

AGARIA- THE SONS OF FIRE- A Brief Review

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The film, 'Agaria- The Sons of Fire' is a 27 minutes long ethnographic film. The film has been made under the direction of Nandan Saxena and Kavita Bahl and cameraman, Kamaljeet Negi. It was also screened at the second edition of the Chandigarh cinema festival. Although the film has not won awards, but has secured a good place in terms of providing insights to the part of the culture of the Agaria tribe.

Agaria tribe belongs to the central provinces of India. They reside in the adjoining areas of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, specifically in the Balaghat, Dindori, Mandala and Sidhi districts of Madhya Pradesh and Kawardha, Raigarh and Bilaspur districts of Chhattisgarh. They are often referred to as the aboriginal iron smelters and blacksmiths of India. It is because of their traditional occupation that they have a dispersed population, with predominantly only one Agaria family being found in some of the villages (Elwin. 1942; Russel and Hira Lal. 1916; Mehta. 2004; Singh. 1992; Soni. 2016).

According to Elwin (1942), the people of Agaria tribe used to make implements like axe, arrow head, sickle, nails, etc. and sell in the local markets for their livelihood. However, Soni (2016), in his research brought out the changes that have occurred to this traditional community by the advent of industrialization and globalization. At present, the people of the Agaria tribe have started leaving their traditional occupation and have resorted to other means for their livelihood. The coming up of factories has affected their craft. The major sources of the economy are referred to be agriculture, labour work or making of artefacts from the easily available iron. The agricultural land available to them is uneven, without proper irrigation and just enough to produce crops for own consumption. They have also taken up hunting and fishing for own consumption. This has led to a low average annual household income. Moreover, they have a low literacy level and are thus accounted as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG).

The film starts with a background folk music and mainly focuses on the skill of iron smelting, aged by the people of Agaria tribe in the past. The beginning of the film provides an insight about the tribe Agaria, their inhabitation, source of income and the livelihood and the way it has changed over years.

The film maker and the correspondent of the film, Nandan Saxena developed an interest to know about the iron smelting technique of the people of Agaria tribe after meeting Dr. Pandey of the Tribal Research Institute, Bhopal, who, in turn paved his way to the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal, to show him how their habitat and the furnace actually looked like. The correspondent showed curiosity in knowing and understanding the very cultural tradition of the Agaria people, since it had declined over years and is now left just as an oral tradition among a few of them only.

Having gained enough significance to film the iron smelting skill of the Agarias, the correspondent headed towards village, *Gaura Kanhari*, a predominantly Gond village with about five Agaria families. The furnace for staging the tradition of iron smelting had been set up there. The informants and skilled workers, *Panku Ram* and his wife, *Ramwati Bai* took pride and privilege to perform this eminent art of their culture. While *Panku Ram* along with his friend set up the furnace, all the people of the tribe, including his in-laws, grandchildren and others gathered there to be a part of this auspicious event. The required resources, like the charcoal and iron ore, either magnetite or haematite were generated and bought respectively. The people then followed their mythological rituals, by making customary offerings of *Mahua* and chicken to the *Lohasur*. Then, *Ramwati Bai* stepped on the bellows, and the process of iron smelting advanced. After about three hours or so, the completion of task was concluded and the iron was taken out. The iron so produced was termed as *kuwari loha* or the virgin iron.

Analyzing contextually, the culture of the Agaria people was well depicted by this film, whether it was in terms of the iron smelting process or as oral tradition. The offerings made by the locals to their almighty very well showed their belief and customs. Apart from that, a few insights about the culture of the Agaria people could be depicted from the kind of clothes they wore, their tattoos, language and dialect and a lot more. Moreover, it can be concluded that though women are not given an equal status in this polygamous society, they work equally as men do. Talking about the correspondent's contribution towards the culture of the people, the offering of a piece of cloth and the bottle of wine, made by him denotes his sense of understanding their culture as well as brings into consideration an eminent way of rapport establishment.

Carrying out the semiotic analysis, a number of signs and symbols can be acknowledged for the Agaria people. For an instance, the importance of *mahua* can be seen among the people of the tribe. It can also be considered as their staple drink, with much of significance in case of religious as well as social aspects. Apart from that, *kuwari loha* or the virgin iron is treated as pious and pure, and is thought to protect the person possessing it from evil and keeping him safe. On the other hand, the animal sacrifices, like that of the chicken or pig again throws light into their beliefs and customs.

Drawing an insight towards the mise- en- scene aspect of the film, the way the camera had been used could have been improved, as the constantly moving frame blurred the vision at times and also reduced the quality of the film. Also, at some points, like while shooting at night, lightening could have been paid more attention to. This would have added on to the beauty of the film.

To summarize, it can be concluded that the film brings out a very different and innovative view about the traditional process of iron smelting preserved by the Agaria people. It can be very well differentiated from today's modern technology used for the same purpose. Moreover, the coverage provided through the film is exceptional. However, the film has been shot in not so natural setting as the furnace was set up by the people of the tribe, only when they were asked to do so. Had it been in natural setting, the situation and also the ways and techniques depicted could have been much better. Not only this, a question that arises here is- 'who the targeted audience was?' and 'whether the filmmakers were able to deliver their view and explain the significance of the same to them?' Also, if the community was promised to be shown the same, how that plan would have been carried forward, since the people of the community did not seem so aware about the technology to have seen that on their own. So, were the people actually able to witness themselves as a part of the film or not?

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