



KARAM-JAWA PUJA OF PURULIA : A SOCIO-CULTURAL REVIEW**Abhijit Sarkar**

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ABSTRACT:

The India is marked by its well-heel heritage of the folk culture. Purulia the western most district of state of West Bengal is no exception to it. We know, the culture is in essence contained the tradition of life and thinking of a particular society. Every aspect of the life and thought of a particular community can be referred as the culture of that community. The term culture as prefixed with 'folk' may have been termed as the folk culture. The term 'folk' mean the common populace of a region having traditional way of life, customs, beliefs and arts that make up a distinctive culture. The inseparable twin festival of Karam-Jawa is one of the most popular and sacred agro-religious festivals of the folk cultural zone of Purulia. This paper aims to review the various socio-cultural aspects of Karam-Jawa festivals and songs, in and around Purulia, a W.B district. In a row this study would enhance the scope of study on the feasibility of folk culture and folk song to comprehend the various dimensions of social studies centred on the regional perspective.

KEYWORDS : Purulia, Folk Culture, Karam-Jawa, Durga Puja, Kumari Puja, Tusu-Bhadu, Bura Bhagwan, Parsha Ekadashi, Parbana, Parbotia, Mangalkavyas.

INTRODUCTION:

Folk culture is a subtle container of social heritage and realism. It engulfed every aspects of society and culture of mankind. So whenever it needs a probe into the deeper of a society or to review its dynamism, the folk culture of that particular society should explore first. We know, food gathering was the most primitive economic activity of human society. The techniques of production and collection of foods influenced the entire activities of mankind to a very great extent. So the content of folk culture has priorities the experience of food gathering through collection, hunting and production by using technology en suite with time. A similar development took place while dealing with the hindrances of nature and the dire needs of primitive statecraft, human society prayed for population vehemently. Thus the cult of productivity took a deep and twofold turn in the social psychology. Production of foods and progeny became the prime mover of everything in the society, which left deep impression over the art and culture of civilization. Worth mentioning that, most of the folk and mainstream religious rituals are heavily centred on the cult of productivity and are mostly performed by the virgin girls. The folk festivals like Karam-Jawa or Tusu-Bhadu and the famous Durga puja (worship) of caste (Varna) Hindus are on same boat in this regard. In fact Kumari

puja (worship of maiden girl) on the day of Durga Navami is nothing but a ritual to felicitate the huge capability of virgin girls for fecundity. Being a symbol of productiveness both the virgin girls and the cultivable lands used to get the privileges of being worshiped. A highly patriarchal social psychology nurtures all those rituals and practices to retain its own control over the means of production through the ages. Thus both the girls and the lands became the property and the liability of the society. Presently the phenomenon of fertility in religion and culture is not in prime focus, but it does play a role in the disguise of religious rituals.

CHARACTERIZATION OF KARAM-JAWA:

The twin festival of Karam-Jawa is a festival of achieving abundance of agricultural production and wealth as well as achieving progeny. People of this region are in belief that, it is only Karam Devta (God) under whose dictum they can earn a good harvest. Karam puja is held in the month of Bhadra of Bengali Calendar, which falls in August-September of the Roman calendar. Though presently the cycle of agriculture has changed due to the climate change, but traditionally the month of Bhadra is the month when the crop is in the offing and harvesting would take place shortly. Thus the lord called Bura Bhagwan¹ or the Supreme Being is worshipped in expectation that, he would enable the nature to keep the field green and ensure a rich production. This Bura Bhagwan is well known in the name of Karam Raja or Karam Thakur (God), in the narrative of Karam. This Karam Raja, like lord Brahma of the mainstream Hindu mythology, is the architect of universe, hence is the Supreme Being. In one of nice Ahira song of Bandna Parab of Purulia region, the poet has depicted the creation of universe by the Supreme Being with following luminous lines:

‘There were no fire, nor any wind, neither this piece of lands were there
The almighty in disguise of sound has created the Universe’²

The Supreme Being or Bura Bhagaban was in disguise of sound, have created the earth and heaven. Certainly the storyline has a clear resemblance with that of Biblical statements of creation of universe as well as Hindu mythological statements coupled with Dashavatar theory of god Vishnu. The day of initiation of Karam puja usually observed on the Parsha Ekadashi which according to Hindu myth is the day when lord Vishnu after a prolonged sleep has changed his posture of sleeping. The existence of Bura Bhagaban in sound, as cited in the song mentioned earlier, too had resemblance with Hindu mythology as there is a theory of Shabda Brhama in Hindu scripture which speaks the origin of universe from a big bash. However all these denotes the link of Hindu myths with the myth of Karam, presume that Karam takes place among the tribal who due to geographical proximity influenced by Hinduism mostly. In fact most of the local chieftains of aboriginal origin, to maintain their proud Hindu legacy used to celebrate the festival accordance with Hindu scriptural dictum, though not unquestionably accepted by the majority. The Hinduized Karam is known as Raj Karam and performed in some pockets of the regions. However, popular Karam observed everywhere in the region and other parts of the country with much enthusiasm.

PERFORMING ASPECTS OF KARAM-JAWA:

The performances of Karam worship have used to start with the placement of Karam twigs at Akhra (the place). A branch and twigs of Karam tree (*Mitragyna parvifolia*) as insignia of Karam Thakur is placed in the midst of the loggia of performer’s home, the place known as Daltola (feet’s of twigs) which is the centre of so called Akhra. Traditionally Akhra used to rise at the village headman’s home or on any of common places of the concern village; though a man or family can erect Akhra at their home and performed Karam personally. However this Karam twigs have brought from the forest by the young girls sings Karam tunes to praise the Thakur. Before implantation, the twigs usually cleanse with milk and local rice beer, called Handia, and garlanded with flower. The performers along with other villagers have collected flowers, other vegetation and fruits for worship in daily basis from the nearest forest. The most important ingredients for worship are the leaves and twigs of Bel (Wood apple/*Aegle marmelos*), Hortuki (*Myrobalan/Terminalia chebula*), leaves of paddy, leaves and twigs of Shala (*Shorea robusta*) tree, scented sticks called Dhup;

earthen holy lamp and earthen pot filled with holy water called Pradip and Ghata correspondingly, vermilion called Sindur, mince of rice and Kankur an indigenous form of cucumber with foot-stalk, laid down over its own leaf. The presence of Kankur especially connotes the fecundity, in anticipation that the girls observing sacred rituals would produce a good number of children like Kankur which is produced in good numbers. Noteworthy, the worshiper calls this fruit their 'Beta' (Son) and the leaves on which the Kankur have placed, actually appeared to them as a motif of 'Kantha',³ a special variety of rural domestic Bengali bedroll for babies. The performers are known as Parbotia, performer of Parbana (festival). Though Prof. Binoy Kumar Mahata finds its source in the word 'Parabrati',⁴ one who performs religious rituals for the welfare of others. There is no formal restriction for boys to take part in Karam rituals and performances but actually the girls are considered as the chief protagonist, contrary while performing Jawa (an allied ritual performed with Karam), there is restriction over the boys to take part. Here a round shaped basket made of bamboo and filled with sands, mud and multi grains seeds, is placed inside the house and nurtured with water and turmeric and worshipped daily with scented holy sticks called Dhup. This filled up basket is popularly known as Jawa Dali. Everyday this Dali is used to put in the sun rays for quite some time. During the performance this basket is placed at the Daltola. The seedlings over this basket are called Jawa, whereas the round shaped forms of Dali denotes the shape of universe. The Jawa insinuates a small replica of an agricultural field as well as a replica of life in the universe. As we have discussed earlier that Karam is held on Parsha Ekadashi in the Bengali month of Bhadra. Three, five or seven days back from the commencement of Karam, the Jawa is usually been placed by the young girl worshipers (Parbotia). This is the initiation of the Karam Parab. In fact both Karam & Jawa are the two inseparable religious festivals. Daily prayer usually starts at Daltola where the Karam twigs have already been implanted, garlanded and the Jawa Dali is placed. The Parbotia observed fasting for the entire day. Particularly from the launch of Jawa the girl devotees have to perform certain rituals with utter rigidity. They debarred to have more hot and pungent as well as stale and sour foods, pot herbs, combing of hair and even prohibit to evacuate on the soil directly, instead by using leaves of Palash tree (*Butea monosparma*) or leaves of Kanchu tree (*Colocasia esculenta*). They have to wet the Jawa Dali with water and turmeric daily. Their role to maintain Jawa Dali and seedlings over there, may compare with the performances of mother, hence they were termed as Jawar Maa (Mother of Jawa).⁵

DANCE AND SONGS OF KARAM-JAWA:

After the placement of Jawa, the girls used to dance and sing songs every evening. Of course, the rehearsal of dance and song begin from the Bengali month of Shrawana (month of July-August), but Jawa dances used to start from the first day of Bengali month of Bhadra, though without the presence of Jawa Dali. Eventually, the Dali used to place sometime before Parsha Ekadashi, as I told earlier. Religion apart, these songs and dances are the most prolific features of Karam-Jawa festival. Karam dances have different names in different regions, such as Danr dance, Panta dance or Pantashaliya dance and Jhumur dance etc. In Some places this dance is known as Deonra or Dounra.⁶ The term Danr actually have derivatives from the term Danda, which denotes the posture of standing; so it can be guessed that, as the Karam dance is basically a performance of standing dancing ovation to the Karam Devata, so it termed as the Danr dance or the dance with standing posture. Whereas some others opines that, the term Deonra denotes the rapid and swift action of the Karam dances, as it has similarities with swift and rapid sprint.⁷ The term Panta also needs a special mention; as the experts find its derivation from the word Pongti, which actually stands for the sequence or cycle. As the Karam dances perform with a particular sequence of standing and physical movements of the dancers; so it named after that.⁸ Karam dance is one of the oldest forms of Indian tribal dances, as the experts opined. The dancers, dressed in traditional Saree and Dhoti, garlanded with flowers and twigs of indigenous plants, dance to the tunes and beats of local instruments. Dancers have to form a circle and put their respective arms around the waist of next person and continue to move steps and waist in rhythm in to and fro style.

The Karam-Jawa songs are an integrated part of the festival. It has earned huge popularities among folk songs of this region. Alike dances the songs also have plenty of names, viz. Danrshanlya, Pantashaliya, Jhingyafullia, Panta Nacher Gan, Bhadariya Geet⁹ etc. Remarkably the names of the songs are frame with that of their association with any of the particular type of Karam dance. As for example, the Danrshanlya songs should sing only with the Danr dance, etc. The lyrics of the Karam songs are mostly created by the rural women. Thus the story of their hardship and struggle, romances, and everyday realities finds a vivid mention there. Also, the problems they have use to face in their in-laws' home find the most outstanding expression. Moreover, the essence of the Karam songs typically lies in the day to day life of common people and their socio-economic-cultural activities. In fact there is nothing in their daily life, which could not have a minimum mention in these songs. Noteworthy, a number of songs having the content of the inner cry of young women, who states mournfully their subordinate status at their in-laws home. The women even chastised the social system for own inferior status, in comparison with own brother. These songs remind us that, both of the brother and sister of a particular family are born from the same parents and had shared everything, including the breast milk, but consequently the sister had to leave all the comforts of the parental family after her marriage, but the brother used to stay there with every comfort and company of relatives. Maintaining the social and patriarchal hegemony, the patriarchal tunes of these songs reminds us that, the brother himself is not responsible for such different fates; rather it is an eternal mandate of the almighty. So in accordance with such intention of almighty, it is the duty of the daughters to go to their in-law's home and serve there to earn her own livelihood and also to increase reputation for her parents and relatives. Sometimes in a reverse development those songs referred such brother as the Angel, as he is the only person who can pass messages between married sister and her parental home. In this context, some of the songs suggest that, the sister shows favouritism to her brother over her husband by providing the brother the best of foods and comforts. This superfluous softness of sister to his brother, has surely situated with a soft indication of the sexual rights over there between brother and sister, which before introduction of marriage, was a common practices of primitive society. In fact all the songs are excellent pieces of family drama and in-house-power-politics centred on the tragic situations of the daughter-in-laws, so common in Indian patriarchal society.

Along with unqualified seriousness of life, a handful of Karam-Jawa songs are abounding of jovial feelings of people, particularly of women. Sometimes we may find a romantic depiction of love, women's expression to garland herself with flowers, foot-stalk and leafs of trees plenty in nature, their feeling on travelling over the path of the native village, bordering forest, which fascinating them in a way that, they dreamt off, such fragrance of flowers and the nature have captivated them.

REVISITED THE MYTHS OF KARAM-JAWA:

After a daylong observation of various rituals, the performers gathered around Daltola at the time of dusk. Here in an advance stage of prayer the priest narrates the legends of Karam Thakur to the Parbotia. There are multiple versions of that legend, which varies from region to region. In Purulia and its adjacent regions, story of Karmu and Dharmu is mostly narrated, has semblance with famous Bengali Mangalkavyas. The narratives are as follows:

- a. Once upon a time there was a king who had two sons called Karmu and Dharmu. After the demise of the King, Karmu went for a business trip abroad. He returned on the day of Karam puja, and hence none from his family had gone to welcome him. Getting angry, Karmu insulted Karam Thakur and got himself and the properties separated from his brother Dharmu. This brought wrath of Karam Thakur over Karmu and as a result he had to face all sorts of sufferings. One day the Moon advised him to pacify angry Karam Thakur. Subsequently Karmu started his journey and became successful to earn the blessings of Karam Thakur.¹⁰
- b. Another story is the story of seven brothers. During the harvesting season these brothers remain busy all through the day at the agricultural field. Their wives used to bring meal at the field every day. Suddenly

one day they failed to do so, due to their engagement in the Karam ceremony. Angry brothers returned home and frantically insulted the Karam tree, causing the wrath from Karam Thakur. In a result they were thrown into poverty and endless sufferings. Once after hearing their story a priest advised them to worship 'Karam Rani'. After a long search they found and worshiped 'Karam Rani' and earned her blessings.

- c. In an another legend a merchant returned home after a successful voyage, but his wife and other relatives could not reach to welcome him as they were busy in the rituals of the Karam Puja. The merchant became angry, uprooted and threw the Karam tree away. Consequently, curse of the God fell on him, resulting in the loss all of his wealth. As suggested by an astrologer he arranged a search for Karam Devta. Finally he was able to acquire the blessings of Karam Devta. Till then the festival of Karam is being observed.¹¹

All the three narratives bear more or less resemblance. Everywhere the misdeeds done by the tragic heroes towards the Karam trees and other insignia of Karam unfolded the screen of the story. This flows of narratives had gain a tragic impetus when the heroes immersed into misery by the wrath and curse of Karam Thakur. In this juncture an oracle sometimes from moon, sometimes from priest or astrologer have destined them towards the goal of achieving Karam Thakur and bring back the god to the home. This venture experienced a lot of hurdles, sorrows, miseries and also a lot of teachings and interaction with human and non-human creatures of the universe. All the three narratives ended with the acquiring of blessings by the heroes from Karam Thakur and re-establishment of peace, prosperity and wealth thereby.

As I told earlier that, first one is the most popular in Purulia region. So we should plunge deep only into this one to find out the particular features of tells as well as the inner-twist of subvert culture of folk, outside the regular and dominant orbit of elite culture. During Karmus journey, this folk narratives inspired by the trend of folk culture mingled the tell of one with tell of many. He witnessed two ill-fated men, both of them were having failed to dispose of their burden and reiterate Karmu to learn the way of their deliverance, from Karam Thakur. Not only men, Karmu had visited a tree which produced only insect-filled fruits which even denied by the birds to consume. Then an enraged ox after hearing his intention to meet Karam Thakur, requested karmu to pray to god to make arrangement of a grandee and granary for their dignified livelihood. In a sequence he met a pond of contaminated water, a horse that had a similar frustration like the ox as he too had no master, no granary, no home to stay, deficient proper education and training. Once again the same situation was occurred when Karmu met an elephant and a crocodile both of them had their own impediment, the elephant had lost the vigour to sustain life, while the crocodile told his misery of hunger and restlessness. Finally this crocodile brought Karmu to the palace of god.¹²

In a theatrical twist we may seen, during Karmus meeting with the god; the god himself had a number of burning wounds on his physic and he lie down at a place like dustbin. Here again mark the charm of folk culture, both the devotee and god had to bear the punishment simultaneously. The significance of the concept of 'Bhakter Bhagawan' (god for disciple) of grass rooted religious culture may have vividly noticed here. While learning the cause of such miserable condition of health and residence of Thakur ; readers become astonished once again to get the unconventional answers from the god's end. The god made a clear statement that, during his first meeting with Karmu after coming back from voyages, Karmu with anger and despair have thrown him out at Dustbin.¹³ Hence the god compelled to reside at dustbin, as the disciple had intended so. Once again when separated with brother Dharmu, Karmu of his own had pay tribute to Karam Thakur and broke the fasting with fresh and hot rice-meal¹⁴ and thereby denied the model code of eating cold and previously prepared meal. Consequently, god had to bear the burning wound over the body as token of Karmu's wrongful adaption of custom of breaking fast. Worth Mentioning, the popular religious beliefs consider that, the god has the privileges to curse or punished anybody and that chap had to bear all these hazards of his own. But here in the field of folk beliefs, the accounts have changed all together. Here a sermon is projected that, both the god and disciple had to meet the sufferings and misery for any of one's fault. Again it is fascinating enough; when after having assurance from Karam Thakur to return with him,

Karmu have shown his dutifulness by demanding the remedies for which he promised to his friends, such as man, tree, ox, horse, elephant, crocodile, ponds etc. whom he met while travelling for quest of Karam god. Well enough, the god after requested by Karmu, recommended adequate measures for his friends too, though they had not formally paid their tribute to the god, nor performed any such rituals, neither have witnessed so many hurdles, which Karmu had to face. So now this time from god's end, the simplicity of religious beliefs and practices may have recommended through this storyline. By virtue of these narratives and counter-narratives, the personal quest of Karmu for god does not confined in his personal orbit but engulfed the folk en-mass. Thus the morals of folk religion: well being for majority has placed into prominence. Moreover as we see, the sufferers, whom Karmu had met during his journey to god's abode, were mostly non-human creatures. Both Karmu and Karam Thakur has their own attachments and soft corner for those creatures, which in fact have suggested that folk religion has rare kind of flexibility where human beings are inseparably related to other non-human creatures of the universe and thus defending the cause of ecology. In fact a huge sense of altruism may easily be visible on the whole spectrum. To look into the end of the story, the priest used to ask the Parbotia, "To whom does the Karam belong? To whom does the Dharam belong?" The prompt answer from the Parbotia is, "Karam (religion and duty fullness) is mine but the Dharam (blessings and well-being) is for all". In fact the folk culture is an everlasting crusader for selflessness. Truly here lies the essence of folk culture.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION:

From the inception, the India has witness a cultural fusion led by folk culture and religion. It promulgated the cause of selflessness by challenging the narratives of urban elitist culture which most often talk the story of power and money. Elitist urban based popular culture mostly was dominated by upper social hierarchy and subverts the concept of social equality. Noteworthy the folk elements in urban popular culture are toeing everywhere, but seldom acknowledged. To take the example of famous Durga puja of Hindus, the cult of 'Bahana' (Vehicle) of goddess Durga and her associates Laxmi, Saraswati, Ganesha and Kartik and their Bahanas like Lion, Mouse, Owl, Duck and Peacock or the concept of 'Kala Bou' (Bannana Tree) and many others are perfect insignias of worship of animal, nature and even animatims. In a similar manner we may refer here such incidents, which happened during Karmu's journey to find Karam Thakur: he mate two men, a crocodile, a tree, a horse and an ox on the way, which actually a similar depiction of importance of nature and ecology and others allied elements which is instantly propped up by the folk culture. In this connection, the natural articles which used for Karam puja may deserve a bit of focus. We have stated earlier that, a branch and twigs of Karam tree (*Mitragyna parvifolia*) is motif of Karam Thakur, centred on the place called Daltola (feet's of twigs). Moreover in various phases of puja (worship) performances, several natural elements like leaves and twigs of Bel (Wood apple/*Aegle marmelos*), Hortuki (*Myrobalan/Terminalia chebula*), leaves of paddy, leaves and twigs of Shala (*Shorea robusta*) tree, earthen holy lamp and pot called Pradip and Ghata respectively, water, mince of rice and Kankur with foot-stalk used as component essentials, may authenticated its bias towards nature and ecology.

To realize the score, we can take up the elitist version of popular of Durga mythology, where nature and ecology remained veiled by sophistication. We know the animals placed together with deity of Durga or Kali only as the 'Bahan' and nothing more than that. Similarly, all other natural elements used for worship of goddess Durga or other deities of Hindu myth only become a secondary metaphor and a mere belongings of holy Sanskrit 'Mantra'. All these have mechanized a propensity to uphold the magnitude of main stream gods or goddess. To take another well known example from Shiva and Kali cult, it can be seen that both Shiva and Kali of Hindu mythology have no doubt brought from a subaltern folk-cultural hideout; their appearance, belongings, dress and pattern of worship all are bearing such testimonies; but paradoxically, scriptural narratives of their origin are subverted and intentionally drafted with ambiguity. The concept of 'Asura' which was adopted from the tribal folk tradition is another ardent example of distortion of facts and historical moralities. The elitist Hindu mythology have always been tried to depict Mahisasura as a villain and

a motif of evil etc. by hiding the facts of antagonism of power-dominated culture over their comparatively inferior counterparts. In fact, everywhere of its domain, popular urban culture and religion have earmarked Dharma (Religion) somewhere for Hindus or somewhere or sometimes for Christian or Muslims and sometimes/somewhere for this or that caste, that sect.etc. Similarly a number of hymns and mantras related to the Hindu worships and sacrifices used to pray for the desire for personal well being and wealth instead of good for all.

Contrary the folk culture and religion have its own spirit to put an end to those blinkered ideas. The folk culture regarded Dharma as inherited from the forefathers, lesson from nature, as well as preached by the philosophers of their own as well as from mainstream culture and religion. Influences of Sri Chaitainya Mahaprabhu and its Vaisnavism over the folk cultural life of Purulia and its adjoining parts of Rarh Bengal (roughly, South-Western and Western part of present West Bengal) are worth mentioning in this regards. The folk religions assimilate the god and goddess from the conventional religious ideology of elite beliefs and at the same time and similar fashion it propagated the charm of social equality. The folk culture and religion have always put aside the individual and championed the cause of social well being in general. This time the mantra of Karam “The Karam (religion and duty fullness) is mine and the Dharam (well being and blessings) is for all” denotes such truth lacking any ambiguity.

To conclude with, it should be observed expressively that, festival of Karam-Jawa in essence a folk festival centred on the cult of production of paddy as well as the progeny, as we told earlier. Somewhere between its origin and maturity it has gathered socio-economic-religious twist by engulfed the myth, legends and tells of folk derivation. Beside the presentation of religio-rituals ceremony with sharp leanings towards nature worship en-suite with culture of production, the performance of Karam songs and dances have intrude all the vacuums of this festival. In fact the songs and dances are the prime mover behind its social popularity and acceptance among the masses. In a sense, a popular hysteria is become synonymous with this festival. All the songs recite herewith are strong exponent of societal experiences of folk instead of mere prayer to almighty. Only a few of the songs are sings as prayer with religious tunes to Karam Thakur or Supreme Being, rather most of the songs are the song of the din and dust of the commoners. Moreover a lion share of Karam songs composed, have acquired by the women by virtue of their close proximity with the cult of production as well as with Karam puja. Consequently the Karam-Jawa songs mostly have portrayed the narratives of womanhood and their struggle as well as their inner-tune of love, despair, joy and sorrows with homely simplicity; which find mention earlier while I have initiated the write-up on songs of Karam at one or two pages back of present article. To be true to the reality, there is hardly any doubt that, the utmost reception of Karam puja and performances by the commoners of this folk-cultural region, en-rooted actually in the sphere of this homely simplicity. In fact this simplicity has lent a democratic-liberal tune over all the episodes connected with this popular folk festival.

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