

THE KARAM FESTIVAL OF THE ORAON TRIBALS OF INDIA: A SOCIO-RELIGIOUS ANALYSIS

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Festivals are significant and essential to community living and understanding. A festival moves from being a mere occasion to observance of deep rooted traditions and customs of community living. It is a widely accepted fact that the festivals, which are woven into the cultural and social fabric of life also become a medium to understanding, especially with reference to a country like India, the quintessential 'Indianness', as it is through their institutionalization that one begins a process of understanding the traditions, the legends and the parameters that led to the birth of a particular festival or festivals. A festival can have a social base or a religious base but when it comes to a country like India, the social factors invariably get infused into the religious factors and give the festivals a unique sacred cover and fervor.

Scholars have invariably identified the secular and sacred aspect of festivals. The festivals without doubt are 'an occasion to wear new clothes, decorate houses, sing hymns, let off fire works, prepare special meals and exchange good wishes. They may have a religious meaning or be associated with a particular season, but be it in any part of the world, the festivals have much in common, for the joy of living and gratitude for nature's bounties are universal. The festival is a periodic religious celebration or series of performances of a certain kind, often held periodically.'¹

Although the 'essence' of most of the festivals is religious, that is, the veneration of various gods or deities, the social aspect, which is the most visible aspect of a festival, is equally significant, which can neither be denied nor overlooked. All festival observances culminate in the general and collective merrymaking, invariably marked by greater social interactions and exhibiting of fine dresses, sharing of delicacies, which now have taken a wider berth through the

¹ Ajit. K. Singh. *Tribal Festivals of Bihar: A Functional Analysis*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1982. Introduction. p.3.

coming up of exclusive shops or centers catering to the specific as well as mixed public of urban, semi-urban and rural areas. These occasions, moreover, become an outlet for the release of psychological tensions and worries that otherwise bog an individual down and stunt their move towards peaceful existence and bliss.

All festivals, whether tribals' or the non-tribals' are important in terms of conducting an anthropological study or analysis of the socio-religious life of the community. It is through the medium of festivals (only) that one gathers information about the value systems, beliefs, morals, ethics, and family and community organization and also constructs the identity of the community. It is with serious concern that one approaches the study of tribal festivals as these festivals are at risk of extinction through the various modes of cultural transitions or transformation to the styles and manners of the dominant non-tribal communities.

The Karam festival of the Oraons falls within the socio-religious domain. The Karam festival is classified as an agriculture festival. In this sense, it is highly symbolic as it is also associated with the idea of 'productivity' or 'fecundity'. The idea of fecundity applies to the agricultural produce or crops as well as to the recently engaged girls of the village who venerate the Karam deity residing in the Karam tree. Thus the Karam festival also becomes an occasion to petition God for perpetuity of the clan or community through the fecundity of the participating girls of the village. The Karam festival also becomes a motif because the communitarian fervour is invoked and enforced through the sacred and secular observance of it.

The Karam festival is celebrated usually on Bhado Ekadashi, on the eleventh day of the bright full moon (Purnima) of the month of Bhado (August-September). The Karam tree, scientifically called *Nauclea Parvifolia* is the center of the proceedings at the festival. The preparations, for the Karam festival, start around ten or twelve days before the festival. The girls, who wish to participate in the festival, sow barley in their homes. They keep it inside their homes, in shade, away from direct sunlight. They also sprinkle water mixed with turmeric over it due to which the germinating barley acquires a golden yellowish tinge and looks beautiful. The idea behind this ritual is to revive in their memories, the day of the 'great escape' of the Oraons from the enemy tribe Cheros in the Rohtas fort in the Shahabad district of Bihar. The whole process of germinating barley seeds is a ritual and so is replete with the singing of songs to the germinating seeds by the girls of the village who keep watch over the germinating barley like mothers watch over their children. The barley or *jawa* in the pot is an image of the impregnated earth (or the womb of the earth) fertilizing the *jawa* seeds and producing shoots or *jawa* flowers. The image is extremely pertinent in the context of the Karam festival. During this period, the girls participating in the festival abstain from consuming non-vegetarian food to maintain the auspiciousness of the Karam festival.

The morning of the Karam festival, starts with the women pounding rice in the *dheki*² or a wooden implement to obtain rice flour. This rice flour is used to make a local tribal delicacy, which can be sweet as well as salty. This delicacy is cooked in the morning of the Karam festival for consumption, and shared in the neighborhood thus also fostering community fervour.

In some villages as in Ghatha, Gumla, in Jharkhand, prior to proceeding to the forest to cut the Karam branches, the girls as well as boys, observe the ritual of '*Jimma Cheena*', which in Kurux means 'giving the responsibility'. The *Baiga* or the tribal priest hands over the essential

² Dheki is a wooden implement used for various domestic purposes. It is used to pound paddy or separate husk from rice, to make chiwra etc.

ingredients such as a handful of white *arwa*³ rice, white thread, a little *sindur* (vermilion) and a white egg required for the ritual of '*suta bandhana*' (or tying the thread) in a leaf. Through this ritual the *Baiga* entrusts the group, with the sacred responsibility of the ritualistic cutting of the Karam branches. The youth are the upholders of the Oraon customs and tradition. It is up to them to perpetuate it or put an end to it. This ritual symbolizes the 'passing of responsibility, tradition, and wisdom from the old to the new.' The youth after this proceed to the forest where the *Kattari* or the one who is supposed to cut the Karam branches, first goes to the spot, which was marked by the ancestors as the place, which has a Karam tree in its precincts. He begins the ritual of '*suta bandhana*' by placing three small stones of equal size in a row. Thereafter he ties a white thread around the three stones three times. He then puts a '*sindur tika*' (or anoints with *sindur*) on each stone, places an egg in the centre and sprinkles some *arwa* rice on the stones. After reverently bowing his head before the three stones, he picks up the egg and throws it away towards the direction of the rising sun. This ritual of *suta bandhana* is carried out in two places. Here, the white color of the *suta* or thread stands for purity. The number three is significant in the Oraon universe, as it stands for the invocation of, in hierarchical order - God (or *Dharmes*), whose holy name and blessings at the beginning of all auspicious occasions is important; the ancestral spirits, without whose approval and beneficence any auspicious activity can be ruined; and *Panch*, the elected representatives of the community, entrusted with the general welfare of the tribal community.

The *Kattari*'s tying a white thread around the three stones symbolizes offering of new clothes to the three signage thereby expressing reverence, honor and love for them. The anointing of the three stones with *sindur* and sprinkling a little white *arwa* over them also symbolizes reverence for the three objects of worship by which their blessings, benevolence and goodwill are also sought by the Oraons. As mentioned earlier, the white color of rice and the 'parboiled' quality of rice stands for 'pristineness', which is maintained in the 'offerings'. An egg, generally, symbolizes life but a white egg symbolizes purity of life, so here, in the performance of the ritual, it becomes the highest form of sacrifice as there is no shedding of blood, which usually characterizes a fowl or any other animal sacrifice. The direction of the rising sun is equally important in the tribal universe. The direction of East, for the tribals, stands for hope, life, prosperity and well-being, so they face east while propitiating the deities. During a marriage ceremony also, the couple are made to face east before committing themselves to each other for ever. In the tribal theology, God or *Dharmes* is a kind figure, who has therefore been called *Biri-Belas*, which, in Kurux, means lord of light. This comparison of *Dharmes* with *Biri* or light or sun is not without reason. The sun is a traditional symbol of hope and happiness. Its rising brings the dark and dead earth to light and life. The elements and beings of nature rejoice under its warm and kind rays. The sun also, in this sense, becomes a symbol of life saving energies. The act of offering or *suta bandhana* is thus completed in accordance with the dictum of the ancestors who had done this earlier and made it binding upon their progeny.

The group thereafter goes towards the Karam tree and amidst much singing; the *Kattari* anoints the tree with *sindur*, sprinkles some *arwa* rice on it, bows to it and climbs the tree. Since the Karam after the preliminary ritual acquires the status of a deity, the '*sindur tika*' that is applied to the tree symbolizes welcoming the Karam in the community with reverence and honor. *Sindur*, in the Indian context, is treated as a substitute for blood; it is suggestive of life, it is auspicious as its application unites two people together in love. In an Indian marriage

³ Arwa rice is usually offered in the worship as it is not parboiled before husking but only dried in the sun, as against Usna rice, which is parboiled before husking.

ceremony, *sindur* is applied in the parting of hair of the bride by the groom. The bride responds by putting a '*sindur tika*' on the forehead of the groom. This gesture sanctifies the union of the bride and groom. When it is applied to the Karam Raja, it symbolizes love and affection for the deity.

It is also crucial that the *Kattari* cuts the Karam branches with one stroke of the axe, as the festival is a ritual and sacred, therefore utmost care is taken to cut healthy, disease and worm free branches with just one stroke. The branches should not bear many strokes and thereby get 'defaced' or 'damaged'. It is equally important that the girls standing beneath the tree catch the branches in mid air. They should not touch the ground. The idea of 'pristine' or 'pure' branches is maintained here.

After this the group proceeds to the village, to the *Baiga's* house singing, dancing and swaying the branches over their heads. They reach the *Baiga's* place where the *Baiga* receives the Karam branches by washing the feet of the Karam deity with water, and anointing the branches with *sindur*. An example of this tribal ritual of welcoming the guests by washing their feet, interestingly, is also found in the Hindu Mythology - *The Ramayana*, where Nishadaraj, the tribal chief welcomes the Aryan Prince Rama by washing his feet.

It is customary for the Karam to be received by the *Baiga* first as the tribal belief is that many spirits come along with the Karam. So the duty of religious priest is called for, to intervene and protect the village from any kind of malevolence at the hands of the spirits.

The *Baiga* also offers *hadia* or rice beer, which is a cultural artifact, to the party. The group dances outside the *Baiga's* place for some time, and after placing the branches on the roof of the *Baiga's* house departs for the night. These branches have to be watched over the night by the *Baiga* against stealing by the anti-social elements. These branches represent symbolically the issue of the girls participating in the ritual. So stealing of the branches would mean depriving the girls of their issues, which in the tribal society is equivalent to ruining the totality of the family.

In the morning, with the cock's first crowing, the branches are taken in a procession to the village *akhra*⁴ amidst much singing and dancing, and installed in the center by the *Baiga*. The center position of the Karam is symptomatic of the 'centering' of the Karam in the lives of the tribals. It is a motif as it constructs the socio-religious life, identity and existence of the Oraons. It also serves as a reminder of the 'great escape', so it is accorded the 'center', the prominent position in the *akhra*, as in the lives of the tribals.

It is very interesting to note that the Karam festival propounds fecundity of both the girls and crops or land. In other words, the tribals' family as well as the fields should be brimming with abundance as both are important elements in the tribal universe. The fecundity of both is essential in the tribal world as they are signifiers of 'abundance' and happiness in a family and community. These two, if, infertile can cause pain, unhappiness, misery and lead to the 'destruction' of the family and community. The 'honor' of both is protected zealously. Both are symbols of life. They provide nourishment and sustenance to a family and community. They can make or mar families. Wars or battles are fought over acquisition of them. In the semiotic universe of the Karam also, they are significant elements.

In the larger context, the Karam is the signifier as well as the signified. It forms the culture as well as the society. When it acts the signifier it indicates its position or status as a socio-religious function in the Oraon society. It is the medium for the convergence and the

⁴ Akhra is a big courtyard. It is the ground where the ceremonial dances are held. The Oraons have many other festivals, the observance and celebration of which require ritualistic dancing and singing. Akhra also serves as a place for important social gatherings.

existence of the community and the construction of the identity of the Kuruxs. It enables the development and convergence of the tribal consciousness to a single unit, through the motif of the Karam. As the signifier, it is a festival which allows the tribals a social and cultural cohesion thereby promoting harmony, and fraternity among people. It is an occasion where people forget their sorrows and miseries with a cup of *hadia*.

As the signified, the Karam is the reason for the existence of the Oraons. It is the identity, and the tribalism of the Oraons. Therefore it has a sacred space in the Oraon universe.

The *Baiga* begins the ritual worship of the branches by lighting a '*diya*' (an earthen lamp) and placing it at the feet of the Karam deity. He anoints the branches with *sindur* and sprinkles a little white *arwa* rice and *hadia* at the feet of the Karam deity. With this, the installed Karam branches thus transmogrify into the Karam deity who is then lovingly called Karam Raja by the girls and boys.

The veneration of the Karam branches is also seen in the very act of the picking up of the fallen Karam leaves during the carrying away of the Karam branches to the *akhra*. These leaves are later immersed in the village pond or '*don*' or low land in the village, with the three Karam branches, by the girls who touch the ground with the Karam branches, three times, facing east.

In some villages, after the installation of the Karam branches, the *Sarna*⁵ community begins the incantation of the Karam prayer⁶, which in Kurux is:

*Maia Dharme kiya em, Nighai khann hurmi iri, Emhai khann mala iri,
Akkam balkam adin samrhake, Nin hurmi samrhake.*

Translation:

‘*Dharme* (God), thou are above and we below. Thy eyes see everything. Our eyes don’t see (spirits). Things we have inadvertently omitted, do thou make up, do thou control everything.’

The Karam prayer like other prayers is petitionary. It is a prayer to the Supreme Being *Dharmes* to bestow peace, prosperity, health and happiness upon the tribals. Through this prayer, the tribals ensure the well being of their households. The prayer also acknowledges that *Dharmes*, who is above sees everything that happens below. He controls and regulates everything upon the earth. Man is a puny creature, totally helpless without *Dharmes*’s beneficence.

Nature as always forms an integral part of the Oraon life. So the Oraons turn to nature for the better regulation of their lives. After the completion of the Karam prayer, the incense sticks are put at the feet of the Karam deity. The ‘fasting’ girls go to their respective homes to break their fast with rice bread and other delicacies prepared on the occasion of the Karam festival. They return soon after all dressed up with their ‘Karam *dowra*’ to hear the Karam *katha* (story) from the elderly story teller. With the ritual of the ‘dressing up’ of the participating girls in their fine white sari with red border, which is an ethnic wear of the Oraon women, the image of Karam as the ‘bridegroom’ is enforced. So the girls are ready to, symbolically, receive their groom, which is the Karam Raja, through participation in the Karam rituals. The observance of

⁵ Sarna is the name given to the followers of the indigenous tribal religion.

⁶ This was observed during the Karam veneration in Multi, Mandar, the village in Jharkhand, India, where I conducted my research on the Karam festival. It does not appear to be a general practice as I was informed by Shri B.N. Munda, an educated Munda Pahan and a member of Delhi Sarna Samaj that prayers are offered only at fowl sacrifices. Since the Karam festival has no sacrifice of that nature, it is highly probable that the observance of Karam prayer at Mandar is due to urban influence.

this ritual is a little similar to the ritual of Karva Chauth where the married women observe fast and later, after offering *argh* or worship to the moon, break their fast. In the act of ‘offering’, the surrender of the woman to the Eros in her, which is associated with the moon, is suggested. It also symbolizes being in touch with the depths of one’s being.⁷

In the Karam festival, the girls’ thus dressing up to receive the Karam in their midst, waiting eagerly and jubilating enforces the idea of their being in touch with their deepest desires, which are for the simple tribal girls - a good husband and healthy progeny, in short domestic felicity.

The Karam *dowra*, which is a very important element in the veneration of the Karam deity contains a little white *arwa* rice, white thread, *jawa* (barley shoots), *chiwra*,⁸ a fresh green cucumber wrapped in a new colored cloth, a *diya* or an earthen lamp, flowers, leaves, *sindur*, a little water in a leaf cup, a little milk in a leaf cup and a little *hadia* or rice beer in a leaf cup among other items. All these items are undeniably symbols of life, of sustenance, and of fruitfulness. The idea behind placing the *dowra* at the feet of the Karam Raja is also symptomatic of invoking Karam Raja to bless the girls with fecundity, good life partners and healthy progeny, the symbols of which are kept in the *dowra* especially the cucumber, which, according to the tribals, stands for a child.

The narration of the Karam story is a ritual in itself as it ensures the narrativization of not only the Oraon history, but also of the Oraon traditions, customs, rituals and identity. The Karam festival, from this moment, stops being an ordinary festival, but becomes a performance, a ritual, a means to understanding and emphasizing the Kurux identity, which is at the core of the observance of the Karam festival.

The *Pahan* or the story teller begins by dropping a leaf cup full of *hadia* on the ground thus announcing the beginning of the narration of the sacred legend of the Oraons, which also serves as the origin myth of the Karam festival and also serves to propound the ‘*Karam dharm*’ or duty of the Oraons.

The Sacred legend

In the ancient days, the Oraon tribals were well settled in Rohtasgarh in Shahabad district of Bihar. They had established themselves well and were flourishing and prospering under a loving and caring ruler. Their kingdom was well fortified and strong against any form of attack from the enemy. But they were unaware of the designs of the enemy tribe Cheros who had become envious of the Oraons’ peace, prosperity and progress and were looking for an opportunity to attack and break into the Rohtas fort. They attacked the fort many times, but suffered a humiliating defeat each time. So, they connived with the milkmaid, who was the only person allowed inside the fort, to supply them with information regarding the habits and customs of the Oraons and also the loopholes in the fort. The milkmaid frequented the fort and had knowledge of the rituals, customs and habits of the tribals. She told the Cheros about the Oraons’ traditional festival *Xaddi*, on which occasion the Oraons men were wont to drink heavily and revel, forgetting all their cares, worries and responsibilities. So the day was chosen and the plan was laid to strike the Oraons when they would be most vulnerable. The Oraons in keeping with the traditional norms celebrated *Xaddi* with much feasting and revelry. At the end of the day, they were heavily drunk and fell into deep slumber. It was at this time, that the enemy attacked the fort. But the brave and resourceful Oraon women, under the leadership of Princess

⁷ Surjeet Singh. “The Semiotic Structure of the Ritual of Karva Chauth.” *Semiotics of Language, Literature and Cinema*. Ed. By Harish Narang. New Delhi: Books Plus, 2000. p.304.

⁸ Chiwra is the puffed and flattened rice. It serves as a snack for the Oraon tribals.

Sinagi, perceiving the grave threat to their existence and identity immediately dressed up as men and taking up their rakes and pestles countered the enemy and defeated them not once but three times. The enemy, unable to stand the bold counterattack, quickly retreated. They upbraided the milkmaid for deceiving them about the Oraon men's vulnerability. The milkmaid told them that the fighters were not Oraon men but Oraon women disguised as men. The weapons they had used were clearly weapons of women. The milkmaid also told them that the Kurux men normally wash their face with one hand, while the women use both hands to wash their face. And, if the Cheros keep a close watch on the Oraons, especially when they are washing, they can easily find out the truth. The enemy felt incensed by this insult at the hands of the Oraon women and with renewed aggressiveness attacked the fort again and this time succeeded in dislodging the Oraons from there. They entered the fort and started massacring the Oraons. The Oraons, unable to counter the attack, were forced to escape through the secret underground passage into the forest. They ran until they reached a cave well hidden with the dense growth of trees. They took shelter there and thus saved themselves from their persecutors. The enemy pursued them and combed the whole area but could not find them. When the enemy had gone, the tribals making sure that there was no more danger to their lives, came out of the cave and started inspecting their surroundings to see what had saved them from the enemy's gaze. They saw that there was a huge Karam tree with thick clustered leaves growing at the cave entrance. The branches of this Karam tree were hanging over the cave opening, thus, obscuring the cave fully from the notice of the enemies. There was a thick and dense growth of Karam trees around the cave. These had completely obscured the cave from the notice of the Cheros, and had thus saved the Oraons. The Oraons bowed to the Karam tree in all reverence, according to the tree, the status of "Raja". From that day, the Karam tree became for them, an unforgettable symbol of God's love and mercy. It had saved their life, and so, they accorded it, the sublime status of Raja, of king, of a deity to whom prayers could be addressed and blessings sought. The king of the Oraons declared a special day of veneration to the Karam tree. This moment marked the birth of the Karam festival of the Oraons. The month of Bhado was chosen to offer gratitude to the Karam Raja for his unending bounty and blessings.

The Oraons inhabited the cave for many years and during this time of confinement in the cave; they fed on forest produce, wild fruits, and whatever else they had carried with them while fleeing from the fort. On the day of the veneration of the Karam inside the cave, the tribals had used '*jawa* flowers' to worship the Karam. These *jawa* flowers were nothing but the tender barley shoots that had sprouted from the seeds fallen inside the cave. Due to moisture in the soil, the barley seeds had germinated. They had attained a yellowish tinge due to the lack of exposure to direct sunlight. As the fear of the enemy had prevented the Oraons from venturing far away from the cave, in search of flowers and fruits, they used the *jawa* flowers to adorn their hair and offer to the Karam Raja. Later, the same *jawa* flowers were carried away by the Oraons as mementos, along with the Karam branches. Both the symbols were reminders of the great escape and the 'savior' of the tribals.

The *Pahan* after the narration of this sacred legend or the origin myth of the Karam festival begins the story of Karma and Dharma, from which, the Oraons learn about their '*Karam dharm*' or their duty towards the Karam.

The Tale of Karma and Dharma

Many years after the great escape, there were born seven brothers in a family of the Oraon tribals. The eldest brother was called Karma and the youngest brother was called Dharma. They loved each other very much. Their family was one of the affluent families in the

village and they had no want. But, over the years, their economic condition started deteriorating and the men of the family decided to move to other villages in search of better prospects. They traveled from one place to another, engaged in trading business and gradually earned a lot of money. After earning to their hearts' content, they started contemplating returning home. A long time had elapsed and they felt homesick. So they decided to return to their village and home. They set out for home with their bullock carts and loads of gifts for families, relatives and friends. After traveling for many days they reached the borders of their village. They sat down to rest before resuming further journey and besides, their bullocks were very tired. The eldest brother Karma asked his youngest brother Dharma to go ahead and inform the family of the brothers' return so that necessary preparations may be made to welcome the brothers. It so happened that this very day was the occasion for the observance of the Karam festival and the whole village was busy in celebrations and revelry. They were doing their duty or their *dharm* towards 'Karam', their savior. When Dharma reached the village, he discovered the whole village reveling in the festivities of the Karam veneration. All the people including the brothers' family were fully engrossed in singing and dancing around the three Karam branches installed in the center of the courtyard. Dharma was so taken in by the scene that he forgot all about the assigned duty and joined in the veneration and merriment. When Dharma did not return, Karma got worried and sent the second brother to find out about Dharma and to inform the women of the family of their return. The second brother, too, got busy in the Karam festivities and did not go back. Then Karma sent the other brothers, one by one, to find out the whereabouts of Dharma and the other brother, and to also inform the women of their coming. When the sixth brother did not come back, Karma got very worried and decided to go and see for himself what was keeping his brothers. He reached the courtyard and witnessed the people including his family completely lost in singing and dancing. This 'neglect' by his family infuriated him so much that he became mad with anger and in a fit of madness uprooted the Karam Raja and cut the branches into seven pieces and kicked and threw them away in the cow dung pit with full force. From this very moment, luck, happiness, and prosperity turned away from him. The Karam deity went beyond the seven seas and ill-luck found Karma. After his anger had subsided a little, he went back to get his bullock carts, but to his dismay, found all his valuables and bullocks stolen. He came back to his house only to find it all crumbled and his family afflicted with numerous maladies. His crops also failed in the subsequent years and he became a poor, miserable man, while his brothers continued to prosper and progress. Finally, after a prolonged suffering, he came to his senses and realized the gravity of the insult he had meted out to the Karam Raja. Advised by his brother Dharma, Karma set out in search of Karam Raja to beg forgiveness for his act and to plead for mercy. On the way Karma met a woman, who had thick grass growing on her head. When she learnt about the destination of Karma, she requested him to ask Karam Raja to provide her with a solution to the problem of thick growth of grass on her head. Karma promised her and moved ahead. He met another woman, who had a wooden stool stuck to her bottom which no amount of exertion could dislodge. She also requested Karma to plead to Karam Raja for a solution to her problem. Karma promised that and moved ahead. He met another woman, who had a stone grinder hung around her neck perpetually. She had tried to take it off but had not succeeded. She also requested Karma to ask Karam Raja for a solution to her problem. Karma promised her and moved on. He came across a professional *Chirkutta*,⁹ the '*chiwra*' maker, who complained that he could not make *chiwra* as whenever he used the *dheki* to make *chiwra*, the *chiwra* became powder. The *chiwra* (ideally) should be flat. He also requested Karma to ask

⁹ Chirkutta is the term used for the professional chiwra maker.

Karam deity about providing a solution to his problem. Karma promised that and moved on. He faced more difficulties as he could neither get anything to drink nor to eat since nature had also turned against him. With a penitent heart he continued his journey and soon came across a huge sea where he was blessed with the presence of the Karam deity that was resplendent in complete dazzling glory. Since Karma was so overcome with repentance, the Karam deity forgave him and on his prayers gave him three branches to take home and venerate. The Karam Raja decreed to Karma about the ritual worship of Karam festival on the eleventh day of Bhado Ekadashi every year. It also blessed him by returning all his wealth and property. Karma requested the Karam Raja for the answers to the questions that the people on the way had asked him on his tortuous journey. The Karam Raja replied that the first woman with the thick growth of grass on her head should cover her head in front of elders as a mark of respect. The second woman who had a wooden stool stuck to her bottom should not sit in front of her elders and in places where her older-in-laws sit. She should show due regard to her elders. The third woman should stop being selfish when her neighbors ask her for the stone grinder. She should learn and generate community sharing and fraternity. The professional *Chirkutta* whose *chiwra* used to become powder should stop being corrupt and greedy.

The Karam deity's blessings also fostered a connection between Karma and nature as he got food to fill his hungry stomach and water and milk to quench his thirst. After reaching home, Karma dutifully installed the Karam branches in his courtyard and venerated the Karam Raja with his whole family. His family was blessed by the goodwill of the Karam Raja. They became well and in subsequent years prosperous, wealthy and happy.

After the ritualistic completion of the narration of Karam story, a little *chiwra* with a slice of cucumber is distributed to the people gathered around. The young cucumber is given especially to the older males. The slice of cucumber is referred to as *babu*, which stands for a child in the Kurux vocabulary. Treated as a guest of honor in the Karam feast, it is welcomed as one would welcome a human child. A child as always is a welcome guest in any community. Its arrival is awaited with anticipation and welcomed with happiness. It symbolizes the continuity of the family and the tribe.

The boys of the community are offered *jawa* flowers by the participating girls, and by this act of offering it is hoped that the fraternity as was present between Karma and Dharma will be nurtured and strengthened between the girls and the boys.

Then the jubilation begins. With a leaf cup full of *hadia* to drink, the simple tribals forget all their fatigue, worries and tensions in life and vivaciously fulfill the decree of the Karam Raja, which is the observance of the Karam festival with the ritual of dancing and singing.

In the evening the Karam Raja is placed in the *dowra* after its feet have been washed and taken in a procession to the '*don*' or low land for the immersion by the girls. It is immersed into the pond by the girls after a final act of reverence that is by bowing the head and touching the ground with the branches three times.

The ritual of Danda-Katta

Sacrifices are an integral part of the tribal life, more so in an Oraon's life. Sacrifices, which essentially and inherently are perceived as belonging to the religious domain also explain and elaborate the social and cultural beliefs and values of the community. And offering of sacrifices – the most solemn acts of worship become an important means, for the tribals, to declare their allegiance and devotion to the religious polity that they belong and adhere to.

The Oraon tribals of Chotanagpur consider *Danda-Katta* as a symbol of supreme ritual sacrifice. It is performed in every *Sarna* household 'at every venture of social consequence -

feasts and festivals, at the commencement and successful completion of important undertakings such as the beginning of a new work, reploughing for sowing, harvesting and hunting expeditions. It is also performed for many private needs and occasions.¹⁰ It means much to the tribals as it symbolizes the totality of original *Kurukh* religion and is considered the most ancient form of worship of God of the *Kuruxs*. Through this ceremony, *Dharmes* is acknowledged as the Supreme Being and thanked for all the blessings that he has bestowed upon the tribals in the form of good crops, cattle, healthy progeny and for interceding and ensuring lasting bliss, prosperity and protection from numerous evils, sickness and misfortunes. The ritual of *Danda Katta* is known by various other names also like *Palkhasna*, *Danda Rengna*, *Bhelwa Phari* and *Bhakh Khandna*.¹¹

The *Danda-Katta* ceremony may be performed in every *Sarna* household during the Karam festival.¹² The *Danda Katta* is a means of preventing the evil eye from harming the peace, progress and well being of the household.

Danda Katta literally means '*Danda Katta*', where '*danda*' means a 'branch' or symbolically a 'line' or semiotically the 'threshold of the house' and '*katta*' means 'crossing' or 'to cross'. To elaborate, *Danda Katta* means a line, which theoretically, ideally, should not be crossed. In the context that we are speaking of, *Danda Katta* symbolically prevents the evil or evil eye or malignant forces, from crossing the threshold of the house. *Danda Katta*, incidentally, also becomes a means of finding out if that particular house has any evil eye upon it.

The purpose of *Danda Katta* requires the *Pahan* who officiates in the *Danda Katta* ceremony to observe certain ascetical practices and purificatory rites. As the ritual performance of *Danda Katta* is a solemn celebration of the beneficence of *Dharmes*, the *Pahan* observes a fast the day before the sacrifice and religiously abstains from his conjugal rights. In the early morning of the day of the sacrifice, he takes a purificatory bath near the village well before beginning the preparations for the ritual sacrifice. This ritual contains all elements and procedures of ritual sacrifice as instructed by *Dharmes* himself, as it is believed by the tribals that it was *Dharmes* only who guided man to conduct the highest form of ritual sacrifice. It is a mandatory observance (in some villages before the commencement of some social and religious functions) in which the *Pahan* cleans a particular or a suitable place, where he wants to perform the *Danda Katta*. He cleans that place with cow dung. He 'draws a design of three concentric circles. The outermost circle is crowned with seven identical semi circles'.¹³ The design is drawn in three principal colors, black (*kariya*) with charcoal powder, red (*guria*) crushed from the burnt clay from the hearth, and white (*charka*), the rice powder. A small heap of white *arwa* rice is made in the center of the design and a white egg is placed on the heap. A split or forked *bhelwa* twig is placed on the egg in such a way that the split or forked ends rest on the egg and the leafy end points the other way. Then the *Pahan*, who sits facing east, begins the 'Creation Story' followed by a prayer, which the Oraons believe was taught by *Dharmes* himself to the Kurux ancestors. The 'Creation story' or 'Kurux genesis myth' recounts the Supreme lordship of *Dharmes* who is the creator of the world, of life from a little clay, of animate and inanimate. He showered a rain of fire, which destroyed everything except *Bhaiya Bahin*. *Dharmes* brought

¹⁰ V. P. Koonathan. *The Religion of the Oraons*. Shillong: DBCIC, 1999. p.147.

¹¹ Ibid., p.148. All these terms have a specific meaning. For example Palkhasna means destroying evil tooth, thus breaking or thwarting the mischief. Danda Rengna means dragging the twig; Bhelwa Phari means Bhelwa twig splitting, and Bhakh Khandna means warding off evil word.

¹² This was, however, the norm at Multi village of Mandar. The observance of this important ritual is at the discretion of the *Pahan* and the village representatives.

¹³ V. P. Koonathan. *The Religion of the Oraons*. Shillong: DBCIC, 1999. p.148.

them home and taught them the art of agriculture. He created day and night for them to work and to rest, and he initiated into them the secret of procreation. He taught them the ritual of *Danda Katta* to protect their crops from disease and decay. The *Pahan* thereafter breaks the egg on the heap of *arwa* rice and incants:

“See to it *Dharmes*, if evil mouth ‘*baibhakh*’ (malicious words) or the evil eye ‘*najar-gujar*’ of anyone falls on so and so, may the evil eye burst even as this egg is now broken; may the evil mouth burst even as this *bhelwa* twig is now split.”¹⁴

This is the moment which signifies the establishing of a relation with the Divine, with *Dharmes*. The prayers are directly addressed to him, where the gratitude is acknowledged and entreaties forwarded.

Significance of the design and the items used

According to the famous anthropologist Sarat Chandra Roy, ‘The design represents a magic symbol, and the three colors represent the rainbow, which being the largest and most powerful bow in heaven or on earth, is believed to be the most potent in warding off the evil eye and the evil attentions of malignant spirits’.¹⁵

The three different colors symbolize the rainbow, the weapon of God to ward off evil. It is through these symbols that *Dharmes* saves his creation from all kinds of malignant forces. The concentric circles and the seven superimposed identical semi-circles represent *Sat Pati Raji* or seven strips of land, which symbolize the whole universe, and through it, the omnipotence, omnipresence of God the Creator, Lord and master of all, is also acclaimed. The three concentric circles are drawn with black charcoal powder, which symbolizes the boundary of the universe and also symbolically prevents evil from getting inside (the *Sarna* house); the red burnt clay powder symbolizes color and joy in the *Sarna* families; and the white *arwa* rice flour symbolizes purity of life for the *Sarna* believers. Besides, these colors have a deeper association with the beliefs and value system of the *Sarnaites* - creation of the world, the punishment to mankind in the form of rain of fire, sacrifice, marriage and procreation

The heap of white *arwa* rice placed at the center of the design stands for purity and security of life. Rice, which is an agricultural symbol, symbolizes life and abundance in life. It is a potent symbol of food, the abundance of which in life is the desire of the simple tribals.

The white egg placed on the heap of the *arwa* rice represents the shapelessness of the Supreme Being. An egg is a ‘*nirmuhin thande*’ i.e., a thing without head or leg and therefore, a symbol of self contained life. The white color of the egg symbolizes purity and in offering it to *Dharmes*, the tribals hope to offer a sacrifice in its purity and totality. By breaking the egg in the ritual, the tribals, seek the intervention of *Dharmes* to break or destroy the evil machinations of the anti-social elements upon the people in whose name the ritual is performed.

The forked *bhelwa* twig is placed on the heap of white rice and egg to ward off evil. The *bhelwa* tree, scientifically called *semicarpus anacardium* is a wild tree resembling the cashew nut tree. The *bhelwa* tree with its long leaves is considered to have miraculous, magical powers. By the observance of the ritual, it is believed that the *bhelwa* with its powers of destruction will symbolically destroy all forms of evil set upon that particular household or crops.

The use of a few drops of *hadia* (rice beer) on the design of *Danda Katta* is again very culture specific way of appeasement of the spirits. Rice beer is local tribal drink brewed with

¹⁴ V. P. Koonathan. *The Religion of the Oraons*. Shillong: DBCIC, 1999. p.149. This prayer has a different version in different villages, where *Dharmes* is invoked for the perpetuity of progeny, cattle and crops, and for protection against numerous maladies.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.148.

boiled rice with local herbs and *ranu* or *bichchi* ¹⁶ added to it. The contents are then put in a pot and covered properly. After a few days of fermentation, the beer is ready to drink. It is called *hadia*, and is a favorite local beer or drink to restore vigor to the tribals after a hard day's labor. The men as well as women consume it uninhibitedly. It is an important part of the Oraon culture. It suggests honor and respect for the person in whose name it is brewed and served. The same idea of honor and auspiciousness prevails when a few drops of it are sprinkled over the *Danda Katta* design.

¹⁶ It is a medicine made of rice flour and local herbs, which finds use in the preparation of *hadia* or rice beer.