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4. Bastar Dussehra As A Cultural Counter-Symbol: A Socio-Anthropological Study Of Ego Renunciation In Tribal Tradition

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Abstract

While mainstream Dussehra celebrations across India culminate in the symbolic burning of Ravana, Bastar's Dussehra follows an entirely different trajectory. Rooted in the indigenous cosmology of the tribal communities of Chhattisgarh, this festival does not portray the victory of one moral force over another. Instead, it foregrounds surrender, humility, and the immersion of ego. This socio-anthropological study examines Bastar Dussehra as a ritual system centered on internal cleansing, communal harmony, and cultural sustainability. It highlights how the festival functions as a counter-symbol to dominant Hindu narratives, offering a unique lens into indigenous spirituality, gendered ritual authority, and ecological ethics.

Keywords: *Bastar Dussehra, Tribal Rituals, Ego Renunciation, Indigenous Cosmology, Cultural Symbolism, Danteshwari Devi, Anthropology, Bastar Traditions*

1. Introduction

Across much of India, Dussehra is synonymous with Ravana Dahan—the burning of Ravana effigies to mark the triumph of good over evil. In contrast, Bastar, a culturally rich tribal region of Chhattisgarh, celebrates a markedly different version of the festival. Here, Ravana is neither constructed nor burned. Instead, rituals emphasize ahankar-visarjan—the immersion of ego—and intense community participation centered around goddess Danteshwari.

This paper examines the layered symbolic, social, and ecological meanings of Bastar Dussehra, situating it as a distinct cultural paradigm where victory is inward, communal, and ecological rather than adversarial.

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2. Objectives

1. To analyze Bastar Dussehra as a counter-cultural symbol within the broader landscape of Indian festivals.
2. To explore its anthropological significance in relation to tribal identity, gender relations, and ecological consciousness.
3. To document and interpret major rituals using emic (insider) perspectives.

3. Methodology

The study draws upon:

- **Ethnographic fieldwork** conducted during multiple Bastar Dussehra cycles.
- **Primary documentation** authored by the researcher, including:
 - Monograph Study of Bastar Dussehra (Tribal Research & Training Institute, 2015)
 - Photographic Documentation of Tribes of Chhattisgarh (TRI, 2021)
 - Bastar Mein Adivasi Vikas (2019)
- **Qualitative interviews** with ritual actors including kachhin devi representatives, jogis, rath karts, temple custodians, and community elders.
- **Secondary literature** from anthropological journals and archival records.

4. Cultural and Ritual Dimensions

4.1 Pat Jatra: Beginning with Nature

The festival begins with Pat Jatra, the ceremonial worship of the shal tree, marking the commencement of goddess Danteshwari's rath construction. This ritual encapsulates indigenous eco-spirituality and reverence for forest landscapes.

4.2 Kachhin Gadi: The Centrality of Feminine Consent

A young girl is selected to embody the goddess, and her consent is formally sought—a rare ritual structure where female agency, purity, and spiritual authority converge. The kachhin becomes the symbolic axis of the festival's decision-making.

4.3 Jogi Bithai: Meditation and Self-Denial

A chosen young boy is buried neck-deep for nine days in silent meditation. This profound act symbolizes spiritual offering, ascetic endurance, and the tribal philosophy of self-negation.

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4.4 Rath Parikrama: Collective Sacredness

The massive rath is pulled not by royalty or state authority but by hundreds of devotees. Importantly, the king does not decide when the rath will move—this authority rests solely with the kachhin devi, reflecting a democratic and matrifocal ritual order.

4.5 Ohadi: The Departure and Renewal

The concluding ritual, Ohadi, marks the symbolic farewell of the goddess. It signifies not closure but cultural regeneration and the cyclical renewal of cosmic and communal life.

5. Anthropological Interpretation

5.1 Ego Immersion vs. Enemy Destruction

Bastar Dussehra rejects the binary moral narrative of Ravana effigy burning. Instead, it promotes introspection and ego dissolution—values deeply embedded in indigenous cosmology, which prioritizes harmony over conflict.

5.2 Gendered Ritual Power and Matrifocality

The female kachhin holds the highest ritual authority, while men support and execute the ritual apparatus. This inversion of mainstream patriarchal religious hierarchies indicates a matrifocal spiritual system.

5.3 Embedded Ecological Ethics

Rituals are intimately tied to natural elements—trees, soil, seasons, forests. This highlights an indigenous ecological worldview based on interdependence, reciprocity, and sustainable coexistence.

6. Contemporary Relevance

In an age driven by ambition, performance, and material assertion, Bastar Dussehra offers a quiet but profound message:

“Do not burn Ravana — discover him within, and offer that ego to the earth.”

The festival emphasizes humility over spectacle, collective welfare over individual dominance, and ecological balance over consumption—making its ethos deeply relevant to contemporary environmental and social crises.

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7. Conclusion

Bastar Dussehra is not merely a regional variation of the national festival. It is a civilizational counter-narrative that challenges dominant notions of victory, power, and ritual practice. Through its matrifocal authority, nature-centric rituals, and emphasis on ego renunciation, it presents a transformative model of cultural sustainability. More than a festival, it is a living repository of tribal philosophy, reinforcing a worldview rooted in balance, humility, and coexistence.

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