



Devatva And Life: A Critical View On Spirituality In Rituals In Bihar

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ABSTRACT

The idea of divine permeates the *yog* of all existence. It holds a prominent position in the Indian *lok Parampara*. This paper explores the conception of the divine in the rituals of marriage ceremonies in Bihar. This work is an attempt to understand the significance of the rituals and how *devatva* present in the rituals shapes the common spiritual, cultural, and social identity of the people. By employing ethnographic research methods, it tries to document the rituals in different areas of Bihar. This paper also attempts to document the variations in the ritualistic practices with time and in different areas within the state. This paper critically analyses the concept of *devatva* in these ritualistic practices and how it shapes the common consciousness of the people of Bihar.

Key Words: *devatva*, *lok*, *lok Parampara*, rituals, *sanjha parati*, and *geet*

Introduction

Divine is an extension of the collective personality of a community or a group. In other words, divine is an embodiment of the lived experiences and aspirations of people which finds representation in abstract as well as definite forms. This idea of divine is its own logic and such representations are suggestive of the highest consciousness which is also known as *Parmatma*, *Ishwar*, or *Devta*. It is considered sacred and beyond the ordinary while its presence can be felt in the mundane everyday life. The basic idea of divine finds various forms and variations across cultures, belief systems, and philosophical traditions. The idea of divine is associated with the qualities of being all-powerful and all-pervasive. It is a guiding light for humankind which offers protection and salvation - it is to be worshiped. This paper explores how the deities affect the socio-cultural and spiritual aspects of marriage ceremonies. This is an attempt to analyze and document the rituals of inviting the divine (*devta and pitra*) for the wedding ceremony through local *geet* (folk songs). This paper also attempts to explore how the practice of these rituals has changed over time and regional variations in the ritualistic practices within the same state. It attempts to understand the idea of divine within the socio-cultural framework of Bihar in the context of specific marriage rituals.

Divine in the Indian tradition of thoughts

With reference to the Indian Philosophical tradition divine can be explored in the context of *Atman* and *Brahman*. In this context, *Atman* is the individual soul. It is beyond the mortal body and mind. It is beyond the cycle of life and death. It is limitless and immortal. Sri Krishna in the second chapter of *Bhagwat Geeta* differentiates between the human body and *Atman*. He states the immortality of *Atman* and uses the metaphor of changing clothes on the human body to explain the relationship between the body and *atman*. “य एनं वेत्ति हन्तारं यश्चैनं मन्यते हतम् | उभौ तौ न विजानीतो नायं हन्ति न हन्यते ||” (2.19) This verse translates as “The soul is neither the destroyer nor it can be destroyed. The ones who think otherwise do not possess right knowledge”. The process of realizing one's *atman* paves the way for salvation. *Brahman* is the ultimate source of energy. It is

the supreme consciousness. *Brahman* can be understood as the absolute truth and source of all knowledge. It is the ultimate infinite reality. *Atman* is considered to be a part of the *Brahman* or the ultimate reality which is transient. The convergence of *Atman* and *Brahman* is the ultimate goal of salvation.

The philosophy of *Advait Vedant* (non-dualism) believes in the *yog* of existence. The *Chandogya Upanishad* states “*Tat Tvam Asi*” (That Thou Art). According to this philosophy *Atman* and *Brahman* are one and *Brahman* is the ultimate and the only infinite reality. The idea of *Atman* and *Brahman* being different arises from the lack of knowledge. The whole world is an illusion (*Maya*) and not real and it is due to *avidya* that one is unable to see beyond this illusion and have the knowledge of *Brahman* and know that the world is an unreal manifestation of *Brahman*. This ignorance of experiencing dualism causes suffering whereas the path of true knowledge leads to *Ananda* (liberation). The path to salvation is knowledge of the self – bereft of this illusionary world. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* states “*Aham Brahmasmi*” (I am *Brahman*) and *Mandukya Upanishad* states “*Ayam Atma Brahma*” (This self is *Brahman*). It is this knowledge that is the ultimate truth and it is the way to liberation from suffering which is the cycle of birth and death. This philosophy propagates the practice of self-inquiry through contemplation (*atma-vichara*), meditation, and *yoga samadhi*. It supports the instrumental role of *Bhakti* (devotion) and *dharma* (moral and ethical living) in the spiritual journey.

The philosophy of *Dvait Vedant* (dualism) believes in the existence of two distinct realities. *Madhvacharya* who was also called by the name *Anandatirtha* was the prominent propounder of this philosophy. *Dvait Vedant* posits the existence of two parallel realities one being independent; the supreme God *Vishnu* (*parmatma*) who created the universe and the humans being dependent on *Vishnu*. According to this philosophy, *Atma* (individual soul) is distinct from *Parmatma* (Supreme God) even though it is the *Parmatma* who is the creator of *Atma* (individual soul). *Madhvacharya* rejected the idea of absolute and unchanging knowledge. He propagated the idea of knowledge being relative. According to him the transient nature of the universe does not make it unreal (*Maya*) rather it is as real as the supreme God. Professor B. N. K. Sharma in his book *Philosophy of Sri Madhvacharya* writes “*Madhva* advocates a realistic epistemology wherein the external world and its objects are considered real and knowable through the *pramanas* (means of knowledge) such as perception, inference, and scriptural testimony” (Sharma, 89). *Dvaita Vedanta* introduces a hierarchical relationship between God and individual souls. *Jivas* are reflections or shadows of the divine but never attain an identical status, even in liberation (*moksha*). Each *jiva* possesses qualities such as truth, consciousness, and bliss in varying degrees, influenced by *karma*. With this understanding of the divine this paper attempts to analyze the significance and symbolic representation of *devatva* in the rituals of Bihar.¹

Divine in art and life

The idea of divine is fundamental to the understanding of the mysteries of the universe. It forms the base of human existence and the living experience. India’s rich religious and cultural heritage is intertwined with the idea of divine and its manifestations. The idea of divine finds its expression in art, literature, rituals, and philosophical discourses. Knowledge of the divine in the Indian tradition is associated with the path of salvation and the state of *ananda* (bliss). Indian philosophy (*Darshanas*) and mythology (*Puranas*) provide a canvas for the imagination and representation of the divine. Glimpses of the divine can be found in sculptures, paintings, temple architecture, daily sacred rituals, rituals of marriage, birth and death, music, dance, etc.

In the third *khand* of *Vishnu Dharmottara* King *Vajra* poses a fundamental question to *Markandeya Rishi*. He asks: -

What should a man do? By doing what a man can be happy? By what (means) one can get great happiness in this world and in the other world?

Markandeya answered The wise man desirous of happiness in both worlds should worship *Devta* and know *Antae-Vedi* and *Bahir-Vedi* rites (*Devata-Pujanam*). The deity worship in sacrifices is known as *Antar-Vedi*, similarly fasting (*Upavasa*), vows (*Vrata*) etc are called *Bahir Vedi*.

If one desires all the heavens attainable by Vedic acts (*ista*) and charitable deeds (*Apurta*) one should build temples of Gods. Both (*Ista* and *Apurta*) are seen here. (Shah,03)

In the Indian tradition, *Ananda* (bliss) is associated with the worship of the divine. In the second *adhyaya*, King *Vajra* goes on to ask about sculpting the form of deities to which *Markandeya Rishi* answers that one cannot learn sculpting without knowing the art of painting and one cannot know the canon of painting without knowing the canon of dance. King *Vajra* further asks about the canon of dance to which *Rishi* answers that to know dance one needs to have knowledge regarding instrumental music and to understand that one needs to know vocal music. To fully understand music, one needs to know the language as well and this goes on. Thus, *Markandeya Rishi* successfully throws light on the interdependence of art. One form of art is dependent on the other and art and literature go hand in hand. The idea of divine is an important aspect of each of these forms of expression. *Carolyn Brown Heinz* in her essay *Documenting the Image in Mithila Art* says that Ultimately it is the Gods who are first imagined, then portrayed, and finally mirrored, over and over again, in medium after medium, by faithful worshippers, by producers of cultural knowledge about Gods and worshippers, by craftsmen seeking income from patrons of cultural knowledge, by art worlds making arts out of craftsmen seeking income, and so forth in infinite regress. (Heinz,01)

Divine in Lok

The idea of divine being an important aspect is not just limited to the canonical works of classical art and literature; its presence can be felt in daily living experiences as well. This idea is expressed through oral traditions, myths, folk paintings, songs, dances, beliefs, and so on. This idea becomes more relatable and accessible in *lok*. *Lok* with its divine elements is ever evolving and in congruence with the changing socio-political and cultural scenarios while keeping the traditional ethos intact. It is this adaptive nature of *lok* that proves its relevance and keeps resonating with contemporary times. *Lok* affects and is affected by the common conscience and collective memories of a society. The idea of *dharma* (ethical code of conduct and moral living) is central to the *lok parampara* in the Indian context where the divine elements provide spiritual guidance and outline a way of life that is guided by virtues. The narratives in *lok* are layered and provide space for multiple interpretations depending on the context in which it is placed. The nuances of the narratives are symbolic of the deep philosophical groundings of the society.

The artistic expressions in *lok* are bearers of cultural heritage, rich history, and social identity. Having a formulated understanding of one's *lok* becomes a medium of education in all its facets like the spiritual aspect, socio-cultural aspect, and political aspect. *Lok parampara* entails narratives and different forms of expressions that deal with societal norms, communal responsibilities, historical events, heroic figures, important places, nuances of local language and speech patterns, the importance of relationships and familial bonds, agricultural practices, religious beliefs etc. A person who is well versed with their *lok* is an educated person with reference to the specific culture.

Markandeya Rishi in Vishnu Dharmottara gives away the secret of being in the state of eternal *ananda*. According to him, one must indulge in *devata pujanam* (worship) which involves all aspects of art. In *Bhagwat Geeta*, chapter 12, verse 7 the importance of worship (in any form) is illustrated. It is said that one who is constantly devoted and worships God with love attains true knowledge which leads to eternal salvation. It is through worship that one attempts to obtain knowledge of the divine and one's own soul. It is one of the paths to understand the purpose of one's existence and the mysteries of the universe. It gives hope to humankind while acknowledging the existence of the supreme power. It gives strength and courage to the human race. The practice of worshipping the divine involves a detailed scheme of artistic expressions involving music, dance, paintings, sculpting, architecture, etc. These artistic forms are integral to the traditions and rituals of celebration, mourning, and daily life routine. These artistic traditions are an essential part of *lok*. The symbols and customs followed by the ancestors and elderly become a matter of faith for the younger generation. The expressions of the divine in different mediums and forms are part of the living experience and hence are an indispensable part of daily life. The practice of worshipping the divine in any form is part of the daily life of common people.

Lok and the idea of Shakti (mother divine)

Shakti, the divine feminine power holds an important place in the Indian *lok parampara*. *Shakti*, representing the divine force or the energy that is responsible for the existence of the universe is worshiped in many forms in the state of Biharⁱⁱ. *Shakti* is personified through *Kul Devi*, *Gram Devi*, female ancestors, *Sitla Mata*, etc who are all forms of *Bhagwati*. Ancestors who have completed their life cycle and have left for their heavenly abode are believed to have joined the divine community (*devtagan*). The ancestors who have become part of the community of *devta* are responsible for the health and prosperity of their *kul*. They remain an active part of the family (*Kul*) from the other world of deities. Deities like *Lord Shiva*, *Ganesh*, *Goddess Parvati*, *Shitla Mata*, etc are also considered part of the family in *lok parampara*. These deities are more accessible and relatable in *lok parampara*. The importance of one's own ancestors is no less, if not more than the other deities, in *lok parampara*. It is the ancestors (*Pitra*), who are invited and worshiped on all occasions of celebration and mourning before any other deity. This paper explores the idea of divine in the *lok parampara* of Bihar; pertaining to the artistic expressions of marriage rituals.

Divine and ritualistic practices

The role of divine forms the foundation of the rituals of the wedding ceremony. One of the rituals of the wedding ceremony is giving invitation of the wedding to the *devta* including the *pitra* (ancestors). The tradition of inviting the *devta* to bless the wedding ceremony is age-old. Historically the invitation with details of the ceremony was sung for a specific number of days. Later the details were written and presented to the *devta*. Betel leaves and betelnut is offered with a written invitation. The tradition of singing *devta ke Geet* (Folk songs for *devta*) is a live tradition. The songs are sung in the early hours of dawn. These songs are neither documented nor sung in any other instance. In some parts of Bihar (Saran, Madhubani, and Darbhanga) these songs are now being documented for personal use. The credit for documentation of these songs in the region where the Maithili language is used is given to Vidyapati. Vidyapati has documented songs for all the sixteen *sanskaras* of which *Vivah sanskara* is a part.

“चंद्रमुखी सन गौरी हमर छथि” is a song written by Vidyapati which is sung while worshiping *Gauri mata*:-

चंद्रमुखी सन गौरी हमर छथि ,सुरुज सन करब जमाई ।
हमर मनोरथ दैवो न बूझल , बुढे वर अनि तुलाइ ॥
एही वर के हम हड़ी ठोकायब ,बान्हि देवैन्ह वनसार ।
कानि कानि गौरी चिठिया लिखाओल , हर के कोन अपराध ॥
हमरो करम मे इएह वर लिखल ,लिखल मेटल नहि जाय ।
भनहि विद्यापति सुनिय मनइन , लिखल मेटल नहि जाय ॥

This song translates as “My daughter is as beautiful as the moon and hence my son-in-law would be shining like the Sun. The Gods did not accept my wish and I have got an old son-in-law. Now this son-in-law is all I have and I have accepted him in my world. My daughter has cried out herself. What is her fault in all this! What is written in fate, can never be compromised. Fate always reveals itself in the end.” This is part of Mahesh-Vani which is a collection of Shiv-Parvati songs that is sung in marriage ceremonies as well.

In the *lok parampara* of Mithila (Bihar, Jharkhand, and parts of Nepal) the first wedding invitation is given to *Sanjha Parati* which means the *Kul Devi* and *Devta* along with other *devtas* and *pitra* (ancestors). At least five young girls (*kumari Kanya*) are worshiped and fed *thekua*, *larua* and raw milk (traditional food made with wheat flour and sugar in the case of *thekua* and rice flour and sugar in the case of *Larua*). These *kumari kanyas* are fed as part of worshiping the *devtas* on the first day of giving the invitation and also on the last day of the invitation which is right before the wedding day. These *kumari kanyas* are symbols of *Shakti* who is invoked to give her blessings to the couple. After worshiping the *devta*, they receive the invitation through songs that are sung in their name. The first few songs are dedicated to the *pitra* (ancestors of the same *Kul*). The names of the ancestors belonging to the particular *Kul* are incorporated into the songs. They are called out personally and are informed about the marriage union with details about both bride and groom and their respective families. They are asked to come and bless the couple. All the living organisms, animals, insects, and mother nature are invited along with them to bless the ceremony. After having sung a few songs which communicated all these details, the forms of *Shakti* are worshiped. Songs for invocation of *Shakti* in the form of *Gauri*, *Durga*, *Kali*, *Shitla mata* etc are sung. Certain areas like Bhagalpur district and Munger district have forms of *Shakti* as their *Kul Devi* and hence the songs for invocation of *Shakti* specifically in the form of one’s *Kul Devi* is given priority. Towards the end, songs of deities like *Shiva*, *Ganesh*, and *Hanuman* are sung. Ladies of the village are responsible for singing these songs and invoking divine presence in the marriage ceremony. While singing the ladies are offered oil and *sindur* as well. The ladies distribute tea and snacks after having sung these songs of *devta* and then they proceed with other wedding songs. The whole process of singing *devta ke Geet* goes on for three, five, or seven days according to one’s convenience. The first invitation is given to the *Kul devi* and *devta*, the second invitation is given to *Bhawati mata* in a temple near the village and the third invitation is given to the *Gram Devta* of the village and only then the invitation is formally given to other people. In Madhubani, Darbhanga, and Sitamarhi districts of Bihar, when the invitation is given to the *Kul devi* songs of *Bhagwati* are sung, and at least one song of *Gram devta* and one song of *Isht devta* are sung. The number of these songs varies from one village to another.

Conclusion

Lok Geet and narratives in Bihar play an important role in preserving the heritage and culture of the area. It helps in preserving the local dialect and its culture-specific linguistic nuances. *Devta ke Geet* which is sung while inviting the *devta* for the marriage ceremony works as a binding force that shows the interconnectedness among the spiritual belief system (*adhyatam*), cultural practices, and the social structure of the region. The invocation of the *devta* to bless the ceremony is not merely a ritualistic formality but an emotional urge that finds it mandatory to remember one’s ancestors and seek divine blessings before celebrating such an important event of life as marriage. The idea of marriage in India is not just a social contract, it is very deep. It aligns with Indian cosmology and understanding of life. *Bhagwat Geeta* in chapter 8, verses 17-19 explores the cyclical nature of Indian cosmology (creation and dissolution) which is called *Yugas*. It explains the idea of time which is different for human beings and is different for Brahma. A day of *Param-Brahma* is as long as one thousand *yugas* in human terms. The idea of marriage in India is not just for one lifetime rather it extends beyond the cycle of life and death. Rituals like these reinforce a sense of familial bonding with the local community, one’s own family, ancestors, and the divine. The practice of these rituals in the present time is living proof of its significance in the changing times, making them an indispensable element of Bihar’s spiritual and cultural conscience.

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^{i i} Since the scope and expanse of the rituals are quite vast, the analysis will be limited to marriage rituals in Bihar. Here Bihar is studied as a cultural landscape that covers parts of Jharkhand and eastern UP (areas sharing the common socio-cultural map).

^{ii ii} During the course of research, it was found that *Shakti* is an important point of worship across India – For example, near the place where the research was commissioned, which is Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, Dwarka, New Delhi. There are two important centres of *Shakti* – the first one is *Sheetla Mata Mandir* in Gurugram and the second one is *Bhimeshwari Devi Mandir* in Beri.