

# Gleaning Historical Materials from a Myth: A Study of Kole History of the Creation of the World

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## Introduction

Strategizing the recovery and reconstruction of the indigenous history had not merited the desired attention of mainstream historiography. But fortunately it has lately emerged as the growing engagement of researchers all over the world. This stir may be attributed largely to the serious mobilization of the natives themselves, who contest this marginalization and claim due recognition in the mainstream episteme. Moreover, as this demand emanates from a group with a sizeable number recapturing of this past and its incorporation in Indian history is believed to serve the important purpose of emancipating the discipline of history itself or, to use Thompson's word, its democratization.

We should however begin with the question why the natives are epistemically benighted. It may be ascribed to the dominance of the Rankean dictum of 'No document, no history'. As the pre-literate adivasi societies mostly failed to inscribe the long pre-colonial past in their oral tradition, it created the erroneous notion that they belonged to the domain of pre-history. When the ethnographies and histories were written during British rule this mindset adversely affected the appropriation and evaluation of the role of adivasis in history. Colonial and elitist reading of history kept the entire pre-colonial past out of focus. This again generated the erroneous idea that during the colonial phase the natives moved from historilessness to history. The basic fragmentation of colonial sources makes the invocation of oral source necessary in spite of the general lack of faith in its veracity. And the source that I cull in this paper to reconstruct the history of the Ho of Singhbhum in Jharkhand is the collective memory as represented by their creation myth.

I am aware that due to the theocratic and atemporal character myth may not be considered an 'irrefutable' and 'objective' source material of history. Being 'culturally selected narratives', a myth is understood to reveal the working of human mind. In fact creation myth, as I shall show later, was evolved as a modality of codifying the past in order to express ethnic identity of a group at a given point of time and space. This is expressed in two ways. First by relating the origin of

the ethnic group along with other people, it seeks to signify its own distinct position and then to justify the bases of existing society. As such a myth tends to be 'a social charter' rather than being a fictive and untrue account. Next the narration about its fall in the past or at a recent time may be taken as a conscious attempt to strategize a revival as we notice in the Kherwar and Birsite movements.

Among the Jharkhand tribes, while sociologists and anthropologists have elaborately taken up Munda and Santal myths in their general accounts, but for two very recent papers, Ho mythology has been ignored by scholars. Of these two, the first takes up Ho origin myth, as narrated ritually during *Maghe parab* in Ho villages, to understand the relationship of a Ho with the supernatural and natural worlds. While making a general study of the mythology of the Jharkhand tribals, the second seeks to understand tribal cosmology, including Ho, as formulated in their creation myths. Ahistoricity of the intervention coupled with the expectation to trace historical materials inspired this probe into Ho myth.

Divided into four broad sections the first relates the corpus of Ho creation myth. The second makes a comparative study of tribal myths to understand the specificity of Ho myth. The next section explores historically relevant materials, which I think can be utilized to reconstruct their history from within. The concluding section underlines the limitations of the myth in historical reconstruction and its plausible use for the students of history.

## Ho Myth: Notion of Origin and the Mental World of a Ho

We have different versions of Ho creation myth. Lt. S. R. Tickell, the first assistant political agent of Kolhan, was perhaps the first to record this myth shortly after the subjugation of Ho-dominated areas and formation of the Kolhan Government Estate in 1837. The informants were some knowledgeable Mankis (heads of *pirs* i.e. cluster of villages). The source did not state how and in what changed form the legend of creation survived up to Tickell's time. But since the Ho represented an oral society, it had surely been generationally transmitted. This was partially reproduced a few decades later by E.T. Dalton. Recent ones are those recounted by Hebbar and Purty which clearly show how the structure has evolved and survived down to the present time through its ritualistic reproduction during *Maghe parab*.

I have however used Tickell's version as the staple for this essay for its proximity to pre-colonial Ho past.

The myth narrates the staged creation of the world, each in the form of episodes. Apparently these do not always have causal link as they follow each other but not from each other. Really episodes form part of the generic theme of genesis. It begins with the notion of self-created divine elements of *Ote Boram* and *Sirma Thakur* or *Singbonga* seemingly to usher them as the primal cause at whose intervention the world was supposed to be made. This is how the essential theocratic character of the myth and the theocratic basis of Ho culture are reasoned.

Then follows the gradual creation of other elements in a dateless past, thus adding atemporality to Ho myth. The world was created first, being followed by grass, trees, rocks and water, and then cattle and wild animals. In this biotic background *Singbonga* introduced human elements in the form of little boy and girl, who were given a crab's cave to live in. Then through the first pair, in whom sex urge was created due to the use of *eely* (rice beer), the world was populated.

Deviating from the thematic continuity the next episode narrates the story of marriage between *Singbonga* and *Chando Omol* i.e. the moon, who was self-created like *Singbonga*, birth of their four sons and numerous daughters, destruction of these four sons, cutting of the moon into two as punishment for her betrayal and conversion of her daughters into stars. This deviation to narrate the origin of celestial world may be a human slip in the order of narration. But one may also discern in it the introduction of the divinely ordained idea of marriage as a necessary precondition for human procreation depicted later. Here I would like to link this aberration to the specificity of Ho narrative style. Presumably what signifies here is the conjuncture rather than the particular event. Accordingly the two apparently disconnected episodes in the event of human procreation are somewhat linked by the conjuncture of marriage. I draw parallel from my study of the Great rebellion of 1857-58 where two temporally disordered events of tribal protest were contained within the conjuncture of *Ulgulan* (rising).

The story then rejoins the original theme to detail how the world was peopled. It first mentions the birth of twelve pairs of brothers and sisters. This represents the universalistic vision of world demography, living as one family at one place without the distinction of race, caste, language and geography. They were called the grand children of *Singbonga* suggesting thereby that the first man and woman were his children. The episode ends with the description of a great feast to set the stage for the origin of tribes and castes.

Through willful coupling of man and woman, suggesting marriage, the tribes like Kole, Bhumij, Bhuiyan and Santal and such castes as the Brahmins, Rajputs, Chatris, Kurmis and Ghasis were created. At

this stage the separation of the early men was believed to have taken place. This was first spatial when they started living separately; next it was cultural when people picked up different languages, trades and implements. This meant the evolution of different communities and cultures. Within the same episode the creation of the English is mentioned but it seems to be interpolated. But this interpolation appears to have followed tribal narratological primacy of conjuncture in place of the temporal sequence of individual events.

The notion of fall comes next. The story was that growing incest among people in disobedience to God and superiors so angered *Singbonga* that he destroyed all except sixteen people either with water or fire. To narrate the notion of fall after the introduction of the English may be the symbolic way of referring defeat though apparently this fall belonged to the dateless past. Perhaps it was also the ploy to rationalize defeat by the English by projecting them as one of their kind, to be detailed below, yet highlighting their fall in primordial time. This seems also to underline another characteristic of their temporal sense, rather notion of history. Accordingly time for the native is not only interchangeable like the variation of season, but it is also anti-linear because human progress is attended by the invariable fall caused by internal dynamics.

How the world was peopled again has not been narrated. But the subsequent details relate Ho entry into historic period being represented by British rule, *charak puja* and *sati* as well as Ho contact with the Hindu law of *karma* – good deeds being rewarded in the form of rebirth in better condition and evil act causing rebirth as dogs, pigs or lizards and rejection of the idea of last day. The judgment is however to be made by *Singbonga* to whom the spirits have to go after death. He renders reward or punishment according to the acts done in this world. However since His abode is not mentioned we cannot say if spirits have to visit a world other than the world of humans.

### Tribal Myths: A Comparative Reading

Ho myth is however very cryptic and small when compared with Munda, Santal and Oraon myths. While two versions of Santal myth contain in all twenty pages, and Munda and Oraon myths eight pages each, the Ho one covers a little more than two pages only. With differences in details the rest show a thematic resemblance, possibly because of their origin from the same Kolarian stock (except Oraon). Here a self-created God, variously named as *Ote Boram*, *Thakur Jiu* or *Singbonga* created the earth and living creatures and finally designed the world population first of one family and then into tribes, sects and castes. All three agree in the theme of the destruction of the world by an irate God by a rain of fire or water.

Similarities end here and differences begin. The Munda myth consists of detailed legends relating to the separation of land and sea, origin of man and the

division of time into day and night. It implies the origin of human civilization on earth, ending in a universalistic note. The Santal myth details the birth of the earth and all the living creatures. But here we notice a clear shift towards particularism from initial universalism when the division of man into sects and races are recorded, adding to it a notion of feud between Santals and *Dekos* (ethnic others), without however mentioning latter's composition. As against this, though Ho myth approximates the general approach and pattern of creation in Santal myth, it does not record the creation process in details found in Munda and Santal myths.

Ho myth again departs from the two above by recording the birth of the stars and the idea of reward and punishment for the good and evil acts done on this earth. Moreover, while in the Santal myth only the origin of Santals and *Dekos* is mentioned, Ho myth records the origin of different tribes, castes as well as the English. Significantly while the basis of demographic relation in Ho myth is mutuality and co-existence in Santal myth it is the notion of dialectics. Moreover, while the Munda legend is ahistorical because it records the undated origin of cultures, Ho myth is both ahistorical, as it narrates the primordial creation of castes and tribes, and historical when it refers to the English, *charak puja* and *sati*. In Santal myth however historical progression is much more pronounced. It details the birth of their culture in *Cae Campa*, their gradual expansion, the evolution of their distinct customs, contact and incessant feud with the *Dekos*, Hinduization of Santals and other tribes, defeat at the hands of the Hindus, harrowing tale of their migration and suffering as well as the Santal uprising. This way the broad outlines of the Santal past have been enshrined in oral tradition.

### Historical Materiality of Ho history of the Creation of the World

The expression historical materiality here means the corpus that contains or refers to historical events and conjunctures as well as the Ho notion of their past. These are classified under the following heads to signify Ho sense of space and time.

#### Ho Social Environment

The process of multiplication of human race from the first generation that sprang from the primeval pair relates the demographic ambience of the Ho. The people were the Bhumij, Brahmins, Rajputs, Chattris and unnamed some other kinds of Hindus and then the Bhuiyans, Santals, Kurmis and Ghasis. One can discern that Ho social ecology was constituted both by ethnic and non-ethnic people. But how this demography was created? To quote from the myth: 'Go you and make preparations and make a great feast, rice and buffalo's flesh, and bullock's flesh, goats, sheep, pigs and fowls of the air and vegetables.' Out of the pairs partaking of buffalo and bullock's flesh respectively the Kole (Ho) and Bhumij were born. Next the Brahmins, Rajputs,

Chattris and other Hindus were created of the pairs who shared rice and vegetables. Those who took goats' flesh and fish gave birth to other kinds of Hindus. Bhuiyans were the recipients of shell fish. Santals and Kurmis were left only with pig's flesh. When nothing was left the Ho gave some share to the Ghasis.

The list of named and unnamed Hindu castes, whom the Ho called *Diku*, suggests that they were drawn into relations with non-ethnic groups also who lived in and around Kolhan. We do not however find in the Ho the tendency to strike a spatial kind of distinction as we notice among the Santal who identified the '*Dekos*' as those 'living in the plains', while themselves as those who lived 'in the forests and on the hills.' It may be presumed that the unnamed Hindus were the Goalas, Kamars, Kumars and Tantis who were allowed to live in the Ho villages. It seems that entry of these functional castes into the myth dated back to the time when majority of Ho villages were founded in south Kolhan around the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, one may contend, and rightly so, that these relations may be predated by a few centuries to the time of Ho habitation in north Kolhan when they had a friendly relations with the Porahat raj.

#### Ho Notion of Self

We know that the Ho belonged to the Munda tribe of the Kolarian group living in the Chotanagpur plateau. A section of it broke away from the parent stock sometimes after the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD and migrated in groups to Singhbhum. Over time they developed cognate Ho language and culture, which fashioned distinct Hones. This distinct Ho ethnicity was mythically expressed in the story of the creation of the Ho from the first pair, who chose buffalo's and bullock's flesh. To incorporate this important experience of the community the original Munda myth was reconstructed. So we find close resemblance between the Munda and first five paragraphs of Ho myth. While the sixth in the latter evidently records this fact of separation by stating that the people then lived separately, multiplied and evolved their languages and cultures.

Besides distinctiveness, the Ho believed them the first people to be created by *Singbonga*. Two messages are coded here. First that their being born as Ho implied their rejection of the link with the parent stock. Next it strategically asserted Ho superiority in the comity of peoples. This oral narration of superiority was based on their historic success in carving out an exclusive political space in Singhbhum, which they called *Hodesum*. This conjuncture belongs to a period between 12<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. The myth also codifies another message. The order of distribution of food items in the mythic feast shows that the Ho rated animal flesh higher to agricultural products. This was why flesh eaters received higher position in the order of creation. Next, the legend of the creation of plough found in Munda myth does not find place in



this version of Ho myth. These details conveyed that the Ho identified themselves as the people belonging to a pastoral and food gathering stage where hunting and animal husbandry occupied a higher position than agriculture. What seems probable is that the Ho in 1840 preferred to highlight their pre-peasant forest-centric image to distinguish themselves from the peasant societies of the caste people.

### Notion of the Other

The original notion was that all being the progenies of primeval twelve brothers and sisters coexisted by willfully sharing food and not interfering into other's domain ('none shall touch his brother's share'). But later the demographic divisions crystallized when these brothers lived separately in their chosen places and evolved their distinct cultures. This crystallized Ho mentality to others which was rooted in the hierarchic order of creation of both the tribe and caste. Of the tribes, the Brumes were called *Markus* i.e. next in brotherhood. This affirms a familial relation. Next came the Bhuiyans. Their lower rank showed their marginalization in Ho mental world, a reflection of power struggle for territorial control in an unidentified past. The Santal came next. Their relegation related their political insignificance due to their numerical smallness in Kolhan.

This mythic depiction of inter-tribe they-ness does not however compare favourably with Santal concept of original tribal oneness among the Mundas, the Birhor, Kurmbis and others, who were believed once to belong to the same Kherwar stock. Interestingly the Santal myth also projected the idea of racial oneness with such castes as Doms, Kamars, Tilis, Hadis, Bauris, Kunkals and unnamed others. What could be the mentality behind this mythic code? It may be suggested that the oppression of the Santals by the non-tribal landlords and moneylenders prompted them not only to socialize the doctrine of dialectical relations between Santals and *Dekas* but also to forge the idea of solidarity of the marginal against the oppressors. The absence of this idea in Ho myth may be attributed to Ho superior position vis-à-vis the tribes and castes and the absence of their being oppressed by the non-tribal during pre-colonial times.

The historical experience forced them to similarly subordinate caste groups. So the Brahmins were said to be born of the third pair, Rajputs, Chatris and other Hindus of subsequent pairs. Secondly, they were denied the highest food of buffalo and bullock's meat. These meant that Brahmins and Kshatriyas, who held first and second ranks in the caste system, were relegated to positions lower than that of the Ho and Bhumij, a metaphorical expression of the rejection of caste hierarchy itself rather of their non-Hinduness. Lastly, inferiority of Hindus was further expressed in mythic denunciation of social practices like *sati* rite and *charak puja*. To quote:

Wicked men are born again as dogs, pigs or lizards. Those who swing at Churruck poojas, become some kites, others flying foxes. Suttees never are born again, but remain burning forever in their pits, and come out at night, wandering about, still burning.

Mythic marginalization of the castes, particularly upper castes, can also be historically corroborated. What could be its origin point in time? Possibly the bias against Hindus had originated due to Hindu expansion in Chotanagpur plateau forcing the exodus of a section of the Mundas. So they did not allow Hindus and others to either move through or settle in Kolhan. If we are to believe E. Roughsedge, the general leading British army against the Ho in 1819-20, they were very hostile to Brahmins, Rajputs as well as the Muslims.

### Rationalizing Subjugation

The myth records: 'And after this from the Koles, from their senior house sprung the English, who also ate bullock's flesh. But they are the senior children, and the Koles the junior!' The sharing of the food and acceptance of juniority to the British symbolically expressed Ho defeat at British hands in 1836-37. But significantly an historical fact found passage into myth almost within three years of the event; the reconstructed myth (or reconstruction itself?) was narrated by the Mankis, who themselves were often key factors in Ho resistance and surrender to the British.

We should not however miss another point. The abdication of the first place to the British, expressive of mythic acceptance of subjugation and defeat, was mellowed down by the willful sharing of food. Moreover, the commonness of Ho and British origins perhaps messaged that they were defeated not by the other but by one of their own, and so they deliberately accepted British rule. This rationalization indicates the hegemonization of a section of Ho leadership. But the fact remains that a phase of anti-British uprising began during 1857-59 when the community challenged British rule. Even then the myth was not reconstructed at that time. Does it mean that acceptance of British rule was more real and the uprising of 1857-59 an aberration for a Ho? It may also suggest that the oral construction/reconstruction of the past is not conditioned by the autonomy of the past *per se* but by the imperative of the present.

The myth leads us to Ho notion of time, both dateless and dated. They believed that the world and all elements on it had originated in primeval time. This implies that a long stretch of time beginning with the origin of the world is beyond human reckoning. To this order belongs the creation of the earth, wild animals and then man. There is also the suggestion of dated time when it referred the English, *sati* and *charak puja*. Having no knowledge of watch and

calendar a Ho did not count months, years, decades and centuries but only followed the course of nature to conduct their agricultural, hunting activities and festivals. They however knew how to reckon smaller units of time like day and night. Though the Ho myth does not record its origin as the Munda myth yet there is a clear suggestion of this temporal sense. The exact words are: 'Now the four sons kept with their father, and the daughters lived with their mother, and as the sun rose everyday....'. This implies knowledge of the day beginning with sunrise. But how the days were constituted into yesterday, today and tomorrow, as we find in Munda myth did not find a place in Ho myth. I would like to suggest that the myth as it originated and progressively developed, belonged to a pastoral people for whom movement into forest for the hunt and food necessitated the knowledge mainly of day and night and for the rudimentary agriculture the knowledge of the changing seasons.

### Conclusion

The study thus shows that Ho myth is neither as comprehensive nor diachronic as the Santal myth is. Next, we do not find any reference to Ho history of

migration, even though it was an important marker of Ho past. Lastly, the notion of mutuality and co existence, which the myth conveys, is deceptive mainly because it was through dialectical relations with tribes and castes that Ho identity was also defined and progressively recreated. What then makes the Ho myth historically relevant? It mainly portrays the fructification of their distinctive identity vis-à-vis other tribes and castes, the peoples with whom the Ho had to forge a relationship and its very nature, their attitude to subjection to British rule and their notion of time. Singularly the myth helps us neither in encapsulating the total historical ambience as in Santal myth nor in understanding one decisive event of history as migration in the case of the Santal. But it provides traces of many of the conjectures from the past. More so, it relates how the community conceived the past and what of the past they considered worth retention, a fact very relevant to appreciate Ho rather tribal concept of history. This mentality perhaps more intently provides an access into the process of their thinking where what is suggested is perhaps more important than what is articulated. ✖

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