of uninhabited hills” and with a fort which “has the river on three sides, and is surrounded by a mud wall and moat, within which are about 150 houses including those of the chief, his court-house, and jail” (Dalton 1865: 1–2). Being located in a relatively inaccessible and remote part of Odisha and populated predominantly by Adibasis in the sparsely populated, but not uninhabited hills, Bonai may be characterized as a “jungle kingdom” (Schnepel 2002) with a pivotal Raja-Adibasi alliance.

Internally, the Raja still recognizes the high status of the Bhuiyan chief (Saont) and does not contest the Bhuiyan claim to indigeneity, which is also confirmed in royal chronicles produced in the early twentieth century (Pramanik / Skoda 2013). This claim is not only marked by the name *bhuiyan*, literally meaning “earth people”, but the Bhuiyans are also characterized in

the chronicles as the supreme (*sresta*) group among the Adibasis, their chief being described as *matishwar* or “Lord of the Soil”, who literally hands the soil to the Raja during the latter’s investiture, when the Raja sits on the Saont’s lap.

Goddesses in and around the fort

Before turning to the goddess Kant Debi and the Dasara ritual itself, a few words must be said about the various other goddesses present during the ceremonies in and around the fort. Locals distinguish between *shanti* and *chandi* goddesses, i.e., between relatively peaceful goddesses like Lakshmi on the one hand and rather fierce, potentially destructive, benevolent as well as malevolent mother goddesses on the other, in accordance with the following widespread classification of goddesses, whereby these distinctions are indicative rather than clear-cut (Biardieu 1989: 140; Michaels 1998: 247):

Sri / Lakshmi	Durga
wife	virgin / unmarried / childless
prosperity	warrior
pure	impure
pacified	violent
passive	active
mild	wild
vegetarian	non-vegetarian / blood sacrifices

Goddesses worshipped by Raja, Paudi Bhuiyan, etc. around Dasara all belong to this second category, and one encounters them, for example, surrounding the fort, guarding it in all directions. During Dasara only Ma Kumari, as tutelary goddess, plays a major role: she is described in the royal chronicles as the goddess of the fort (*garh debi*) and as linked to the state’s well-being (she is particularly worshipped during droughts and for protection against contagious diseases like smallpox). In her temple just outside the fort (*bahari garh*) she appears as a hardly recognizable stone idol – according to local beliefs, she became disfigured after devouring a human being. As elsewhere in eastern India, Durga is associated with the tutelary deity (*ishta debi*) of the Raja and vice versa. This link is particularly stressed in a prayer (*janan*) in the royal chronicles (Pramanik / Skoda 2013: 38) dedicated to her in which she is addressed as “mother”, “Mahisamardini” (demon-slaying goddess), “caretaker of the whole world” and “caretaker of the fort” (both a universal

and a very specific context of protection) or as “tutelary deity of Bonai” and “Durga of the forest” (linking the royal family to the wilderness).

Inside the fort, goddesses in anthropomorphic form are of secondary importance, while Durga, as in other regions in Odisha (Schnepel 2002; Mallebrein 2004), is worshipped primarily in the form of swords (particularly Patkhanda as a main sword), expressing a sacrificial polity not only during Dasara. Her manifestations include not only swords, as she also appears as Naba Durga, represented by a bracelet (Nabadurga Kankana; see below) or several metal bracelets, and also in form of small metal figures depicting the goddess with eight arms. However, the Raja receives Ma Kumari’s blessings in the form of another sword known as the Kumari Prasad. While the Kumari Prasad was used by the Raja for everyday representational needs, the Patkhanda figured even more prominently during Dasara, being publicly displayed during the procession to the Dasara field. While it remains unclear how the Raja received Kumari Prasad from the tutelary goddess, it is believed that the Patkhanda had been brought from Rajputana and used to kill the autochthonous chiefs (except the Bhuiyan chief, who became an ally), which enabled the Raja to conquer the new realm. The empowerment of the Raja is literally re-enacted during Dasara, when he symbolically re-conquers his realm, a theme that used to be highlighted during the Dasara procession at the time of the princely state, while at the same time Durga’s victory over the demon could be alluded to.

Yet, there is still another sword known as Mohana Khanda which is kept inside the palace premises, while the other two used to be kept in the armoury (*khanda ghar*; nowadays they are kept in the Jagannath temple). It is believed that Mohana Khanda was taken from a tribal chief while he was conquering the realm. The motif of “capturing” a potent idol is fairly widespread in Odisha (see e.g. Schnepel 2002: 259). Mohana Khanda, too, is considered a form of Durga, but she is even less visible than the Patkhanda. On one occasion alone is the public given *darshan* (sight) of her, namely at the investiture of a new Raja.

In relation to Dasara in Bastar, Alfred Gell (1997: 442) once argued that there is certain contradiction in the rituals depicting the goddess as both foreign and local, as well as the Raja as both mediator with the outside world and “vehicle of the goddess”. The assemblage of potent swords and their specific usage in rituals in Bonai expresses both notions simultaneously. Moreover, the goddess may also, as Biardieu (1989: 132) has pointed out, combine her role as the “protectress of a site” located on the boundaries of a marked territory to fend off the enemy, like the tutelary deity at the outer fort, with her role as the “protectress of a family” situated inside the palace

just like Mohana Khanda, which, unlike Kant Debi, represents not an alliance, but rather conquest.

Referring specifically to the swords, but not to them exclusively, in conversations the royal priest (*rajpurohit*) emphasized that the Goddess Durga has a permanent seat inside the fort, something that in his view (and not only his) distinguished the fort rituals from those recent “upstarts” in the market area, who were promoting the worship of Durga in her Bengali form. Moreover, he linked the *pitha* inside the fort to many other religious centres and a greater tradition by referring to the locally well-known mythological story of Sati or more generally the Goddess (*debi*). Wherever her body parts fell upon the earth a *pitha* came up (e.g. Kinsley 1987: 186), stressing the localization of the goddess and her literal “grounding” (on territoriality, see also Galey 1990).

Kant Debi (Kant Kumari) as visiting goddess

The aspects of the earth and of territorial anchoring are also stressed in relation to the Goddess Kant Debi, also referred to as Kant Kumari or Kant Mahapru, who stands out during the Dasara rituals as the only visiting goddess not firmly located in Bonaigarh. Appearing in the form of a small metallic snake with a cobra-like hood, she is carried by Paudi Bhuiyans to the fort. She, too, is considered by many to be a form of Durga and a sister of Ma Kumari. This sisterhood may hint at a possible, yet incomplete appropriation of the goddess, because, unlike the other tutelary deities (Kulke 2001), she has not moved to the court, but rather has a sister there. The special link to the goddess is explained in her legend in the royal chronicles. Accordingly, the goddess is believed to have come from outside, i.e., the neighbouring kingdom of Keonjhar. She is linked to the tutelary *devata* in the form of *salagram* stones representing Vishnu, and to Durga as a bracelet and other holy items – all obtained after killing a Babaji who did not want to offer them to the Raja voluntarily – as well as to hills (close to Keonjhar) where she and the Bhuiyan reside, and to the Pano community, which plays a marginal role in her rituals. The mythical story states:

After a few years the place where the Babaji was killed was turned into agricultural land and belonged to a person of Pana caste. One day when that Pana was ploughing the land, he could feel that an iron thing struck against his plough. He put it aside and continued ploughing. [...] Finally he could see that it was something like the iron part (*sama*) of a husking pedal (*dhinki*). He thought of taking it home to use it in his husking pedal (Pramanik / Skoda 2013: 39ff).

The story brings up the peculiar “quaint shape” (Roy 1935: 105) of the goddess, basically “a roundish fragment of some old metal object” (ibid.), and continues that a visiting money lender (Mahajan) recognizes the value of the piece, but finally

The Pana [...] dreamed that he should give the *sama* to the King, otherwise his clan will be wiped out. That night the King also dreamed that whatever he sees in the morning, he should worship it. That night a Bhuiyan of Jala also dreamed that he should go to the King early in the morning and bring the *sama* from the Rajbati. [...] The Bhuiyan kept it in Jala. After some days again the King dreamed that it (the *sama*) will be worshipped as Kanta Debi. From that day onwards Kanta Debi is visible on the day of *pratipada* [indicating the time around Dasara, US] (Roy 1935: 105).

The narrative includes very obvious hints of fertility with the reference to ploughing as well as the *dhenki* (grinder), both indicating sexual intercourse, and to wealth through the harvest as well as the moneylender, but perhaps most important in the latter part is the divine intervention through dreams that resolves the various interests (moneylender, Pano, Bhuiyan and Raja). The order of the actions also seems to be important, i.e., the goddess is first brought to the Raja and afterwards to the Bhuiyan, contesting a Paudi Bhuiyan view that the goddess is their mother. In the chronicles she is presented as an allochthonous goddess. In similar cases of other goddesses – e.g. in Hermann Kulke’s (2001: 117–8) developmental scheme of divinities in the former Garhjat states – her presence, according to the royal family chronicles (*rajbansaboli*), seems to have been revealed in an early period after the conquest of the realm. No specific Raja is mentioned, and the time appears to be rather mythical. However, in contrast to other states that Kulke analyzed, the goddess did not become the tutelary goddess of the Raja, but rather the Raja’s “personal deity” – as the late Rajasahib K.K.C. Deo argued – in contrast to Ma Kumari as the Raja’s “chief goddess”. The latter preferred to stay in the hills, i.e., on the fringes or borders of the kingdom with the Paudi Bhuiyans, again indicating the ambivalent tie created between Raja and Paudi Bhuiyans through the goddess.

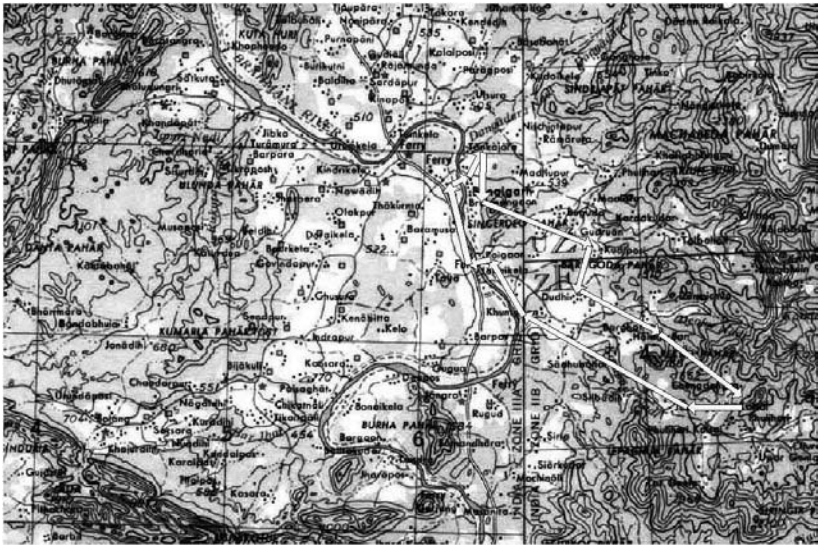
Dasara in Bonai: a sacrificial polity after merger

This account starts with a synchronic and morphological perspective on the rituals, abstracted from observations over several years, but referring in particular to 2007. Similar to Durga Puja as performed in Bengal, Dasara in Bonaigarh starts on the sixth day, Sashti, but ends at the following full moon, Kumar Puni, during the light fortnight of the month of Asvina. It links god-

dess, former ruler and former subjects offering their services in a sacrificial polity. Thanks to the Raja, who meticulously listed all expenditures, we also have a clear picture of his budget for Dasara and the way he distributes money and sacrificial meat on this occasion.

For example, he pays *dasturi*, considered a customary payment or remuneration for a customary service rendered, to the central protagonists involved in the performance of Dasara, including 1) the brahmanical Raj-purohit, 2) the Paudi Bhuiyan ritual specialist in charge of Kant Debi known as *dehuri*, and 3) the non-brahmanical priest, but also the person in charge of cleaning the swords, the potter and various other communities, some of whom, such as *parida*, were formerly in charge of producing alcohol for the Goddess Kant Kumari, but no longer perform that duty.

MAP 1: Route of Kant Debi during Dasara in Bonai



From an Adibasi perspective, the most important part of Dasara is related to Kant Debi. Accordingly the Kant Dehuri plays a major role in the rituals until the goddess is handed over to the Raja (later she is returned to their charge). On Astami, the Raja (or his representative) and Paudi Bhuiyan meet in a village about two kilometres south of the fort to receive the Goddess Kant Kumari, a ritual known as Kant Beth or “meeting the Goddess Kant”.

Already on the second day of the fortnight or Dwitya, a group of Paudi Bhuiyan starts a procession from her abode in the hills, moving in the course of a fortnight clockwise from the hills to the plains and back again. The route, including overnight stays in the houses of various headmen (*naik*) and a Jagirdar of the Gond community (see Roy 1935: 107), and thus involving other Adibasi and non-Adibasi communities, is outlined by the Raja and his lawyer on paper and carried by the Dehuri (Map 1). The sequence largely corresponds to the royal chronicles outlining a royal perspective on the meeting:

Before that the Bhuiyan comes and takes a handful of flowers offered to the deity on the day of new moon. Then the goddess comes along with her seat through [the prescribed villages to] [...] a place named Kantajodi [where] a ritual on a special platform is done for Kanta Debi. Then the Raja Saheb goes with his watchmen drumming the *dhhol* and playing the *muhuri* to bring Kanta Debi. The Bhuiyan leaves Kanta Debi thinking that the King is coming to kill him. Then Raja asks his followers to search for the Bhuiyan to call him back, but he does not come. Then Raja does not wait for him, but takes Kumari Debi and hands her over to his priest (Pujari) named as Amat. This is called *kanta bhet*. After finishing the Debi Puja at 12 midnight she meets Kumari Debi and stays with her like a sister in the armoury (*khanda ghar*) in a bowl filled with blood (*rakta handi*). (Pramanik / Skoda 2013: 40–1)

While the chronicles seem to assert the Raja's power vis-à-vis the Bhuiyan, and interestingly change the name of the goddess from Kanta Debi to Kumari Debi in the text after handing her over, in 2007 the Raja's grandson (deputed by the Raja) actually had to wait quite some time for the Paudi Bhuiyan in order to receive the goddess. The Raja was furious and later scolded them in my presence. Such things, so is the impression conveyed, would not have happened earlier and may indicate the growing popularity of the goddess' procession, but also the changing relationship between Raja and Paudi Bhuiyan, i.e., their awareness of their bargaining power.

Unlike the chronicles, on meeting the Raja on the eighth day, the Paudi Bhuiyan, and particularly the Dehuri, inquire about the well-being of the Raja (and Rani) and his kingdom. The Raja answers positively, and only afterwards is the goddess handed over to him, who in turn offers a new silver umbrella, which is attached to her idol (*murti*). The dialogue between the young grandson and the equally young Paudi Dehuri (Figure 1) seems to be a shortened version of what Roy (1935: 109–110) described for the pre-merger period, namely:

The Dihuri of Jolo comes up to the Raja with the image, salutes him, and enquires of him about the health and welfare, first of himself, then of his Rani, then of his children, then of his servants, then of his elephants, then of his horses, and last of all about the welfare of the land (Prithvi or

Earth). The Raja answers “yes” to every question; and then in his turn, the Raja asks the Dihuri about the welfare of himself and his children and then of the Pauris generally; and to every question the Dihuri replies in the affirmative.

FIGURE 1: Raja’s grandson receiving goddess Kant Debi from Paudi Bhuiyan Dehuri, Bonai 2007



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In this form, the dialogue seems even more balanced and expressive of mutual care, though the Raja took precedence, as underlined in Roy’s account by the following sequence: “While the Dihuri hands over the image to the Raja, he addresses the Raja, saying – ‘Here is your deity (Deota); we kept it in the hills. Examine and see if the image is broken or intact’” (ibid.: 110), which was then confirmed by the Raja. No matter whether in the pre-merger or the contemporary situation, on receiving the goddess from the Bhuiyans, the Raja passes her on to the Amat or non-brahmanical priest. Belonging to the Sud community, he is in charge of Kant Kumari in Bonaigarh, but also of Ma Kumari, and his family presumably took over this duty from Bhuiyan generations ago (Roy 1935: 117). He worships her on a specially erected platform and sacrifices two *bukas* tied together. They should be beheaded by the Barik or “sacrificer” in charge of the animal sacrifices, who these days belongs to the Keunt community (previously performed by a Bhuiyan).

Receiving *dasturi* for this duty, he should execute it in one stroke, before the Raja returns to the palace. Having handed over the goddess to the Amat, the Kant Dehuri and his men stay in Bonaigarh, but have no further ritual duties until the tenth day or Vijaydossomi (the “victorious tenth day”), when the goddess is returned to their care after the Mandal Puja (platform rituals) in the fort, particularly the outer fort, are over and the Goddess Kant Kumari bids farewell to Bonaigarh, leaving from the northern side of the fort. In fact, it is stressed that she should move only in one direction and should never return the same way. However, before the Paudi Bhuiyan crosses the river to return to the hills – the goddess is supposed to reach her abode on the day of the next full moon – a special cake (*chakuli*) made of bitter neem leaves should be offered by the Patro, a low-status, “untouchable” community whose title is linked to the Pano community, which is considered to have a special link to the goddess, as outlined in the chronicles. This expresses the bitterness of farewell.

Apart from Kant Dehuri and Amat, the third major role is played by the Brahmin Rajpurohit, who actually receives the largest amount (Rs. 150 in 2007) as *dasturi*, though he considers the payment as *dakhina* and not *dasturi*, as noted in the Raja’s records. His ritual services are particularly required from the seventh day, Saptami, up to Vijaydossomi, when he takes care of various rituals such as Sandhi Puja, performed exactly between Astami and Nabarmi, the eighth and ninth days, and possibly formerly linked to human sacrifices. The time must be determined by a Brahmin or astrologer and was fixed for 2 a.m. in 2007. Like the Mohana Khanda Puja, it should be performed secretly, i.e., out of the public eye. Here the Rajpurohit worshipped Nabadurga in a smaller room next to the main durbar hall, because, he argued, only Nabadurga is worshipped, and the other gods and goddesses present should not see it.

The Rajpurohit is solely in charge not only of the anthropomorphic idols of Durga and the worship of the mythical *kankana*, but also of the Mohana Khanda sword kept inside the palace. Simultaneously with the Kant Beth, the Rajpurohit should also perform the Mohana Khanda Puja, which takes place at night inside the palace (though it was delayed in 2007). Here, the Rajpurohit worships the Mohana Khanda and a *buka* is sacrificed, which is cooked immediately after the *puja* on the palace premises and distributed among and consumed exclusively by the male relatives of the Raja (*biradri*), though the meat should not be taken into the house. The *biradri*’s entitlement to this meat stands in contrast to other ritual sacrifices (Khanda Puja and Khanda Basaa), when the Raja distributes the meat at will.

The Rajpurohit not only performs the Mohana Khanda Puja but also – together with the Raja – the so-called Mohana Khanda Birsarjan, literally

the “immersion of Mohana Khanda”, but in practice the sprinkling of water over the sword on the afternoon of Vijaydossomi after Kant Debi has left and after the Rajpurohit has performed a *homa*. Around sunset this is followed by the Dasara Puja celebrated on the veranda of the former palace. Here the Patkhanda is brought from the Jagannath temple, and the Raja (or his deputy), being almost alone with the Purohit, is asked to hold the sword in order to perform *buliba* by moving it in all directions, before the Patkhanda returns to the temple, followed by a Somnath Puja to worship Shiv in his form of Somnath so as to purify the house. Thus, the Rajpurohit is involved in the handling of the main sword or Patkhanda, but he shares this responsibility with the Amat/non-brahmanical priest and the Kathi who cleans the swords.

In fact, the Amat not only receives *dasturi*, but is involved in the Dasara rituals right from the start, i.e., from the Bel Barni Puja or “*bel* invitation”, sometimes also referred to as Sashti Puja, and performed around sunset on the sixth day. It is considered the point of commencement. A branch of the tree, which is believed to be auspicious, is worshipped in the presence of a member of the royal family and a few other interested men. This is seen as an invitation to the goddess, and the branch is subsequently carried to the *khanda ghar*, where most rituals take place.

Moreover, on the seventh day, when a seat is built for the goddess in the form of swords (*khanda basaa*), and on the eighth day, when the Khanda Puja (“sword ritual”) is performed in the evening – called Durga Astami by the Rajpurohit – it is the Amat who worships the Patkhanda and Kumari Prasad together, though in the same room as the Rajpurohit worshipping Nabadurga in form of the bracelet. Performed after sunset, the Amat brings the two swords from the Jagannath temple to the durbar hall (formerly to the armoury) in order to install them together with the *bel* branch facing eastwards. The Amat worships them as well as local deities. At the end of the rituals, the first he-goat (*buka*) is sacrificed for Patkhanda (on the seventh day), while one is sacrificed for Nabadurga on Astami (largely a repetition of the evening before). As the Amat and others argued, buffalos used to be sacrificed on these occasions, and there are hints – at least symbolically – of human sacrifices as well, but neither seems to have been performed in recent decades.

On the ninth day, the procession of the Goddess Kant Kumari through Bonaigarh, which began with the Kant Beth, continues under the guidance of the Amat. The goddess moves along the fixed route from the village south of the fort to the older market area (*patna*) west of the fort and from there to the outer, northern part of the fort (*bahari garh*), where she meets her sister, Ma Kumari. The Amat, being also generally in charge of the routine worship of Ma Kumari in her temple, arranges this as a private meeting. Even the

Amat leaves the temple for a while in order to let the sisters do their “talking”, as he explained, undisturbed. In 2007, the practice differed from the royal chronicles, which state: “After finishing the Debi Puja at 12 midnight she meets Kumari Debi and stays with her like a sister in the armoury in a bowl filled with blood (*rakta handi*).” In this version Kant Debi and Ma Kumari appear even closer, but the closeness might be linked to the strategic interest in appropriating the goddess.

However, in contemporary Bonaigarh the *rakta handi* is only remembered in the rituals on the ninth day, when the Goddess proceeds towards the palace and is worshipped throughout this day on certain platforms (*mandal*) erected for her along her way. This part was also simply known as Mandal Puja, and the public flock to the platforms to have *darsan* of the goddess and to offer sacrifices. Reaching the palace, the Amat performs the Digi Puja (“ritual of direction”) just outside the old main entrance (*singha dwar*) of the palace. According to the Amat, the goddess blessed the four directions using a similar symbolism as in the Dasara ritual. Subsequently, the goddess was brought to the durbar hall (as *khanda ghar*), where she was placed in a rice pot (*handi*) filled with rice (*chaul*) set right between the two swords already installed there. It is widely believed that this pot used to be filled with blood (*rakta*) in former times and it is therefore called *rakta handi* (“blood rice pot”). Once the goddess has arrived, the Raja takes *darsan* first of Kant Kumari and Patkhanda/Kumari Prasad, and then of Durga/Nabadurga, in private. Afterwards, the swords are brought back to the Jagannath temple by the Amat, followed by the Rajpurohit carrying Nabadurga as a bracelet. In another small procession, the Raja himself (or his son) carries the goddess Kant Kumari into the interior of the palace, where she is worshipped at an altar (*bedi*) by the Amat. He places the goddess in another pot filled with *mahuli* wine, which is distributed as *bad bhog* (“grand offering”) among the public that has gathered for the occasion around the *bedi*, while another *buka* is sacrificed for Kant Debi. From the palace the goddess moves to the Brahmin quarter (*brahmin sahi*) within the fort and is finally handed over to the Paudi Bhuiyan in a small ritual close to the former house of the Amat in the presence of a relative (*babu*) of the Raja. The place next to the river is identical with the spot where the Bel Barni was performed.

Although less important than the Kant Dehuri, Amat and Rajpurohit, nevertheless Kathi, Kumber and Behera have more specific roles and can equally be considered recipients of *dasturi* in exchange for their services. For example, on the seventh and eighth days the royal swords are washed, sharpened and finally wrapped in a new white cloth by the Khati of the Maharona community, who also performs a more minor ritual in worship of the swords. This part, called Khanda Dhua (“sword washing”), takes place

within the compound of the Lord Jagannath temple (outside the palace for Patkhanda and Kumari Prasad) and is repeated on the eighth day for Mohana Khanda inside the palace. The Behera, who belong to the Hansi community, also known as weavers, prepares an umbrella (*suti chhattar*) presented to Ma Kumari on Kumar Purnima. Though his remuneration was not listed as *dasturi*, the Raja called it *dasturi* during conversations and explained that it would be handed over prior to the full moon. Moreover, the Kumbar and potters receive a relatively large amount in return for providing all the pots required. As the Raja further explained, the link to the family who received land in order to provide pots for the rituals has been broken, and all the pots are actually purchased in the market.

Without going into the details of the items used for particular rituals, such as coconuts, vermilion, etc., it is significant that the Raja's largest expense is for seven sacrificial goats, which accounted for almost half of his budget, whereas rather nominal amounts are spent on *dasturi*. In some cases, the gifts or amounts the Raja offers during *darsan*, listed as *darsani* on the occasions of Kant Beth, Khanda Ghar, Kumar Purnima or Dasara Puja, would be received by the respective ritual specialists. In addition to these specific payments, some of them were also entitled to the bodies of sacrificial animals. Thus, out of the seven he-goats offered to the goddess(es), two he-goats sacrificed during the Kant Beth rituals customarily go to Amat and Kant Dehuri, while the Rajpurohit receives the *buka* sacrificed during the Mandal Puja inside the palace premises; another, sacrificed for Mohana Khanda, is prepared jointly by the Biradri, the male members of the royal family (clan). The last *buka* is offered at full moon, known as Kumar Purnima, which marks the end of the Dasara rituals. On this day Kumari Puja is performed, and the Raja moves in a procession from the palace to the temple of his tutelary deity, where he offers the first *buka*, followed by others (the public) who wish to do the same.

Changing fort rituals, declining palace rituals, and the increasingly popular worship of Kant Debi

The royal chronicles written before the merger also describe other elements not performed today:

[...] arms and ammunitions are worshipped at the *khanda ghar* and the Brahmins are given food (*bhojana*). When Kanta Debi is taken to the opposite side of the river, Dasahara Parba is observed. Then the groups (*dala*) of Saanta, Dandapata and Mohapatra come to the Rajbati. [...] The Raja goes to the Dasahara Parba with silver sedan (*tamajan*) and sword at the hand. Beside Raja, Tikayat, Patayat, Rajkumar and Kumar go sitting

on the elephant with silver palanquin (*palanki*). British police also escort them in front and behind the Raja's group and all go for Dasahara Parba. At the Dasahara field wrestling, *kasrat* (exercise) and archery play is observed among the different groups of soldiers. And at the end Raja distributes the prizes. While returning from the Dasahara field the Raja is given a welcome with dance and song and is worshipped (*bandapana*) with incense at every square. Returning to the Rajbati all the soldiers from different places are given a big feast (*bhoji*). (Pramanik / Skoda 2013: 42)

This brief overview indicates a range of elements, such as the procession to the Dasara field, which were no longer performed by 2007, but were depicted in photographs taken in 1935–36 and vividly remembered by older locals. Showing the king in state, the photos may also serve as a reference point for a diachronic comparison. Apart from a number of photos, including of the Diwan and virtually all important state officials, some photos show the Raja with Adibasis. For example, in a central photograph the Raja is holding the goddess Kant Kumari, surrounded by Rajpurohit, Amat, relatives, Paudi Bhuiyan and others, at the moment of handing over the goddess (Figure 2), a scene not very different from the situation in 2007 (Figure 1).

On another picture one sees a group of Adibasi, presumably Paudi Bhuiyan, as the late Rajasahib of Bonai explained, while yet another image shows the Raja being carried on a lion-headed silver palanquin to the Dasara field in a ceremonial procession surrounded by Paiks (peasant-warriors) holding bows and arrows as well as symbols of royalty such as the umbrella (*chhattar*) or emblems (*bairakh*). Before coming out of the palace, Paiks, who mainly belong to the Bhuiyan, Gond and other Adibasi communities, and police constables – described as “British” in the chronicles – had gathered in front of the *singha dwar*, the former displaying their fighting skills. Elephants waited to carry the relatives of the Raja, Bhuiyan Zamindar and Gond Jagirdars in the procession. Another photo highlights the Raja sitting on his special seat next to the Ma Kumari temple, in front of his subjects, and waiting for the final ritual on the day of the full moon.

Observing fort rituals in 2007, and keeping the splendour of the 1930s photographs in mind, one cannot fail to notice a decline that corresponds to local impressions of decay, in which enchanting pomp is much reduced. There is a widespread feeling of a general retrogression, a sense, for example, that standards are no longer being maintained. A case in point was the final day of the Dasara celebrations in Bonai. The crowd gathered at the Kumari Temple, the site of the final rituals, which the participants did not consider very impressive, arguing instead that in earlier days many more devotees and spectators had turned up there. Moreover, as an advisor to the Raja told me, in the old days people feared the goddess and therefore would not commit any crimes. Lamenting a bygone era, of course, fits well with ideas

of a dark age (*kali yug*), which is sometimes even mentioned directly. And indeed, in many cases expenditure on rituals has been cut to a bare minimum and even beyond. For example, the *khanda ghar*, the armoury, collapsed a

FIGURE 2: Raja holding Goddess Kant Kumari



- 1) Raja, 2) Rajpurohit, 3) Babu/Raja's relative, 4) Barik, 5) Amat, 6) son of Amat, 7) Kant Dehuri, 8) relatives and servants

collapsed a few years ago, so the rituals had to be shifted to the former *sabha ghar* or durbar hall. And even there the roof is damaged and one room used for the rituals has completely blackened walls because burglars lit a fire in it a while ago. The *murti* of Nabadurga, which is worshipped in this room, is kept on a half-broken wooden *gaddi* (throne). But more importantly perhaps the Mohana Khanda Puja, the ritual for the most powerful and secret sword, was not performed simultaneously as prescribed by custom due to the absence of the Rajpurohit, who eventually performed it later. In earlier times, however, the Raja engaged two Rajpurohitis to avoid any disruption because of such unforeseen events, whereas nowadays only one priest is responsible for the performance. Given the fact that certain ritual sequences have been tightened, reduced or abolished altogether, observers and actors sometimes refer to the present-day arrangements simply as a “short-cut *puja*”. The worship of the swords is either postponed or celebrated in a very private atmosphere, such

as during the Dasara ritual; compared to the Dasara procession with a public display of Patkhanda, this indicates a disintegration of the sacrificial polity.

Another clear indicator of further and steady reductions of ritual splendour and royal largesse in more recent times is the number of sacrificial animals offered during Dasara. As the late Raja recollected, when his father was ruler he used to give 66 *bukas* (uncastrated he-goats), not to mention buffalos or rams; he had “cut it all down” to eight in 2006 and to seven in 2007. Similarly, all the musical performances – the playing of drums for the first eight days of the first half of the month, followed by the playing of other instruments for another eight days – have been discontinued. The most radical change probably concerns the discontinuation of the procession to the Dasara field, which, according to most people, ceased in the 1960s, i.e., presumably prior to the abolition of the privy purses under Indira Gandhi in the early 1970s. In fact, the Dasara field itself has disappeared under new buildings for the court association on the very same ground.

However, the deviations of 2007 should not lead one to the conclusion that pre-merger rituals were performed in a completely satisfactory manner or that accelerated change is a post-merger phenomenon. In fact, one might rather expect certain shortcomings and fluctuations in terms of splendour, depending on the financial situation, or perhaps the presence of a photographer as in the 1930s. There are, for example, hints in a report of 1948 mentioning considerable changes in the expenditure just around the merger. Thus, the Administrator of Bonai wrote to the Additional Secretary to Government, Cuttack, on 20 September 1948¹:

Prior to the merger in the year 1947 the Ruler drew a sum of Rs. 3,000/- for all his religious ceremonies and festivals for that year. Before that the annual grant from the State for Desehra [*sic*] was Rs. 26/- only as sanctioned by the Political Agent from year to year. This amount was being drawn by the Ruler. All the celebrations were done inside the Rajbati. It thus appears that the Desehra was being celebrated by the Ruler in his private capacity.

If the report is correct, the budget for ritual activities was considerably inflated from Rs.26 to Rs.3,000 in 1947, the Raja using his new, but short-lived financial freedom from paramountcy. As the report also suggests, the amount was considerably reduced to Rs.1,000 a year later. This amount, the newly appointed Administrator argued, should be spent on the Bhuiyan durbar on Dasara, but not on the ritual activities. Thus, he hints at another ritual element during Dasara, a ritual of loyalty neither included in the photographs, nor existing today.

¹ Reply (No. 10226) by Administrator of Bonai to Additional Secretary to Government, Home Department, States Section, Cuttack on 20 September 1948.

In 2007 the Raja, according to his own calculations, spent around Rs.6,000 on palace rituals – half of the money for the *bukas*. Thus, compared to the more lavishly funded Durga Puja in town, or the merger period, he organized his own rituals on a shoestring budget. However, abolishing rituals or ritual elements might not only be a response to the abolition of the privy purses. The Raja and other people involved were well aware of the current debates on animal sacrifices, the agitations of NGOs in this field and newly introduced laws, all of which may lead to further alterations in future. Thus, a comparison between the situation in the 1930s and the present-day celebrations on Dasara brings significant changes to the fore:

TABLE 1: Ritual elements of Dasara in 1930s and today

Situation in 1930s	Present situation
worship of Kant Kumari / Paudi Bhuiyans coming to the fort	vibrant, perhaps even more popular nowadays, but royal gifts reduced
Nabadurga Puja / Sandhi Puja	performed with reductions
tradition of Ankulia & Baktria / symbolic human sacrifices	completely abolished
procession to the Dasara field / public competitions at the field	completely abolished
Bhuiyan Durbar ²	completely abolished
Kant Purnima Puja / rituals for the tutelary deity after Dasara	performed, but gifts reduced

Even more than 60 years after the state merger, however, the alliance between Raja and Paudi Bhuiyan continues, though it is also potentially threatened by mining activities in the area, particularly the proposed POSCO mine at the top of the Khandadhar waterfall, often highlighted as a place of scenic beauty and a tourist destination. The POSCO project led to massive resistance, for example, in August 2007 (before Dasara):

[...] the Khandadhara Suraksh Samiti (KSS) had demonstrated one massive rally at Bonairgarh region followed by a thousand of tribal peoples who had promised by taking water in their hands not to allow POSCO to lift

² The Raja remembers that for a few years after he had succeeded his father six to seven *sardar* (headmen) still attended the celebrations, offering gifts and receiving turbans.

the iron ore from the Bonaigarh region where in, it is, [*sic*] understood to have a deposit of 600 million metric ton of iron ore spread over a land of about 62 square km. Fifteen days thereafter the tribal people gheroad/ cordoned one of the officers of POSCO at Bonai Sub Collector office who had came [*sic*] to the area for their survey and other government sanctions. The tribal people literally take that official's consent who had promised not to come to the area for their project work. (Expressindia 2007)

During this protest, a memorandum was submitted to the Governor of Odisha through the Sub-Collector at Bonaigarh, listing the protestors' fears and grievances, especially the risk of the waterfall drying up completely and causing ecological damage, but also highlighting the religious significance of the area with reference to Mother Sita as a pan-Indian deity believed to have passed through the area when she was kidnapped by Ravana, and to Mata Kanteswari Devi (Kant Debi) having her abode near the waterfall. This point was poignantly summarized in an NGO report based on discussions with villagers in the surrounding area:

The forest and stream of Khandadhar has an immense religious and cultural significance for people of Bonai and adjoining area. The Khandadhar Hills are the abode of "Maa Kanteswari Devi", the chariest goddess of local people and deity of Paudi Bhuyans. There is one temple of "Maa Kanteswari Devi" in the form of a cave near Bahagura stream [...] There is a belief that she comes out from this cave on invitation of Bonaigarh's King in the month of Dushera to give blessing to its worshippers and fulfils the cherished desire of the people. There is a strong feeling among the local people that any destruction to her temple or the habitat of wild animals and home land of Paudi Bhuyans would create catastrophe in the region. (Final Report 2008: 149)

The fear that a new POSCO mine would either extinguish or deal a severe blow to the Paudi Bhuiyan community, their habitat and goddess seems to have reinvigorated the link between Paudi Bhuiyan and Raja, the former turning to the latter for support. Subsequently, the Raja, who used to stress how his father prevented the Birla company from mining in 1947, though he could not prevent it after independence, participated in the demonstration mentioned above. While newspapers stressed the participation of the local MP Juel Oram (now again Union Cabinet Minister for Tribal Affairs) – himself from Bonai – the list of signatures indicates the esteemed position of the Raja by including him as the first signatory, before the MP and followed by the Raja's son. The foregrounding here of the religious dimension, similar to other resistance movements as in the Niyamgiri Hills, also implicitly highlights Dasara and the Raja's role, though the outcome of the protest remains to be seen, and other players, such as politicians, are, no doubt, of increasing importance.

Conclusion

The Dasara rituals in Bonai show an enduring ritual triangle consisting of the Raja, the Adibasi and the goddess(es), though the rituals have undergone considerable changes over the last century and also involve other actors (Brahmins, other castes, etc). On the one hand, pomp on the Raja's side has been increasingly abandoned or discontinued in the former princely state since the merger, rituals have been shortened, expenditure reduced, and the sacrificial polity in general is slowly disintegrating. On the other hand, various goddesses associated with the Goddess Durga, particularly in the form of swords, are still worshipped in both the palace and the fort. Among these goddesses and all the royal elements, the goddess Kant Kumari, linked to Paudi Bhuiyans and the Raja, appears to be even more popular nowadays whenever she visits the lowlands during Dasara. Rajas in Bonai continue to patronize the goddess and may have tried to appropriate her earlier. The rituals, such as handing over the goddess to the Raja, the relationship of sister of the Raja's tutelary deity and the royal chronicles can be interpreted in this way, but this appropriation was achieved imperfectly at best. Dasara rituals also express a fairly balanced alliance, perhaps even a relationship of mutual care, between the Raja and a relatively autonomous Adibasi community established through the goddess. Thus the alliance seems to have been reinforced or revitalized through mining in the area and its consequent threats to the Paudi Bhuiyan, who have turned to the Raja for support.

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