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The bridegroom's companion in Odia: A study in socio-cultural semantics

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A few Odia (earlier Oriya) lexicographers have accepted /ma:rkuNDi/ as a native word with the following meaning: 'a boy accompanying the bridegroom to the bride's house for marriage.' But interestingly this boy cannot be just any boy; but either the bridegroom's brother or cousin. Thus, /ma:rkuNDi/ represents a special role in the Odia society. I intend to discuss the socio-semantic aspects of this word along with its synonym /kuilibara/ used in the northern Odia dialect. In fact, both these expressions represent a Munda custom verbalised through Dravidian words and used in Odia, a prominent Indo-Aryan language.

Key words: Odia, Indo-Aryan, Munda, Dravidian, socio-semantics, convergence.

INTRODUCTION

Unlike ordinary content words of a language, kinship terms do not usually show changes as the kinship system in a society is more or less stable. But even then, when a change takes place in a society due to various reasons, kinship systems change and so do their meanings. For instance, the word /devr/ was used in the great Sanskrit epic Mahabharata "...for both the younger and elder brother of the husband. The epic story shows that when a woman was widowed and childless, a child could be begotten on her either by the elder or younger brother of her husband" (Karve, 1965: 64). But the descendants of this word designate the younger brother in almost all Neo Indo-Aryan languages. As a result, a new term /deDhasura/ 'one and half father-in-law' is used to refer to the husband's elder brother in these languages. Interestingly, when a joking relationship exists between a man's wife and his younger brother, who is termed /devar/ or /diyar/ throughout the Indo-Aryan speaking area, a relationship of avoidance is quite common between a man's wife and his elder brother especially in eastern India. The other important point I want to mention is that it is a custom across the castes and regions of the eastern Indian state Odisha (earlier Orissa) for a young boy called /ma:rkuNDi/ to accompany a bridegroom when he goes for marriage. Though this system is found in a few other Indian states like West Bengal, Bihar, etc. no

such custom is practised in many other parts of Aryan and Dravidian India. As there is absolutely no discussion of this word as well as the custom associated with it, I intend to focus on these in this paper.

WHAT IS /ma:rkuNDi/?

The word /ma:rkuNDi/ is commonly used in different parts of Odisha except in the northern Odia dialect that uses /kuilibara/ in its place. What is surprising is that none of the Odia dictionaries published so far including Gopal Chandra Praharaj's seven-volume *purNachandra oDia: bha:sa:kosa* (1931 - 1940) that contains lots of dialectal words and expressions has listed /kuilibara/ as an entry. Even /mar:kuNDi/ is not listed in some, for example Pramodachandra Deb's *pramoda abhidha:na* (1942). Though /mar:kuNDi/ has found a place in most Odia dictionaries, all of these have described it as a 'desi' or native word with the following meaning: "A boy who accompanies the bridegroom in the procession to the bride's house for marriage" (Praharaj, 1936: 6486). But this description is incomplete and inappropriate because not any boy can accompany the groom. He has to have the relationship of either brother or cousin with the groom in order to be eligible to accompany the latter and this

information is crucial to determine the real meaning as well as the etymology of this word.

THE LEVIRATE SYSTEM

In the event of the elder brother's death, if a younger brother customarily marries his widow, this is called 'levirate'² in the anthropological literature. Though this system is current, it does not have the support of the Aryan social system. "The Smṛtis have all condemned it as a custom not suited to the present times, so that during the historical period one finds the custom of adoption coming into vogue. Higher castes and ruling families generally prohibit levirate and prefer that the widow should adopt a boy." (Karve, 1965: 133). For this reason, the kin terms /bha:bhi:/ and /devar/, which are quite acceptable and frequently used now were treated as abusive terms in the medieval period. According to Karve (1965: 173), "The word bha:bhi: ... was taken as an insulting mode of address for a respectable woman. A story tells that a woman so addressed by a king burnt herself and her curse destroyed the whole life of the king. In the story, the term bha:bhi: is contrasted to the terms ben (sister) and ma: (mother) which are the proper terms of address by a stranger to an unknown woman. Just as a man must not use the term bha:bhi: for a woman so also the term diyar is not used by a woman for a stranger except in abuse". But the situation is entirely different now.

THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC HERITAGE OF ODISHA

Whatever may be the cause of the change in other parts of India, in eastern India it may be presumed to be due to the influence of the Munda and Tibeto-Burman substrata. As a number of Munda languages are spoken in Odisha, I want to argue that these are responsible for the prevalence of this custom in this Indian state. In the Munda speech-communities there is a strict avoidance between a man's wife and his elder brother whereas a man's younger brother is entitled to marry his elder brother's wife in the event of the latter's death. A very similar situation prevails in the Odia society. A man's wife and his elder brother even do not see each other throughout their lives. A woman covers her head and face if by chance she comes across her husband's elder brother. On the other hand, there exists an intimate relationship between a woman and her husband's younger brother. Though their marriage does not take place in the event of the former's husband's death among the upper castes, it is still found taking place among the lower castes. But as expected, it is usually not a regular marriage; rather they live together with the family's consent. Therefore, whenever such an event takes place, the common Odia word for marriage proper, that

is /ba:ha:ghara/ or /bibha:ghara/ (from Sanskrit /viva:ha/) is not employed. The expression used for this is /ka:cakhaDu haba:/ literally meaning 'to wear glass bangles and metal bracelets'. It should be noted here that when a woman becomes a widow, she stops wearing these ornaments which are a sign of a married woman. However, all these clearly point to the fact that there is a strong and widespread Munda substratum in the Odia society. It will not out of place to mention that a number of Munda characteristics are found in the Odia language and Lord Jagannatha, who is of Munda origin, is the tutelary deity of the Odias. Therefore, it is quite reasonable to assume two things: First, the aforementioned relationship of avoidance between a man's wife and his elder brother is due to convergence of the Odia culture with that of the Mundas. Secondly, /ma:rkuNDi/ is a symbol of the levirate system that was once prevalent in the Odia society. Let us discuss this in detail.

A PLAUSIBLE ETYMOLOGY OF /ma:rkuNDi/

As already mentioned, /ma:rkuNDi/ besides being a boy is obligatorily the bridegroom's brother or cousin. He wears new clothes and gets dressed very much like the groom and used to travel with the groom in the same palanquin earlier. Nowadays, the palanquin has given way to a decorated car. After reaching the bride's home or the place where the marriage has to take place, he gets the same treatment as the groom, except for participating in the marriage ritual. This is unambiguously meant to tell the bride and her family that there is a person to look after her in case she becomes a widow due to her husband's death. It is intriguing that /ma:rkuNDi/ cannot be derived etymologically from either Indo-Aryan or Munda sources. As it cannot have an Indo-Aryan etymology, most Odia lexicographers have treated it as a 'desi' or native word. But it is an extremely fascinating fact that it is a compound composed of two Dravidian words /ma:ru/ (Burrow and Emeneau, 1984: 429) meaning 'changed, exchanged, altered, reversed', etc. and /kaNTan ~ kaNTi/ (pronounced [kaNDan ~ kaNDi] 'husband, etc.' (ibid.: 111). Thus, the lexical meaning of this compound is 'substitute husband'. Notice here that the initial syllable /ma:/ has a long vowel, that is /a:/ and it bears the stress; so the short vowel /u/ in the second syllable is liable to get deleted in a polysyllabic word in Indo-Aryan when the following syllable has a vowel other than /a/. This is how Dravidian /ma:ru/ has become /ma:r/ in Odia. Interestingly, /ma:r/ is also used with a similar meaning in the northern Odia dialect till today. Again, there is hardly any contrast between /a/ and /u/ in the penultimate syllable in polysyllabic words in Odia, for example /tentaLi ~ tentuLi/ 'tamarind', /pa:kharu ~ pa:kharu/ 'from a side', /a:Daku ~ a:Daku/ 'towards', etc. Thus, there is no problem for /ka/ of /kaNTan ~ kaNTi/ to

become /ku/ in Odia.

THE DIALECTAL COGNATE /kuilibara/ IN NORTHERN ODIA

Another interesting fact is that instead of /ma:rkuNDi/, the northern dialect of Odia uses /kuilibara/, which can also be analysed as a compound. Though /kuili/ or its Standard Odia form /koili/ is normally accepted as referring to the singing bird 'cuckoo', it is not really so. Rather, I suggest that this word is related to Dravidian /ko:yil/ meaning 'temple'. There are many Odia expressions in which /koili/ is used in this sense, for example /koili baikuNTha/ 'the place in Jagannatha temple where the images of Jagannatha, his elder brother Balabhadra and younger sister Subhadra are buried, and hence, it is 'temple VaikuNTha'. /koilibuDa/ 'early morning bath on the day before marriage after which the bride visits the temple of the village deity'. So /kuilibara/ literally means 'temple husband' that can be interpreted as 'a husband who has the sanction of the temple, that is god' and it also has the same referent as /ma:rkuNDi/. What is significant is that both /ma:rkuNDi/ as well as /kuilibara/ are compounds that contain Dravidian words; but, interestingly, these compounds are not found in Dravidian. That means these compounds represent a cultural concept that was alien to the Dravidian-speaking communities. Most probably by then the levirate custom had become a taboo in the Odia society. It is commonplace that whenever a concept becomes tabooed in a speech community, an indirect and circumlocutory expression is used to refer to it. At the same time, it is very interesting that such circumlocutory expressions may consist of words borrowed from other languages spoken in the neighbourhood. In all likelihood, this is what has happened in the case of /ma:rkuNDi/ and /kuilibara/. Though levirate is a Munda custom, it has been given expression through a Dravidian compound after it became a taboo, especially among the higher castes of the then Odia society.

CONCLUSION

The words like /ma:rkuNDi/ and /kuilibara/ demonstrate an intricate and interesting cultural past of the Odia society. Though convergence takes place normally between two languages, cultures, or societies; the present study demonstrates a multi-level convergence involving Munda, Dravidian, and Odia, which belongs to the Indo-Aryan stock.

Notes

- 1) I am thankful to the two anonymous referees for their comments and suggestions that it has been very useful to improve both the content and expression of this paper. However, the usual disclaimers apply.
- 2) The point to be noted is that the Latin word levir, which is the source of 'levirate', is directly related to Sanskrit 'devr', Greek 'daēr', Old English 'tācor' 'husband's brother'. For the switch between initial /d/ and /l/ compare Latin 'lacrima' and Greek 'dakru' 'tear', Latin 'lingua' and English 'tongue'.

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