

**RELIGIO-CULTURAL PROFILE OF THE GANJHUS-BHOGTAS:  
THE LESSER KNOWN DALIT COMMUNITY OF JHARKHAND**

*M. K. Joseph. SJ*

*Principal, St. Xavier's College, Mahudanr, Latehar, Jharkhand, India*

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**ABSTRACT**

*This article is intended to bring to focus the religion and cultural life of a less-known and less-studied dalit community in India-the Ganjhus-Bhogtas. The review of the literature and my field studies revealed that culturally the Ganjhus, although declared to be the scheduled castes, are very close to the tribals. Their life style indicates a tribal origin. The very locations and layouts of their villages, their rhythm of cultivation and use of forest resources are identical to those of other tribes. To understand the cultural and religious sphere of the Ganjhus it is important to study their religious practices and rites and rituals. Therefore, this paper brings forth a comprehensive view of religiosity, way of worship, world-view, belief-systems, feasts, and rites of passage of the Ganjhu-Bhogtas of central India.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Ganjhu-Bhogtas, Belief-Systems, Religious Practices*

**INTRODUCTION**

The life of a person is shaped and governed by a social system, which is in turn controlled by a cultural system [1]. It is not only applicable to individuals but also the community as a whole. Hence, culture plays a key role for the behavioural patterns of individuals and community. "Cultures are indeed greatly variable and are unique" [2]. Cultures are unique and different because the way one society tries to meet the needs of its members differs from that of other societies. A society comprises a group of people having a commonly shared culture. Culture exemplifies the cumulative and commonly shared experiences of a community which are transmitted from one generation to another. An individual born in that culture inherits all the traditions and accumulated experiences of his society. Thus culture can be thought of as the commonly shared way of life, consisting of the totality of tools, techniques, social institutions, attitudes, behaviour patterns, beliefs and values [3,4]. Religion is a significant aspect of the cultural life of the people. Hence the researcher studies some of the sociological theories regarding the evolution of religion.

**Cultural Similarity with Tribals**

Culture manifests itself in different ways, including symbols, values, rituals and heroes. The study of cultural life of the *Ganjhus* includes their world-view, religion, religiosity, and way of worship, their gods, goddess, values, symbols, rituals, and heroes. Like the tribals of Chhotanagpur, they have a holistic world-view, a harmonious existence of God, the world of spirits, the ancestors and nature. Likewise the tribals, the *Ganjhus* believe in a spirit world. According to their belief there are benevolent and malevolent spirits. They offer sacrifices to these spirits to protect the village from calamities. Traditionally at the time of sickness, the *Ganjhus* turned to *ojhas* (sorcerers) for healing. But these practices are

less frequent nowadays as now they go to medical practitioners for consultation and healing at the time of sicknesses. Tribal as well as Hindus festivals are popular among the *Ganjhus*. The *Ganjhus* celebrate *Dussehra*, *Holi*, *RakshaBandhan* and tribal feasts such as *Sarhul*, *Karamand Jitia*. They have their own *Pahan* (tribal priest), to officiate at the ritual sacrifices. Each village has a *Sarna* (Sacred Grove). During festival time community dances take place and both men and women dance together. They have their own folk-tales, which recount their origin and migration.

### **Ganjhus World-View**

The *Ganjhus* world-view is harmonious. In their world-view, God is the Supreme Being who is the author of life, protector and sustainer of life, then they follows the world of spirits, ancestors, nature and other beings. However, the worship of ancestors is the most important part of the *Ganjhus* world-view. The *Ganjhus* say that their ancestors continue to live with them in their community and hence they had special places in their houses for their ancestors. They are part of their household and community. Ancestor worship has been prevalent among the tribes of Jharkand. The core of an cestrol worship is to give due respect to the dead members of the family or community. The *Ganjhus* believe that there is a harmonious relationship between God, the spirits, nature and humans and their life are interconnected and interdependent on God and other beings.

### **Religion of the Ganjhus**

The official religion of the *Ganjhus* is Hinduism. In official records they are followers of the Hindu religion and belong to the *Harijan* group. But they say that they follow the traditional tribal religion. It is very difficult to describe adequately the religion of the *Ganjhus*. Though they claim that they follow the tribal religion known as *Sarna*, it is actually a mixture of remnants from what may have been their own original religion. Many kinds and brands of religious ties had been acquired and assimilated either from the various aboriginal religions prevailing in the area, which they inhabited or through which they passed on their migrations or from the powerful and popular Hindu religion (Fuchs, 1950). They follow the traditional tribal way of worship and are very much at home with their traditional religious practices. Their religious practices centre around four places, namely the *Sarna*, the *GawatSarna*, *Devi Mandap* and the temple of Barsingh. Their god or godlike figure is Baba Barsingh and their goddess is MaaKoleshwari. They offer sacrifices in the *Sarna*, *Gawatsarna* and the two temples. In each *Ganjhu* village, there is a *pahan* or *naya* or *baiga* (different names are used in different places) to perform religious rituals at various functions. He is the village *poojari*, the one who does *puja* in the village at different occasions. He is the only person who can perform at the village *GawatSarna*. The *deity* of the village is present in the *Gawat* and the *pahan* offers *puja* for the *Ganjhu-Bhogtasamaj*.



**Figure 1: A GanjhuPahan under the Karam Tree**

The *pahan* is appointed by the village *panchayat* headed by the *JethRayath*. *JethRayath* is the first person or family who arrived in that village and made his habitat there. He is unanimously elected by the *GanjhuSamaj*. *Pahan* comes from a particular *pahan* family. When a *pahan* dies, his elder son is elected as *pahan* by the village *panchayat*. If the *pahan* has no sons then the village *panchayat* will elect somebody else in the village and crown him as *pahan*.

Besides this *pahan*, there is another *pahan* called *ChatiyaPahan* in each Ganjhus village. *Chatiya* means the spirit of the ancestors. On various occasions the *BhogtaSamaj* in order to please the ancestors and the *bhoots*, offers sacrifices to them. On such occasions the *Chatiya* in the village performs his duty. The soul of the ancestors enters into *Chatiya* through a process guided by the *pahan* of the village. When the soul enters into the body of *Chatiya*, the people ask him what he needs and why he is disturbing the village. The *Chatiya* asks whatever he needs and people give him. When *Chatiya* is satisfied with the offerings of the people he disappears into the jungles, hills and the next day comes back with flowers and distributes them to the villagers. If the *bhoots* are not happy, *Chatiya* suggests that the spirits need blood. So a cock and a male goat are sacrificed and the blood is offered. The figure below shows *Chatiyapahan* holding a basket full of offshoots of maize.



**Figure 2: ChatiyaPahan Holding Jawa**

*Sarna* means sacred grove. It is a holy place for the tribals and *dalits*. The *Sarna* is the most important place of worship for the *Ganjhus*. Only the appointed *pahan* can offer sacrifices at the *sarna*. It is considered to be the holiest place for the *Ganjhus*. The *sarhul* feast of the tribals is celebrated in the *sarna* with men playing drums and women and children dance with great enthusiasm and fervour. The figure below shows the *Ganjhus* coming out of the *saran* after offering *puja*.



**Figure 3: The *Ganjhus* dance Near the *Sarna***

### Festivals of *Ganjhus*

Jharkhand is the state of festivals. The festivals of the people of Jharkhand are connected to their religious life. Therefore, it is important to look at the festivals the *Ganjhus* celebrate. The *Ganjhus* celebrate tribal festivals such as *Sarhul*, *Ashadi*, *Karam*, *Jitia*, *Sohrai*, and *Phaguva*. The appointed village *Pahan* officiates at these ceremonies. They have no statues of gods in their villages. But they have some specially-carved small stones that they keep close to the trees. During festivals they offer the blood of a cock, male goat and pig to the gods' spirits in order to make them happy. They believe that once they offer sacrifices to these gods and spirits they will be protected, otherwise the spirits could become malevolent and disturb them. During festivals men, women, and children, dance together, to express their happiness. The men play the drums and women sing songs narrating their cultural identity.

### *Sarhul*

*Sarhulis* the main festival of the tribal population of Jharkhand. The verbal meaning of *Sarhulis* "Worship of Sal". The word *sarhulis* derived from two words *sar* and *hul*. *sar* means *sarai* (seed of *sal* tree) and *hul* means worship/pray. Therefore *sarhulis* worship of nature. They worship the *Sal* tree (*sarnatree*) that is believed as the place of the goddess *sarna*, who protects the village and the community from all kinds of natural calamities and disasters. The worship place is known as *sarnasathal*. Usually *Sarnasathal* remains aside the village where at least one *sal* tree is found. After religious performances villagers indulge in merry-making. They perform the famous *sarhul* dance and sing *sarhul* songs. *Sarhul* is the first feast in the calendar year for the *dalits* and tribals. The celebration of this feast means the beginning of a new season. Probably it could be compared to the spring season. During this season the trees bear new leaves and fruits. In order to collect the new fruits, flowers and leaves for their use, the people celebrate *sarhul*. These people are heavily dependent on the jungles: for their survival. This feast is celebrated in the *Sarna* (sacred grove) in the jungle to express their solidarity and oneness with the nature. It is celebrated in the month of *Chaith-Vaishakh* (April-May). *Sarhul* is the most important feast because without it, they cannot have marriages blessed in the village. Marriages are linked with *sarhul*. Hence *sarhul puja* is of great importance for the *Ganjhus*. First, they have the *sarhul puja* and then they celebrate the marriages. Also the

constructions of new houses begin only after the *sarhul puja*. It is celebrated on different dates in the *Ganjhu* villages with the purpose of attending all *sarhul puja* celebrations at different villages. Every *Ganjhu* village has its own meeting to decide the date and time to celebrate this festival. Three days prior to the *sarhul* festival, the villagers meet to clean up the worship place (*Sarna*).

On the eve of *sarhul puja* the *pahan* keeps water in a new earthen pot at the *Sarna*. The following morning the entire village goes to the *sarna* led by the *JethRayath*. Nobody goes out to work on that day. They neither collect firewood nor the leaves from the forest. After a bath the men join the *pahan* at the *sarna*. The *pahan* holds a new winnowing fan (known as *sup*). He then keeps the flowers of the *sal* tree in it and on the top of it he keeps chicken and uncooked white rice. In the beginning, the oldest tenant who is the head of the village, (*JethRayath*) who is also-called the *Khut-Karidar* of the village comes with flowers of the *saltree*, and gives a cock for sacrifice. The villagers also bring chicken and uncooked rice. The sacrificial chickens are fed with *arwa* (un-boiled) rice and they are given country wine or rice beer to drink. Vermilion is applied on their head before the sacrifice. After this the *Pahan* is ready to perform the sacrifice. Under the leadership and guidance of the *JethRayath* he performs the *puja*. After offering the blood of the chicken at the *sarna* place the *Pahan* asks the people to take the rice and chicken meat for cooking. The people cook the meal close to the *sarna* and share their meals with the entire village. The rice and chicken are not to be cooked separately, but together and this meal is known as *Tahari*. The *pahan* offers boiled *mahuva* flower and *sathu* which is a local soft drink to all of them. They apply oil to the feet of the *pahan* and wash them. Then the *pahan* pours the water kept in earthen pot at the *sarna*. Women collect the water and offer it to God. The *pahan* then keeps *sal* flowers on the door of his house. At the end of the worship, all the people keep *sal* flowers on their ears. This is called *phool-khosai* (keeping a flower). After keeping the flower at the door of the house of the *JethRayath*, the women move around singing and dancing together and place a flower at every house. Then they all go singing and dancing to the house of the *JethRayath*. Likewise they visit all the houses in the village. They are given sweets or *roti* at each house. They are also given locally-made wine to drink. This festival lasts for about four days. After the celebration of *sarhul*, marriages and construction of new houses take place. The figure below shows the *Ganjhus* celebrating *sarhul*.

### **Ashadi**

In the month of *Ashad* (July), the *pahan* offers sacrifice known as *Ashadi puja* at the *Devi mandap*. The *pahan* offers the blood of a cock and a he-goat. This feast is celebrated as the village feast. Without the *ashadipuja* transplantation cannot take place. Therefore after the *ashadipuja* the people begin their *ropa* (transplantation). This is celebrated before the maize harvest. Once *ashadi puja* is over, the village can harvest the maize crop. They also prepare the field for rice cultivation, and transplantation is to begin after *ashad puja*. The *JethRayath* has to do the transplantation first in his own field. The entire village helps one another for transplantation.

### **Karam**

*Karamor Karma* is another most important feast of the tribals and dalits of Jharkhand. The *Ganjhus* also consider this as an important feast. They believe that by venerating the *Karam* tree they acquire the blessings of the Supreme Being. *Karam* is a special tree. There are different stories attached to the celebration of *Karam*. The core message of the *Karam* festival is that the veneration of the *Karam Raja* (*Karam deity*) brings down blessings upon the *Ganjhus*. The *Karam* festival is celebrated in the month of *Bhado-Ekadashi* (August-September). The unmarried girls of the village start

the preparation 10 days prior to the big celebration on the 10<sup>th</sup> day. They prepare bamboo baskets and fill them with sand. They sow the seeds of gram, rice, pulse, wheat, peas, maize and oil seeds. Altogether there are seven types of seeds. They wait for these seeds to sprout. Every day they take out these baskets and bring them to the courtyard or the dancing place of the village. This dancing place is called the *akhara* of the village. While bringing the baskets to the dancing place every day, the girls sing songs. These songs are known as *Karam* songs. This process will continue for nine days. On the ninth day the unmarried girls fast from morning till late evening. They fast in order to get the best life partners. On the ninth day the *pahan* of the village accompanied by the *JethRayath* and the elders of the village go to the *Jungle* to bring the *Karam Raja* to the village. He is the official person to cut a *Karam* branch from the *Jungle*. He then carries the *Karam* branch with due respects and brings it to the village in the company of others. Then men sing songs while bringing the *karam deity* to the village. The *pahan* then plants the *karam deity* in the middle of the *akhara* and offers *puja*. Before planting the *karam* branch they take the *deity* and make five rounds around the *akhara*. They pour milk and wheat powder on the *deity*. The girls wearing new clothes, light incense sticks and lamps, placed in winnowing fans. They then worship the *karam deity*. The entire village will be present at the *akhara* for this *puja*. He remembers all their gods during this *puja* and takes the names of *BabuBansingh*, *MaaKoleshwari* and the ancestors. The *pahan* then asks the girls to bring the sprouts of the seeds to the *akhara*. The sprouts of seeds are known as *jawa*. The *pahan* examines the *jawa*. If the sprouts have come out beautiful then he concludes that the cultivation of the *Ganjhus* will be successful and they will have a good harvest. The sprouts are distributed and the girls decorate their hair with the sprouts. Then the *pahan* invites all the girls and women to dance around the *karam deity*. They dance for a while. When the dance gets over the *Pahan* invites the elders of the village to narrate the story of *Karma* and *Dharma*.



**Figure 4: Karam Dance**

### *Jitia*

*Jitia* is another main feast celebrated by the *Ganjhus*. It is celebrated in the month of *Ashin*. It is after 10 to 12 days after the *karam* festival. It is celebrated in order to remember the ancestors and to pray for their souls. The elders of the village led by the *JethRayath* and the *pahango* to the temple of *Bansingh* to prepare for *ajitia puja*. They arrange the *puja* articles there. Once the preparations are over they go to the *mandap* for *puja*, where they offer rice, *sindur* to different gods which the researcher joined the people of the *Chichi* village to celebrate *jitia*. On the day of *jitia* in order to please the spirit

world they offer sacrifices to these spirits. They believe that while offering the sacrifices at the village temple some spirits enter into the body of a human being. When the place of *puja* is proposed, the main *pahan* (priest) along with a few elders dressed in white *dhoti* recite the prayers and ask the forefather's help in their lives. Some people name this *puja* as *bhoot-puja* (devil worship). In their language they call it *BhootBharna* (which means to please the evil spirit). They offer rice and *sindur* and ask God to protect them. They also ask the spirits not to disturb their lives. First they ask for God's blessings and protection, and then plead with the evil spirits not to harm them. The prayers and the songs, everything reverberates the name of Barsingh. When the *puja* gets over the *pahans* come out to the courtyard where the women dance and with folded hands they greet everybody and make three rounds of the dancing place and continue their prayers. The *pahan* steps on the thorns and his feet are washed by the men. After this the men join the dance party and continue the celebration. In the late evening they take meals and drinks. *Jitiais* celebrated to remember their forefathers and to honour them. It is celebrated especially for asking God's blessings. It is also celebrated to please the evil spirits and to ask protection from them, and to plead with them not to harm the *Ganjhus*. It is celebrated to remember their greatest ancestor Barsingh and glorify his brave deeds that give an identity to *Ganjhu* society. The entire celebration goes on the whole morning.

### **Dipawali (Sohrai)**

*Dipawali(Sohrai)* is celebrated in the month of *Kartik*. Blood is offered to GoraiyaDevata, who Goraiya is a person from the same village. Goraiya is like a cowboy who takes care of the animals, protects them from all dangers. (Songs are sung in the name of *Lakshmi*. *Sohrai* festival is celebrated on the 16th day of the *Kartik* month (November) on the interlunar night (*amavasya*). It is known as the festival of animals. People apply oil on the horns of animals such as cows, oxen, male and female buffaloes, for five days before the interlunar night. These days they don't plough. Three days prior to *amavasya*, the village men play the drum, trumpet, *mandar*, etc., and wake up all the villagers. They sing and dance almost in everybody's house. The villagers give either some money or vegetables to the singers and dancers and also give some sweetbread to eat. On the occasion of *Sohrai*, the people clean their entire house and its surroundings thoroughly and keep every nook and corner neat and clean. Early in the morning they smear their courtyards with cow-dung. After smearing the house with the cow-dung, they begin to cook in a new earthen pot. They cook a variety of food items. They mix five items such as rice powder, *madwa* powder, maize, green gram, and pulses and make a special dish. This food is called *Pakheer*. They wash their tools including the ploughs. After giving a good bath to their cattle, they apply oil and vermilion on the horns and then decorate them with flower garlands. On this day the animals look extremely beautiful and colourful. Then they offer sacrifices of cock, he-goat, pig, in their houses, and pray to God for peace, happiness, and prosperity. Thereafter, they draw a design in the courtyard of the house with the solution made of water and flour. They also keep banana leaves, at the design. They place the *pakheer* on the banana leaves. They let the entire household animals enter the courtyard. As the animals enter the courtyard the lady of the house wearing a new set of clothes welcomes the animals. She washes the legs of those animals, sprinkles water and un-boiled rice on them. She blesses the animals using the lamps and then gives the *pakheer* to eat. She also distributes the *pakheer* to everybody who is present there. They all eat the on them the *pakheer* together with the animals. This is done to express their solidarity and oneness with the animals that are part and parcel of their lives. Thereafter the people chop the head of the pigling and taking its blood, anoint their foreheads and dance, uniting all the women and men together till the evening. The entire *Ganjhu* village takes part in this celebration.

### **Aghanipuja**

*Aghani puja* is not a community festival. It is a family celebration. The head of the family offers *puja* in his house. It is a harvest *puja*. It is offered to the gods for protecting their crops. It is a thanksgiving *puja* for their good crops. According to the belief of the *Ganjhus* there are four spirits that protect their fields from all four directions. Their names are KishunBruha, the protector of east, Baraldarha the protector of the west, Baghota the protector of the north and Banodarha, the protector of the south. So these spirits protect their fields from all four directions. Therefore the *Ganjhus* offer a chicken each to these spirits. While offering the blood the head of the family says, "You protected our field so we offer you blood."

### **Phaguva (Holi)**

*Phaguva* is celebrated in the month of *phagun* (March-April). It is celebrated on the last night of the *phagun* month. The *pahan* and *JethRayath* of the village go to the jungle during the day and bring a branch of the *simbal* tree along with *kher* grass to the village. This is known as *phaguva*. It is kept in any of the sacred places of the village either in the *sarna* or *mandap*. Then the entire village prepares for the *phaguva* celebrations at night. After the evening meal men and women gather in the *Akhara* of the village and dance together. The singing and dancing continues till four in the morning. When the cock crows for the first time the *pahan* and the *JethRayath* go to the sacred place and with much devotion they bring the *phaguva* from the sacred place to the place known as *phaguvatarn*. Each *Ganjhu* village has a place called the *phaguvatarn* and each year the *phaguva* is kept in that place. Then the entire village goes to the *phaguvatarn*, singing and dancing; they dance for a long time. In the meantime the *pahan* plants the branch of the *simbal* tree in the ground and puts the *kher* grass on the top of the branch. Then he makes a bundle of *kher* grass and lights it. Then he puts fire on the *kher* grass. Then the *pahan* moves five times around the branch and using an axe he cuts the branch each time. He has to cut it down by the fifth attempt so that the branch falls down. Then they sing the *phaguva* songs. While cutting the branch, latex (milk) comes out of the branch and the *pahan* collects it and mixing it with ash applies it to everybody's forehead. They keep on dancing for some more time. Then they return to their own houses and start playing with colour. After playing and applying colour on each other they all go back to the *phaguvatarn*. And with this the *phaguva* celebration comes to an end. Thus ends the calendar year and a new year begins. The people say, "Sal Sambathkatgaya one year is over. We cut the Old Year and we welcome the New Year". This celebration is different from the Holi celebrations of the Hindus.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

This paper has made an attempt to present the religio-cultural dimensions of the *Ganjhus-Bhogtas* of Jharkhand. Understanding the symbolic dimensions of the *Ganjhus*, their way of worship, world-view, belief systems, is of greater importance. This study points to the fact that the life of the *Ganjhus* in general and their celebrations, rites, rituals are all communitarian based on their world-view. Understanding of their world-view and re-interpretation of their way of life and a critical analysis of their symbolic dimensions will lead them to emphasize their demand to incorporate them into the group of indigenous people. This would lead them to enhance their social status. This may also challenge them to build a new *Ganjhu* community with a new self-image.



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