

**TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND
APPROACHES**

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Lecture49

Lecture 49: Tribal Performance and Festivals

Thank you. Good morning, and welcome back to the lecture series on Tribal Studies in India: Interdisciplinary Approaches and Perspectives. Today, we are going to discuss the different festivals of various tribal groups, their celebrations, and performances. So, tribal communities are very much, you know, performative people. Their birth, death, wedding, and all such different stages of life are celebrated through song, dance, and merrymaking.

So, be it a happy occasion or a mourning one, they express their emotions through performance. They embrace joy and sorrow, the different shades of emotions, and the various occasions through their communal performances, their shared performative acts. The festival food is basic most of the time. However, it is considered superior and is usually more plentiful than their daily meals. And liquor becomes the rice liquor.

The Santhalis call it Haria. It is very essential to their celebrations. Durga Bhagwat notes that the nights of festivals are filled with continuous dancing and singing, and social interactions between men and women are usually unreserved on these specific occasions and festivals. Suggestive gestures and songs, explicit content, are usually integrated into the festival celebration process.

Now we will take up the different festivals of the different tribes, selected tribes that we are going to discuss today. So the Karma, the Karma is celebrated as the harvest festival, and Karma or Karampuja is something common to different communities actually. It is celebrated by the Gauns as well as the Santals. Karma takes place in the rainy season during the bright fortnight of the month of Bhado. The ritual, the dance, and the songs form the three integral aspects of this festival.

The worship of the Karam tree forms the core of the ritual, and it includes mixed dances with different formations and a variety of songs. The Karma is danced vigorously by the Gon tribes, but the Baigas exhibit an even more systematic approach, and they are famous for their Karma songs and their wide knowledge of different Karma dances. Bhagavat also observes that across Central India, the Karma Festival is a significant celebration for the lower-caste Hindus as well as the aboriginal communities in the eastern regions, which include the Mandla, the Balaghat, Bilaspur regions, the area that is north of Raipur. and the northern part of Durga. All these places celebrate Karampuja or the Karma, and the tribals as well as the lower-caste Hindus unanimously celebrate this occasion.

The Karma

- Bhagavat (1968) observes that across Central India, the Karma festival is a significant celebration for lower-caste Hindus and aboriginal communities in the eastern regions, such as Mandla, Balaghat, Bilaspur, the area north of Raipur, and the northern part of Durg.
- This tradition also thrives in the former Feudatory States of Chhattisgarh and the former Jashpur, Raigarh, and Sarangarh States, connecting with the Kaimur range and the Chhota Nagpur plateau, where the Karma or Karam festival and dances continue to flourish vigorously.



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So this tradition also thrives in the former feudatory states of Chhattisgarh and the former Jashpur, Raigarh, and Sarangarh states, connecting with the Kaimur range and the Chhotanagpur plateau. where the Karam or Karma festival and dances are celebrated, they continue to flourish in a very, you know, lively manner, very vigorously. So we see that in eastern Madhya Pradesh, the Karma is now a year-round dance for all the important occasions, enjoyed by young people both in winter and summer under the moonlight or the firelight. It is the main dance of the local tribes that greatly enriches their social and romantic lives through nightly celebrations.

The Karma

- In eastern Madhya Pradesh, the Karma is now a year-round dance for all important occasions, enjoyed by young people in winter and summer, under moonlight or firelight. It is the main dance of the local tribes, greatly enriching their social and romantic lives through these nightly celebrations.



A reference footage of the Gond people dancing in merriment.
Source: Jyoti Mahan



Let's take a look at this video, how karma is celebrated. People wear their headgear made up of feathers and they carry a stick, young and old ones alike. And it becomes a kind of a community gathering where people are dancing with headgears, with instruments, playing instruments, you know, and it's way of merrymaking. We see that the Gond tribe's rituals or religion involves worshipping the Buddha Deo or Bada Deo. In Raipur, Bada Deo is represented by a stone and is believed to live in the Sajja tree.

The worship of Bada Deo takes place once in three years and begins with songs. One such song from Raipur is as follows. Of what is the staff made? The staff is made of bamboo. This is the staff of God, the staff of mother, the cloth flag of the Desai mother, the mother of the village.

Gond tribe

- Budha-deo (Bada deo) is worshipped by the Gond tribe in Chhattisgarh. In Raipur, he is represented by a stone and is believed to live in Saja tree.
- The worship takes place once in three years and begins with songs.
- A song from Raipur:

Of what is the staff made?
The staff is made of bamboo
This is the staff of god
The staff of Mother.
The cloth-flag,
Of the Desai Mother,
The Mother of the village (Durga Bhagvat 42).



So during the worship of Buddha Deo or Bada Deo, invitation is given to all the gods through the Raipur song mentioned. And men take their yellow and black flags, beat the drums and men and women dance and sing together. The eldest member of a family make the various emblems of the gods. The women clean the house with cow dung and leave

when the deities are being worshipped. A similar role is played by the women in the Santhal tribe too.

So we see that women are part of the preparatory stages of any ritual, but they cannot participate in the main worship. Further, when animal sacrifices are made, women are allowed to partake in the sacrificial food only after men have finished eating. So when the feast of Buddha Deo is celebrated, no one in the village can refuse the invitation. No distinction of caste and creed is observed or allowed. So all humans are treated as equal in all the tribal communities.

When the feast of *Budha-deo* is celebrated, no one in the village can refuse the invitation. No distinction of caste and creed is observed. The sacrificial food is distributed to all.

Following the feasting, men and women sing songs and enjoy themselves in a similar manner as the Santal's Sohrae. However, merrymaking does not form a compulsory part of the ritual. (Durga Bhagvat 43)



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There is no caste system in their society. The sacrificial food is distributed among all, and following the feast, men and women sing songs and enjoy themselves in a manner similar to the Santhas during their Sohrai. However, merrymaking does not form a compulsory part of the ritual. From Karam, celebrated by the Gons, we move to another Gon festival called Hulki. During Hulki, a major Gon festival, the Hulki dance is performed by men and women together, standing in a circle.

A defining characteristic of Halki is that each man in the circle holds two women by their waists, one on each side. The drummers position themselves in the center, setting the rhythm for the dancing group. Responding to the beat, the dancers step slightly inward toward the center and then move back a little. The women's hands are free, and they wave them back and forth while their feet move with a slow dragging motion.

The Halki dance and songs are linked to the Thakur Dev feast. Thakur means the great God, the great spirit of the tribals of the Gonds. This feast commemorates the marriage of the earth mother, or Dharti Mai, to Thakur Deo. The original Halki songs are sung in the Gondi language and are dedicated to various deities, including Lingu, the goddess Mata,

the goddess of tattoos, the goddess of smallpox, the village goddess, and especially the seven sisters, who are part of the Gond ritual complex or theological complex.

Spanning from the month of Bhado to Diwali day—what is Diwali in the Hindu calendar—the Halki festival reaches its peak on Diwali day, which is the designated Halki day. Here is an excerpt from a Halki song. On the hilltop, whose temple is that, O grandfather? Of what tree are the pillars made? Of orchard tree are made the pillars. Of what will the planks of the roof be? The planks on the roof will be teak.

The Hulki

- An excerpt from a Hulki song:

Ti-no-na-mar-na-na-re
On the hill-top,
Whose temple is that, oh grand-father
Of what tree are made the pillars?
Of 'Odcha' tree arc made the pillars.
Of what will the planks of the roof be?
The planks on the roof will be teak.



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Of what will the planks of the roof be? The planks of the roof will be teak. This is the description of a temple that is being built. Next, we talk about Jamunacha. Considered the most arduous and heroic dance of Odisha,

The Hulki

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The fire-pitting dance is performed with rhythmic skill and deep emotion. The dancers usually fast to honor their principal deity before this performance, and they undertake the dance as a ritualistic offering to the god. It's common for several dancers to perform in sequence during the Jamunacha. From here, we move on to the Urali tribes in Kerala. The

Uralis are a tribe of agricultural workers who were mainly residents of the Cardamom Hills in Kerala.

Like most tribes in South India, the Urali worship nature as gods and regard nature as the inventor of the world. They consider the sun as the creator of all souls and the moon as the mother of all creation. Worshipping the sun is an important aspect of the Urali religion. Music is an intrinsic part of the Urali tribe's culture, and drums and flutes comprise the main musical instruments.

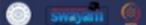
The Uralis perform traditional dances that match the rhythms of their music. Worshipping the sun can also be seen in the Hindu religion. Such similarities may have roots in cultural exchange or the independent existence of different practices. Thus, it is unclear whether common practices between Hindus and tribal communities stem from cultural exchanges or existed independently among both groups.

So there are some rituals that are very similar between the Hindus and the different tribal communities. And it is not clearly known whether one group has influenced the other, whether there has been a cultural exchange, ritual exchange, or if these traditions, these practices existed independently among each of the groups. Next, I move on to the Santal festivals. According to J. Troisi, the Santhal's religious experience is tied to their collective seasonal rites and their associated dances and festivals, which have both religious as well as secular components. As an agricultural community, the Santhal's religious rites focus on the social necessities of fertility and generation.

Santhal festivals

- According to J. Troisi (1979), the Santhals' religious experience is tied to collective seasonal rites and their associated dances and festivals, which have both religious and secular components.
- As an agricultural society, the Santhals' religious rites focus on the social necessities of fertility and generation, connected to their daily lives. They are a highly ritualistic tribe, emphasizing the importance of the time, place, and officiant for any sacrifice. Each sacrifice must adhere to specific norms, a fixed procedure, and a defined content of invocations.



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And their religious practices, their spiritual practices, are very much intertwined with their daily lives. They are a highly ritualistic tribe, emphasizing the importance of the time, place, and efficiency for any sacrifice. Each sacrifice made during rituals must

adhere to specific norms, a fixed procedure, and the defined content of invocations or chants. Agriculture plays a key role in Santal festivals, with celebrations such as Baha, Eroksim, Hariyar Sim, Iri Gundli Navai, Jantar, Sohrai, and Magsim tied to farming activities. The Santhals also observe festivals connected to their yearly hunt.

Further, the Santhals have other less frequent festivals that are not related to agriculture, such as Karam, Jom sim, and Mag more. So let us take up some of these festivals and try to understand them—how the Santhals celebrate them and what is the logic or the rationale behind celebrating these particular festivals. Hariar Sim is celebrated in the months of July and August, on the germination of seeds after they push out new shoots. So once the new shoots come out of the seeds, Hariar Sim is celebrated in July and August. Santhals offer their sacrifices to their demigods or spirits, who are locally known as the bongas, with the intention of a lush paddy harvest.

Hariar Sim

- *Hariar Sim* is celebrated in the month of July-August on the germination of seeds, after they push out new shoots.
- Santals offer their sacrifices to the *bongas* with the intention of a lush paddy harvest.
- Before the day of *Hariar Sim*, the *naeke* fasts and does the rituals. Just like in *Erok Sim*, people are refrained from transplanting the paddy unless this public worship is performed.



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Before the day of Hariar Sim, the Naike fasts. Naike, meaning the priest—the Santal tribal priest. He fasts and performs the rituals. Just as in the case of Eroksim, the general villagers refrain from transplanting the paddy unless this public worship is performed. So, paddy cannot be transplanted in the fields unless Hariar Sim has been celebrated in the village.

Hariar Sim

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- Before the day of *Hariar Sim*, the *naeke* fasts and does the rituals. Just like in *Erok Sim*, people are refrained from transplanting the paddy unless this public worship is performed.



If they do so, the crops will not be very good that year. They believe there will be some natural calamity or pests destroying their crops, or some other negative impact—considered a curse of the bongas, or spirits. Next, we have *Janthar*. The *Janthar* festival is celebrated as the first fruits of the harvest are considered sacred. The importance of these rituals is reflected in the fact that eating the fruits before *Janthar* is celebrated is considered taboo.

So, the fruits are first offered to the gods. The gods and spirits must be honored first. This honoring is done by offering them the first fruits—the first harvest. The Santals have multiple festivals related to offering the first fruits and harvest to their bongas, including *Janthar* and *Iri Gundli Navai*. Accompanied by the village men, the *Naike*, or priest, goes to the *Jahar Than*—the sacred place of *Jahar*, the Earth Goddess.

Janthar

- This festival is celebrated as the first fruits of the harvest are considered as sacred.
- The importance of these rituals is reflected in the fact that anyone eating the fruits before the rituals is a taboo. The honoring of the spirits is done by offering them the first fruits.
- The Santals have multiple festivals related to offering the first fruits to their bongas, such as *Iri-Gundli-Nawai* and *Janthar*.
- Accompanied by men, the *Naeke* goes to the *jaherthan* and salutes the *sarjom* tree, which also represents the *Pargana bongas*.
- The end of the rituals lifts the taboo on eating of these fruits.



And he salutes the *sarjam* tree, which is the holiest tree among the Santals. And then there is offering to the *Parganabonga*, right? The *sarjam* tree itself is representative of the

Parganabonga, which kind of protects the village. When once he is satiated, he will protect the village. That is Parganabonga.

So the end of the rituals lifts the taboo on eating of certain fruits. Each season has its own rituals of offering the first fruits and harvests to the deities and spirits and only then can the villagers partake those fruits, those crops. Next, we have Sohrai or the harvest festival, which is the most significant public event for the Santals, typically held around December-January after the rice harvest is complete. The rituals in Sohrai involve sacrificing of fowls to village and ancestral spirits. Notably, on the first day, the girls perform the

Janthar

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kumara or the blessing of the cows ceremony the cows are celebrated you know they are worshipped during the surai and so kumara is a ritual intended to protect the cattle from diseases and witchcraft because cattle is part of their agro-based economy the cattle flourish they give birth and they live healthily, then their agro-based economy will also flourish. No family will go, you know, without food. There will be no starvation, no natural calamity or drought or famine. Witches that are often believed to be women are thought to possess some kind of evil eye that is capable of harming the cattle.

Sohrae

- Sohrae, or the Harvest festival, is the most significant public event for the Santhals, typically held around December-January after the rice harvest is complete.
- The rituals involve sacrificing fowls to village and ancestral spirits. Notably, on the first day, girls perform 'Cumaura' or the 'blessing of the cows' ceremony, a ritual intended to protect cattle from diseases and witchcraft.
- Witches, often believed to be women, are thought to possess an evil eye capable of harming cattle, which symbolize a prosperous household.



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And cattle is a symbol of prosperity in a household. So, cattle are worshipped during Sohrai. Next we have Baha. The Baha Parab or flower festival takes place after the full moon in February-March. So basically the Phalguni Purnima that is considered as Baha.

Sohrae

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which coincides with the blossoming of saal and mahuma trees. Baha is marked by feasting that includes drinking, dancing, eating and merrymaking and it is considered as a righteous celebration in contrast to the licentious nature of Saharaya. So in Saharaya people are allowed to lose bodily control to some extent. Whereas Baha is considered as a righteous celebration where sobriety is more prevalent. Preparations involve renovating the houses.

So this is once in a year the houses get renovated, repainted, rebuilt. And even the old pots and pans, the earthen pots and pans are thrown away and new pots and pans are made during the Baha. So constructing sheds for spirits such as Marangburu and Jahar era is also prevalent during the Baha festival with a separate shed also built for Gosai era. So these are some of the prominent deities of the Santals, the Marangburu, Jahar era and

Gosai era. While they build their own houses and start using new clothes and new utensils during the Baha, they also build new sheds for the spirits.

Baha

- The Baha parab, or flower festival, takes place after the full moon in February-March, coinciding with the blossoming of sal and mahua trees.
- This festival is marked by feasting that includes drinking, dancing, and eating, and is considered a righteous celebration, in contrast to the licentious nature of Sohrae.
- Preparations involve renovating houses and constructing sheds for spirits such as Marang Buru and Jaher era, with a separate shed also built for Gosae Era.



Source: forbesindia.com



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Karam festival is also very prominent among the Santhali tribes. So Karam festival unlike other festivals is not an annual ceremony and nor is it the one that could be performed regularly. Truasi writes that it is believed to be a borrowed festival from the neighbors of the Santhal community. W.J. Kulshaw says that many songs written during the festival contain references to the heroes of Ramayana.

Karam

- Karam festival, unlike other festivals, is not an annual ceremony, nor one that would be performed regularly.
- J. Troisi writes that it is believed to be a borrowed festival from the neighbours of the Santal community.
- W.J.Culshaw says that many songs written during the festival contain references to the heroes of Ramayana.
- The songs of this festival is recited by the elders of this village that has the story of the origin of man and the division of tribe as per the Santal custom.



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The songs of this festival is recited by the elders from Asantali village and it has stories of the origin of earth, origin of man. And how the different tribes, the different clans were formed and the division of the different tribes as per the Santal custom. So like I was saying, these storytelling processes, reading of, you know, Joms in Binti, their holy work, it's a way of bringing together the community. and propping up their own identity

through knowing the past and remembering the past. The villagers go for merrymaking during Karam through dancing and singing.

Two branches of Karam tree are brought from the forest. The youth who go to bring the branches from the forest go there while dancing and singing accompanied by the tunes of the drum. Later, the elder people from the village start reciting the Karambinti, which is the story of the creation and the division of the clans and subclans. So they talk about their ancestry. It's a way of telling the myth, the stories of their ancestry, how each clan was formed within the Santal tribe.

The end of the recital of Karambinti is once again followed by songs and dances. During Karam, young unmarried people of the same sex who wish to formalize their lifelong friendship enter into a friendship alliance, and the concerned parties exchange Karam buds—the flower buds of Karam—and fix them in each other's hair in the presence of the entire village. Along with the linking of two friends who promise each other mutual economic assistance, especially in times of crisis, this alliance—this friendship—establishes a new relationship between each of them and the other's family. Thus, they also enter into familial ties through this friendship, through this alliance. They become a kind of member in each other's family.

To conclude, Gond and Santal tribal performances and festivals are deeply embedded in their cultural and spiritual lives, often revolving around agricultural cycles, deities, and ancestral spirits. The Gond's Halki dance, associated with the Thakur day of feasting and honoring various deities, showcases communal participation and rhythmic movements. Similarly, the Santals have a rich calendar of festivals, including Sohrai and Baha, which are marked by rituals, dances, songs, and specific social behaviors. These performances and festivals serve not only as entertainment but also as vital expressions of tribal identity. They celebrate their social cohesion and relationship with the natural world, reflecting both unique traditions and occasional influences from neighboring cultures.

They highlight the integral role of collective celebrations in sustaining their cultural heritage. So, I would like to conclude my lecture today by showing this dance form. It is a performance of the Karam dance by men and women alike. We see how disciplined and coordinated the dance is. The feet move together, the hands are synchronized, and the entire village comes together through this song.

Men, women, children, and the older population alike celebrate together through song, dance, and the playing of drums and other instruments. So with this, we come to the end

of our lecture today. Let's meet with a new topic and another round of discussions in our next lecture. Thank you.

Conclusion



A group of Santal women performing the Karam dance.
Source: Dr. Sarbani Banerjee



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