



STRUCTURE AND MEANING OF THE GONDI PUNEM FLAG: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT:

Flags quite often are the symbols of their community; which have a semiotic structure. To find out more about how semiotic structure created meaning, this paper carries out a semiotic analysis of the Gondi Punem Flag, the flag of the Gonds of India. Semiotic structures can create meaning by (1) The logic by which the semiotic structure is constructed. (2) The relation of the semiotic structure with society. (3) By the relationship of the parts of the symbol with other parts. The paper concludes with pointers for future research.

KEYWORDS: semiotic structure , society , future research.

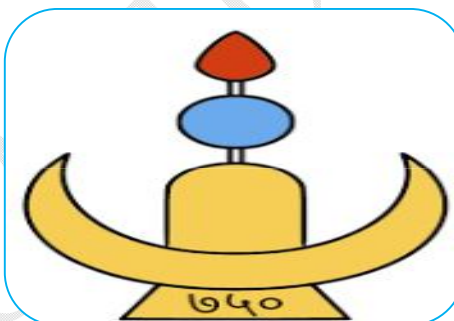
INTRODUCTION

Flags quite often represent their communities. Nations, religions, tribes, among others; associate with flags. Almost always, flags are symbols; entities which stand for something other than the entity itself. Although all symbols have a structure, the role of the symbol's structure in creating meaning has often been overlooked. This paper asks how the Gondi Punem Flag, which is the flag of the Gonds of India, creates symbolic meaning.

India is home to the largest tribal population in the world, many of which are Gonds, an ancient community with centuries of history. Gondi Punem is the Gondi philosopher. Although a lot is

known about the Gonds; this paper will attempt a social-semiotic analysis of the Gondi Punem Flag. The Gondi Punem Flag comes about by the logic of its creation and the socially-situated interpretation of the flag's structure and characteristics.

Objects like the flag can stand as a matter of fact or as a matter of meaning, which are opposed to each other. Wittgenstein (1953) distinguishes between 'See That' and 'See As'. For instance, a Gondi Punem Flag is the visual image of the flag. A fact without any kind of interpretation. Seeing That. The flag can be seen as a flag that has a particular meaning, which comes from a human interpretation. This interpretation creates meaning.



Seeing As.

'Seeing As' creates meaning of a particular symbol. A symbol, thus, is a carrier of meaning which can either be: denotative meaning or connotative meaning. Denotative meaning, the meanings that a symbol has, is the essential meaning of a symbol. For instance, the denotative meaning of the flag is that it is a flag of the Gonds. Connotative meaning is implied by a symbol. For instance, that Gonds have primitive beliefs could be a connotative meaning of the flag.

'Seeing As' involves a subjective meaning which arise from an individual mind but not without a conceptual (Saussure, 1983) apparatus which is commonly shared. 'Seeing As' is not random.

Meanings given by the conceptual apparatus which is behind the creation and interpretation of the peculiar structure and characteristics of the flag. The individual mind that creates meaning is swimming in the pool of collective conceptual apparatus; which is linked to the structure of the flag.

This paper asks how meaning arises from the symbol of Gondi Punem Flag, a symbol with a particular structure? In the following few paragraphs, we will review some semiotics and social theory in order to give perspective to the research question. Semiotics will say how Gondi Punem Flag qualifies as a symbol with a meaning. Social Theory will see how, following Giddens, meaning arises from a 'social practice' involving the logic of the flag's creation and the socially-situated interpretation of the flag's structure and characteristics.

THEORETICAL STANDPOINT

Semiotics is the study of signs. Signs consist of a signifier, for instance, the sound-image in language and a signified, which is the object or concept denoted by the signifier (Saussure, 1983). The signified is the meaning of the signifier. For instance, the Gondi Punem Flag, as a physical flag, is a signifier. The meaning denoted and connoted by the flag is the signified. Put together, the signifier and the signified constitute the sign.

Semiotics is about 'the life of signs within society' (Saussure, 1983). Although, signs and society are distinct, signs have a life inside society. Signs depend for their existence on society and are created by society. Society gives the denotative meanings and connotative meanings to signs, and takes away meanings from signs. New sign relations are formed and old sign relations wither away as a consequence of society.

(Johansen and Larsen, 2005) point out that Peirce mentions three kinds of signifiers or symbols. (1) Icons are those symbols which resemble the signified, for instance, a picture of a flame will resemble a flame. (2) Indexes are those symbols which contain an 'evidence of what is being represented'. For instance, smoke will indicate a flame. (3) Symbols are those symbols which are related to the signified only by convention, like a flag is related to the flag's meaning only by convention.

Meaning is created by the sign relation between the signifier and the signified. The signifier and the signified and the sign relation combining the two create a structure. The research question before the study is how the symbol of Gondi Punem Flag, which has a structure, becomes meaningful. Probably, the structure involves a process by which it creates meaning, a process which can be called 'structural practice'.

Giddens (1984) is a theorist of 'structural practice'. Structure is not a stationary entity, which exists outside human agency. Agency uses structures in order to act. For Giddens, structure is both a 'medium and outcome' of social *action* (my emphasis). Giddens brings together agency and structure, which together perform social action. Acting upon the world is the key element of this concept. Probably, interpretation is also a social action which interprets semiotic structures to create meaning.

Giddens (1984) says that structures include rules and resources, which are two separate facets of each structure. Rules refer to those 'techniques or generalizable procedures applied in the enactment/reproduction of social practices'. Rules can refer to procedural rules, which are about how a social practice will be *practiced*. Resources refer to the 'capabilities of making things happen'; resources include 'individual's command over objects, goods or other persons'.

FINDINGS

The Gondi Punem Flag, Figure 1, is an iconic symbol, consists of various parts which, put together, form a symbolic structure. The flag is a sign, in the strict sense in which Saussure (1983) uses the term. The flag contains various parts which together constitute the signifier. The flag signifies the philosophy of the Gondi people; what Saussure would call a 'concept'; which can also be called the flag's meaning.



Fig 1: The Gondi Punem Flag

The flag is able to gain signification as a signifier because of the peculiar interpretation that the awareness of the knowledge of the Gondi philosophy brings. The flag is 'Seen As' a flag of the Gondi people, at least to the Gondi people as well as those who see the flag 'As' a flag of the Gonds. The denotative meaning of the flag is contained in the ideas reflected in the flag. The connotative meanings of the flag can be many, which can come from the many interpretations of the flag.

Possibly, if 'Seeing As' involves an interpretation; then there can be as many as meanings as there are interpretations. Perhaps, there cannot be a certain meaning of the flag, even if the flag's denotative meanings and connotative meanings are interpreted in the way most Gond people would interpret their symbol. While looking at how meaning arises from the Gond Punem Flag, a symbol with a structure, this paper will not go down the 'multiple meaning' lane, a peculiar post-modernist stance.

Firstly, the flag gains meaning by giving the structured symbol a symbolic interpretation, one which takes shape by a classical explanation. As Kangali (1989/2018) notes, 'it is cut out in the ratio of 2:3. There is a white colour band on the extreme left of the flag. The seven rainbow colours of the flag seem to arise as rays from the from the original basic white light.

The white colour band symbolises the white light of Parsa Pen Power from where arise the *salla shakti* and *gaangra shakti* (the *salla shakti* is male power and *gaangra shakti* the female power). From the action reaction of *sallagaangra shakti*, evolve the *Gondi PunemiGandjiv* (the Gondi beings). The *salla shakti* is depicted by an oblongated figure and the *gaangra shakti* on its top by a round figure. The interaction of the two gives rise to the Jyoti (flame), which is the flame of the life world. From this Jyoti evolve the seven *sagas*(communities of Gonds).

There is a Trishul under the *salaagaangra* union symbolising the three-fold path of Gondi Punem Darshan, which is also called Jai Seva Darshan. The three parts of the Trishul signify the intellect, the mental and the bodily aspects of the GandJeev, further leading to the Gondi Punem Darshan. Gondi PunemiGandjiv are divided into 12 'Saga' branches, which are divided into 750 Gotras. This is why the figure 750 is considered auspicious in Gondi Punem Philosophy. Consequently, 750 is inscribed in the middle of the trishul-like-symbol. This flag displays the cultural values of Gondi Punemis'.

The rule while making this signification is that the meaning of the symbol has to be interpreted according to the classical explanation of the Gondi Punem. The resource involves command over the explanation of the flag, as taken from Kangali(1989/2018). The interpretation that is being carried out above is an act; and hence a 'social practice'; a practice which causes signification.

Secondly, the flag gains meaning by interpreting the structured symbol for a social group, the Gondi people in our case. The flag is a carrier of the Jai Seva Darshan. Pari Kumar Lingo taught Jai Seva Darshan to his followers (Kangali 1989/2018:130):'The ultimate happiness and peace of life cannot be achieved alone. It is achieved only in community life, only by being of service to each other. By the dint of individual work, and by his mind, if an individual is giving peace and happiness to everyone else, then everyone's welfare can be granted. This sense of service ought to be hailed. Seva-Bhavna has to be inculcated in each individual and he should serve all the Gand-Jivs with his body, mind and intellect. Each Gandjiv should serve all other Gand-Jivs. The Trishul in the symbol signifies this world-view, as suggested below.

The Bhumka Neng Mantra says: 'Listen Followers! Know about the philosophy of Seva-Bhav. Know the truth and spread true knowledge, illuminate yourself and illuminate others, become a part of the Saga community order and establish saga relationship according to community rules, be a truth-saying person and use truthful words, serve yourself and serve the saga people'.

The flag contains a symbol on the extreme left which depicts the three facets of service to all Gand-Jivs: body, mind and intellect. The rule is that the structure of the symbol will focus on the import of the flag; an import which will come from the cognition around the Jai-Seva Philosophy. This cognition constitutes the resource of the symbolic structure.

Thirdly, the flag gains meaning as a symbolic structure which has a number of parts; which are in a relationship with each other, a relationship which creates signification. The flag can be divided into (1) The symbol at the extreme left of the flag with a white background and (2) the spectrum of seven colours; each colour corresponds with a certain number of stars, as imprinted on each strip of colour. Parts (1) and (2) put together constitute the flag.

Part (1) contains a symbol against a white background. The three branches of the 'Seva-Bhavna'; body, mind and intellect, constitute the base of the symbol; upon which the rest of the symbol stands. The number '750', which enumerates the total number of Gotras of the Gonds, are imprinted upon the base; signifying a faithful union of the Gondi people with the Gondi philosophy. On the base, The Salla Shakti and Gangra Shakti interact; an interaction signifying the union of Gondi forefathers, standing on the basis of Gondi faith. The light on the top signifies the blessedness of the union, stands as it does on top of the signifiers of the union.

Part (2) derives part of its potency from its relationship with part (1). In the classical explanation of the flag, the white background of the symbol signifies the white light of the Parsa-Pen. The white light splits into the seven colours, just as sunlight splits into a seven-coloured spectrum. This relationship signifies that the 'Sagas' of the Gonds arise from the light of Parsa-Pen. Each 'Saga' has a corresponding number of stars and each star corresponds to the number of Gods that a 'Saga' has. This relationship signifies a union of community and gods.

The rule in interpreting this symbolic structure consists of relating parts to parts of the symbolic flag and creating a signification. Interpreting the same relationship requires an awareness of the ideas behind the flag and its structural layout. Without this awareness, the interpretation can become random. The resource in this interpretation is availability of the photograph of the flag; which enables an interpretation of the parts of the flag possible.

CONCLUSION

This paper began with a research question: how meaning arises from the symbol of Gondi Punem Flag, a symbol with a particular structure? The paper proposed that meaning arises when structures are 'Seen As' in a particular fashion. Denotative and connotative meanings arise from the interpretation of individuals. Using Giddens (1984) this paper argues that meaning arises from the semiotic structure of the flag in three ways.

Firstly, the flag gains meaning by giving the structured symbol a symbolic interpretation, one which takes shape by a classical explanation. *Secondly*, the flag gains meaning by interpreting the structured symbol for a social group, the Gondi people in our case. *Thirdly*, the flag gains meaning as a symbolic structure which has a number of parts; which are in a relationship with each other, a relationship which creates signification.

This paper discusses the flag only in one kind of 'discursive universe'; which is an institutional setting in which a symbolic act is interpreted. The discursive universe in our case is one in which the classical explanation of the symbol takes place, as elucidated in the texts on Gonds. Alternative discursive universes can also be imagined in which the symbol can have new kinds of meanings; possibly in new kinds of ways.

Another angle missing from this paper is an appreciation of individual agency when it comes to interpreting structures which can create semiosis. Only scholarly agency was the basis of our analysis of the interpretation of a semiotic structure to create meaning. Further research can uncover how

individual agency and collective agency can give varying interpretations of semiotic structures like the Gondi Punem Flag.

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