



## Taapoi: A gender dimensions in trading family of Odisha

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### Abstract

Gender is a cultural construct. In Indian patriarchal society the position of women are being depicted in various forms. Indian oral narrations are inventory of the traditional wisdoms that assume pivotal area of the worldview of the community concerned. The folklore can provide many insights in understanding cultures. It also can provide useful data for understanding the status of women in given culture (Reddy 1999). The folk narrative can be any kind of story, tale, or reconstruction told in form prose among people of a cultural group or occupational group. It refers to the cultural intricacies of a community whose members keep the story alive across generations. Invariably it is told in prose form among the people as a part of leisure activities of a cultural/ occupational group. The contents are based on some past event which is either accepted as fictional or believed to have some historical basis. The approach of the paper is based on content analysis of a narration. Through descriptive analysis of contents, it explains the contribution of human factors like jealousy between love seekers in family, perception of guilt, the power of gender (male) and the power of trading profession. It concludes that 'The gender dimension and trading profession reinforcing each other'.

**Keywords:** gender, moral, patriarch, Taapoi

### Introduction

In patriarchal society like ours, the theoretical implication of understanding women dates back to family economic history that in due course of family history transform comparable status between male and female to inequality wherein women have been historically conditioned to assume an underdog position in decision making process. Although a few women figure in history as capable, however, by and large the whims and caprices of male members are kept upheld and women in almost all socio-cultural transaction have been given a subordinate position. Within the framework of traditional patriarch model the love and affection seekers (wife and sister) compete among themselves although they occupy differential social status. In absence of men, the culturally defined elder women assume male-mind and exploit subordinates- the culturally defined lesser status occupants. The jealousy surface in different forms such that it can extend to the level of intolerable torture and even expel from home to push them search for alternates away from home uncared. The genesis of gender is due to different forms of women exploitation, discrimination and suppression. Resources monopoly of men is being challenged by women and their protest ranged from silence to organized movement. There are many studies in which woman have been portrayed in the cultural context explaining both positive and negative roles of mankind (Deva 1978, Doranne 1978, Handoo 1999 and Panda 2002) [2, 3, 8, 7]. Oral traditions are known as *laukika* which have contributed to the development of *rite- de- passage* therefore Flood says that high caste *rite-de-passage* in any particular region of India will be a fusion of *sastric* and folk elements (1994). Oral narrations are the recital of events especially arranged in chronological order based on chained events of experience or the events of imagination created by

mankind. Narration of different kind remains alive in the lips of the people across the generations. These bear the wits, the events of common sense brevity of heroism, morals and the elements of cultural regularities as mechanisms for the maintenance of socio-cultural orders. The actors in the narration may be mythical or real role occupants in the social transactions. The cultural events in the oral narratives remain exchanged between the community members grading the sex into gender and attach specific statuses that differentiate the male from female. Many anecdotes are identified as integral parts of a long narrative in which the status occupants are identified through morals and ethics and their experiences of grief, tragedy, misfortunes, enviousness, victimization, punishments and restoration of social network of relations. Traditional cultural items are thinning across the ages and in such a context of extraneous influence the rituals takes care of their survival and continuity.

### Theoretical Overview

The gender refers to the socio cultural identification of woman in relation to man in the cultural construct. It revolves the way societies distinguish men and women and assign them social roles to perform. However, it is pertinent to observe that no independent role is capable of performing the activities without referring to other connected roles. Thus assigned activities are performed in terms of role-sets in conforming to the gendered norms. It is used as an analytical tool to understand social realities with regard to women and men (Bhasin 2000) [1]. The gendering work in all known human societies is common (Kumar 2005) [6] however, they may differ in degree. Thus gender is a cultural contract and man-made. The origin of the Indian idea of appropriate female behavior can be traced to the rules laid down by Manu in 200

B.C.: "by a young girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house". "In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent." It refers to masculine and feminine qualities, behavior patterns roles and responsibilities which are subjected to change of time and space therefore it is variable. Fox in his book 'Family, Marriage and Kinship' writes that one of the principles of kinship is that male exercises power over female irrespective of societies (1997); thus the sex as a natural identity has been culturally amalgamated and transformed into gender. In the framework of the culture of the community, often the gender identity seems to be subordinate to that of the sex identity due to built-in cultural differentiation. The present paper tries to analyze a folktale of a merchant joint family current in rural Orissa with a view to understand how women are depicted in an age old narration, popularly known as story of Taapoi - a most lovable sister of seven brothers who went for a voyage in trade connection. In Patriarch model of society in absence of male members at home, powerful marital women engineered the cultural fabrics endangering the powerless consanguine woman. The narration goes as follows:

### **The Narration**

A merchant family has seven brothers and an unmarried sister whose ordinal position was eighth. She was Taapoi. In the family she was the last and hence everyone loved her too much and as such all her desires were fulfilled before she demanded. The brothers and the sisters in law were trying their best to keep Taapoi in good humor and poured gratification on her. Taapoi was delighted with the treatment she was receiving from all the family members. Of the seven sisters in law, the youngest was most attached to Taapoi and could not tolerate any sort of displeasure shown to Taapoi by any kin or anyone outside the family. She was more protective compared to others.

Once as usual the brothers went for a voyage as a part of their traditional occupation in the world of trade and commerce. After the observance of all ritual for the prosperity and wish for a safe return the seven brothers were given farewell by the sisters in law. The lone sister was wailing since she will not be alienated from the assured utmost affection of the brothers for the period. It could not be tolerated by the brothers however as the voyage was a compulsion they took an oath from their respective partners that pampered Taapoi will not be ignored for any reason and utmost care and affection must be given to her till they come back home. It was agreed upon and with lot of assurances for gifts the brothers left across waves the seas. The brothers were recollecting tearful face of their sister and were giving lot of similes of anguish referring to the tides of ocean as wailing sounds of the sister, dew as teardrops and war winds of the sunny days as her arrogance etc.

There was a Brahm widow residing in the village. She has been projected as a wicked woman who inflicts animosity in the minds of others to create family strifes. After the brothers left for the voyage the old Brahmin widow started visiting the merchant family and motivated the sisters in law against the loveable Taapoi citing different events and similes and comparisons. Gradually there has been a change in the

interpersonal relation between Taapoi and her sisters in law. All six elder sisters in law were feeling jealous for the attention and affection Taapoi was getting from their spouses. But out of fear they never revealed their sour tone against Taapoi.

After a few days the sisters in law felt Taapoi as a liability to the family. They started misbehaving her and assigned hard works of a maid servant. They attributed her presence at home to all misfortunes of the family. The younger sister in law who loved Taapoi was feeling uncomfortable when she was treated inhumanly by other sisters in law. But due to her social position in the family she was keeping mum. As the days rolled on the grief of Taapoi increased. The sisters' in-law broke the oath that they had made while they were bidding farewell to their husbands and while the sister Taapoi was consoled by all brothers. Except the youngest sister in-law, all others instructed her to wash their cloths, cook food, keep house clean, feed bovines, take goat for grazing into jungle etc. At the suffering of Taapoi the sisters in law were getting pleasure. Such sadist attitude was undigested by the youngest sister in law. Taapoi had to tolerate all odds and manage with scanty food and clothing. She was asked to take shelter along the bovines in shed outside home and in due course of time her presence was intolerable for almost all the sisters in law. She was tanned her skin and baked her face under hot sun and kept the biting cold away by cross folded hands. Due to hunger she was taking fodder as her food, dry prickly grass as her bed and water of the brook in the jungle to quench her thirst. The youngest sister in-law at times surreptitiously brought cooked spicy tasty food and cakes for her in nearby jungle and share grief with her. Recollecting brothers she was weeping in jungle and expressing her desire to the animals and plants and requested the stars to communicate her wish to her brothers for safe return. She did not have any tear to shed as it was completely dried. The chirping sounds of birds remain unheard. The unfortunate Taapoi was kicked out of home. At her exit the sisters in law were happy. Finding no alternatives, ill fated Taapoi had to take asylum in small shrine in the jungle-the abode of a tribal deity *Maa Mangala* to whom the rural trading communities worship as a fertility cult, a *Sakti* cult and goddess of wealth.

Taapoi was counting the days to meet her brothers. The time came and counting the position of stars and movement of cloud, the sisters in law were prepared to receive at the sea shore all seven brothers back home. The boat reached the unusual shore close to forest carrying lot of wealth and variety of gifts for Taapoi. When the brothers got down on the shore they heard a weeping sound of a girl similar to their sister's tone. Out of curiosity they went inside the forest and saw someone wailing recollecting the affection and love of her brothers praying deity for safe and healthy return of the brothers. To their surprise they saw that it was their sister in unhealthy state and inhuman living condition managing life under the control of extreme poverty. Bones spike up through skin, Taapoi was in an unimaginative stage. They for a while observed Taapoi sitting half clad among the cattle in hill slope and was worshipping ocean gods and jungle deities for happy and healthy return of her brothers and appealing nature to communicate her love and wish to her brothers. They could trace their sister who was looking like a mad, underfed, almost

unclothed, unclean and uncared like a street child.

Listening to the tone of brothers Taapoi was suddenly felt delighted and immediately took a promise not to inform brothers the maltreatment she got during their absence. Rather, she appealed the brothers to forgive the wrong doers. They lamented and accused themselves to have relied upon their family members for the Taapoi's condition. The brothers were annoyed and decided to punish them those who made Taapoi's life miserable. They brought her into the boat with all care and kept her dressed like a deity.

In the mean time receiving the message on brothers' return back home after a long gap of some months, all sisters in law with attractive garments reached the sea shore waited with ritual lamps, garlands, flowers, sacred food and water prepared to greet them. Nobody bothered about Taapoi. The brothers came out of the boat and asked about Taapoi. Every one remained silent. One after another all brothers asked about the whereabouts of Taapoi. There was no reply to the query. Except the youngest sister in law, no one had even a sense of guilt in face. The sisters in law were asked to see a deity they brought abode inside. When sisters in law saw, they got amazed. And asked themselves, it this deity- *Maa Mangala* or Taapoi? Except the last sister in law who could see Taapoi in real figure, all others saw real Taapoi in the guise of deity and got amazed. For the guilt of disobedience and breach of trust, except the youngest sister in law, all sisters in law were penalized. They lost their noses. It is believed that the *Sakti* cult whom Taapoi was worshiping had punished the sisters in law.

The unmarried non-brahim girls next to the Khetriyas – the vaisyas, in the caste hierarchical order in coastal Orissa observe this mythical event as a ritual locally known as *Khudurkoni Osha* in all four Sundays in the month of August-September (*bhadra*) and worship the *Sakti* cult, a tribal deity, *Maa Mangala* – the deity whose abode is the forest who is expected to act as a guardian spirit in favor of the unmarried girls for their future security. The girls observe fast and maintain ritual purity during the propitiation. Women, irrespective of caste origin, observe the pollution rules much more strictly than men and contact is culturally defined (Srinivas 1968).

The ritual is being organized at someone's residence within the village. The person who opts for the space at her residence feels important because the deity is invited to her house for propitiation. Thus, the members of household is likely to be better guarded by the spirit throughout the year. The team of girls arranges all ritually important items (cow dung, rice paste for alpana marks locally known as *chita muruja*, flowers, leaves, auspicious water and turmeric, berry leaves raw milk *durba* grass etc on Sunday morning and expresses their social solidarity in organizing the ritual. In past, the ritual was organized in the vicinity of the village adjacent to the forest. As the forest has been distanced from habitation area they organize it in village at someone's residence. Each participant volunteers to have physical contribution in organizing the ritual and there has been a mutual appreciation for the contribution. The space spotted for ritual is smeared with ritual water by the host who the after cleans the area first with mud plaster and after it gets dried they go for with cow dung plaster and other participants prepare beautiful alpana

marks to greet the deity. On this, they keep garlands of flowers stitched plant fiber, leaf plates and cups having seasonally available nuts, fruits, cakes and sweets. They the host invites everyone to start the ritual. The ritual begins with the mythical story being enchanted by the host and at times some portions of the story are being responded in chorus in front of a stone boulder symbolizing *Maa Mangala*. As the day enters they become serious and also fastidious. This seriousness continues till the end of ritual. Across the time, there has been a marginal change in the narration and the remarkable style of participation among the unmarried girls due to infiltration of urban cultural elements. At present the market driven consumer culture has also influenced the ritual performance. The mud and cow dung plastered ritual space is now replaced by cemented space with alpana marks made up of colored power. The leaf plate and cups have been replaced by the brass and steel materials.

The space is no more decorated by traditional items rather alpana marks are being used by the help of mechanical devices of frames meant for alpana marks. The participants come with variety of decorated saris and dress materials and ornaments. The social space here is being used for expression of economic status. The participants of the ritual were mostly mono ethnic - the Vaisya Hindus. In due course of time the economically well off other sub-castes members joined the ritual group. The members of the lower caste but economically better off who assumed an acceptable status in the interacting group imitate the cultural behavior of the *vaishyas*. The acceptability of the new entrants belonging to lower caste may be referred to as *vaishyaisation*. Among the participants some of them claim to be member of the *Khetriyas*. The ritual up-gradation of the lower subsection of the concerned castes is an expression of *sanskritisation* in the lines of M.N.Srinivas's theory of caste mobility. This mean socio-cultural change through imitation of ritual behavior of the upper caste is being initiated by the participant women folk. It has been observed that even the married and unmarried Brahmin women join the feasting and not fasting. The rural unmarried girls in multiethnic village resolve their conflict and develop mutual trust for this occasion. As the time rolled on and technology has gone into the village, the rituals now are being observed with audiovisual aids to enjoy the occasion associated with this ritual. There has been a sea change in the material condition. The ritual that was confined to coconut offer is now expanded to varieties of sweets however the non vegetarian food taboo is maintained till date. This is the occasion to overcome misunderstanding and develop fellow feeling among the participants. This ritual offers an opportunity to share common cultural elements among the women folks derived from different ethnic origin. Women of a particular caste use this occasion also for extra ritual purposes such as exchange of skill and knowledge on preparation of food and dress, discuss on matrimonial issues, formation of women wing of association, arrange strategies for effective self-help group etc.

### Discussion and Interpretation

Two central concepts of this article are the power of male (gender) and power of profession. The trading community profession wise refers to the structure of family wherein for

economic stability and prosperity the occupation demands the male to go beyond the native area through water route and remain absent for a long period away from home. The power of men and power of profession tend to reinforce one another due to oath of silence among the housewives to conceal the sufferings of sister in law Taapoi and action taken by the brothers against the housewives for their ill treatment shown to the dependent sister. The breach of trust between brothers and their respective wives inflicted pain on sister revealed that women related through in-law do not tolerate each other. The patriarch features are surfaced in form of awarding punishment and restoring harmony among family members. The moral is that evils are fearful and severely punished by power and guilt is considered and warned.

Women usually tell a story in which a woman is the central character. Women in this tale have been projected as having no loyalty to the husband; intolerant and jealous. The affectionate interaction shown by brothers towards their lone sister was kernel of jealousy. The degree of compassion among the housewives towards an unmarried lone sister in family was minimal. Similar status occupant incoming females of a joint family dislike the prospective out going females. Matrimonially connected sisters in law are at loggerhead with sister. The relationship among the blood relations in family across the sex has better cohesion thus blood is thicker than water. The gender based works assigned to the unprotected female has been depicted here in which women are projected as quickly motivated persons for the evil and act as intolerant women. However, there is also some expression where woman as a symbol of virtue and forgiveness in this tale has been depicted and evil is rewarded with punishment deserves the attention. The male as protector of women has also been expressed; however, the suffering is a must for women is a common trait in folktale. The supremacy of sisters in law in the absence of the male counterparts, the protectors and authoritarians in family, breeds contempt. This has been manifested when sisters in law assumed the male mind and exploit Taapoi. It is true that weaker women everywhere are subjected to exploitation. The inbuilt coping mechanism for weaker women is tolerance to the inflicted sufferings and patience to overcome socio-cultural trauma. The Taapoi tale identified the male mind in women (wives of the trading family) to exploit a dependent woman(sister of the trading family) and highlights the gender through morals and ethics and the experiences of grief, tragedy, misfortunes, enviousness, victimization, reunion, punishments and restoration of social status among members in family being decided by male members. When it is fading its cultural context due to extraneous influence, to defend, the events assume an integral part of the annual ritual.

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