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Article

Eco-Spirituality as A Boon: A Case Study of Karam Parab Among the Indigenous People of Nayagram Block (West Bengal)

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| | ABSTRACT |
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| <p>Keywords: <i>Karam, festival, tribals, indigenous, nature, environment, eco-spirituality</i></p>  | <p>The term 'Eco-spirituality' connotes a spiritual connection between human beings and environment. In simple terms it demands that humanity should owe its reverence to nature which is essentially its nurturer. A belief in eco-spirituality should prevent man from polluting, exploiting and dominating over mother-nature. India's commitment to preservation and conservation of nature has been collectively articulated and carried forward by indigenous communities. Their festivals epitomize a deep connection between man, nature and society. <i>Karam Parab</i> is one such festival. It is a harvest festival celebrated by the Korba, Baiga, Kudumi, Oraon, Munda, Santal and many other tribes in Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Assam, Odisha and West Bengal.</p> <p>Based primarily on data collected through loosely structured interview from Baligeria village in Nayagram Block of Jhargram district in West Bengal, and also relying on secondary sources, the present paper attempts at a sociological understanding of the ways in which eco-spirituality comes as a boon in an era of alarming climate change.</p> |

Introduction:

Eco-spirituality refers to a manifestation of the spiritual connection between human beings and environment. It comes from the sense of reverence to the nature. It consists of the belief that earth and nature have brought humankind into existence and have sustained them. It has provided men with its bountifulness. 'Eco-spirituality' acknowledges the interconnectedness of a community's identity, culture and economy with their immediate ecology.

In simple terms 'Eco-spirituality' means :

- a) Humanity is born from nature, is a part of nature, and does not own nature exclusively for its own ends and purposes.
- b) Humanity must stop polluting nature and atmosphere.
- c) Humanity must stop over-exploitation of the natural world.
- d) Humanity should not dominate over nature.

India's commitment to nature and its conservation can be a reflection of India's ancient culture. Many Indian festivals epitomize a deep connection between man, nature and society. Traditional eco-spirituality has been collectively articulated and carried forward by indigenous communities especially since the beginning of civilization. *Karam Parab* (festival) is one such festival among many others. It is a harvest festival celebrated in Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Assam, Odisha and West Bengal. The *karam* (*Adina cordifolia*) tree is the center of the festival rituals. The Korba, Baiga, Kudumi, Oraon, munda, Santal and many other tribes celebrate this festival. Besides being a celebration of "*Karma*", i.e. work, and of the selfless love between brothers and sisters, it represents the primitive tradition of venerating nature. Based primarily on data collected through loosely-structured interview from Baligeria village in Nayagram block of Jhargram district of West Bengal¹, and also taking aid from secondary sources, the present paper attempts at an analysis of the ways in which eco-spirituality is practiced through *Karam* rituals, songs and dances. Tribal spirituality is unique. Their spirituality has been passed down through generations. They have got no sacred texts, but their spiritual values and principles are passed down through oral traditions.

About the festival:

The *Karam* festival is celebrated on the eleventh day of the lunar cycle in the Bengali month of *Bhado* (*Bhado Ekadashi*)². It is both a communal and a household festival. The festival comprises of three distinct elements: rituals, songs and dance.

Rituals:

The *Parab* is preceded by another festival called '*Jawa*'. *Jawa* is a celebration of the germination power of seeds. Unmarried girls start celebrating this festival eleven days before *Karam*. They plant seven kinds of seeds³ in bamboo baskets locally known as '*tupa*'; sand, soil, turmeric powder, oil etc are put in the basket. After planting the seeds the *Jawa* observers are required to abide by certain prohibitions and restrictions. They should abstain

from having non-vegetarian food items, should not sleep on cot, should not eat any burnt foodstuff, should not eat sweet things, should not have curd. The belief is that if they fail to follow these rules, their *jawa* might get destroyed or it may create a hole on the earth. This practice is suggestive of homoeopathic or imitative magic as studied by James G. Frazer (Frazer, 1890). It is based on the principle that like produces like. So, besides being a self-training of unmarried girls regarding nurturing a child, *Jawa* is also a festival to convey their gratitude to nature and earth. The Mahatos (Kudumi), Santals, Oraons and Munda in Baligeriapractise the tradition of *Jawa* as they believe that it was their ancestors who had introduced the concept of cultivation. During *Jawa Brata* they vow to withhold famine, produce foodgrains and worship tree as deity. It definitely shows their consciousness about nature.

The festival that immediately follows *Jawa Brata* is *Karam*. The tribals order their ritual, music and dance on nature's signals, i.e. on the blossoming of plants and trees, on the position of the moon, on the cycle of seasons. *Karam* is celebrated depending on the position of moon. As a preparation of this festival, boys and girls go to the forest to collect *karam* branches with the '*pahan*' (village priest). They carry a '*tupa*' with them. They dance around the *karam* tree, three or five times. Then a boy cuts young *karam* branches from an unflowered tree. These are not allowed to fall on the ground while being cut and are handled with utmost care. They also collect some flowers like jasmine, *june*, *amla*, *putla*, *keya*, *sal* leaves and twigs. After returning to the village two *karam* branches are planted in the village courtyard, '*akhra*' or '*karam than*' as they call it. The branches are covered with a new cloth. People sit around these branches to hear the legend of *Karam Raja* narrated by the *pahan*. They refer to the legend as '*Karam Binti*'. After the story is told, the devotees put the collected flowers at the foot of the *karam* branches and dance the whole night. They surround the deity while dancing so that no animal is able to destroy the branches. Lamps fuelled by ghee (Indian butter) are lit in the front of the deity. The members of the community dance and rejoice while enjoying rice-brown beer ('*handia*') throughout the night. The purpose behind this dancing and drinking is that the deity needs to be kept awake on that particular night. The next day, these branches are immersed in a nearby pond or stream, after a salute by touching the *karam* branches, three times, facing east.

All festivals, be they of the tribals or non-tribals , are important in terms of analysis of the socio-religious aspects of the community. It is through the medium of festivals that one gathers information about the value systems, beliefs, morals, ethics and family and community organisation. A detailed study of *Karam Puja* thus reveals the close relationship of these aborigines with nature. As nature forms an integral part of their lives, they turn to nature for better regulation of their lives. The *Karam* festival is essentially an agricultural festival. In this sense, it is highly symbolic as it is also associated with the idea of fecundity. The idea of fecundity applies to the agricultural produce as well as to the recently engaged girls of the village. Thus, it is an occasion when the produce of nature is equated with the fecundity of young girls.

Jhumur(Karam songs and dance) :

Jhumur originated in tribal society, but due to migrations it took several forms. *Jhumur* is performed with songs and dance and with typical musical instruments like *damsa*, *madal* and

timki . Young girls perform the dance, holding each other's waist and moving their hands and legs with the rhythm generated by the male members with the instruments. It is performed in the occasions of *Karam* and *Tusu Parab*. The dance is most popular among the Oraons, Mundas and Kudumis. The term '*Jhumur*' came from the term '*Jhum*' which means shifting cultivation.

Originally, tribal women at the time of agricultural work expressed their emotions in local languages called '*hawka*' (meaning shouting) . *Jhumur* is nothing but work -related musical performance of agriculture- based society. The focal theme of the song is man-nature relationship. *Jhumur* is sung in different languages like Bengali, Oriya and also in dialects like Kurmali, Panchpargania and Nagpuria. But in the region which the present paper deals with, it is sung in Bengali language or in Santali, Oraon, Mundari or Kurmali dialect.

To understand the evolution of *Jhumur*, let's have a look at the different phases of its development. In the first phase, *Jhumur*, as work song and recreational performance was confined within tribals living in the forests. In course of time, influenced by the fertility cult, it became an instrument of worshipping for good harvest by the settled agriculturists. With Vaishnava influence from the 14th century, it underwent an improvement in quality and dimensions. *Radha-Krishna Lila* then formed a major part of it. However, the golden age of *Jhumur* ranges from 1850 when it was enriched with literary value addition. Since 1950, inclusion of contemporary social, economic and political thoughts within it has marked the Green Age of *Jhumur*. Again the Karma songs can be classified into different types:

- (i) Songs dedicated to *Karam Raja* in which the celebration of the ritual is glorified.
- (ii) Love- songs, in which marital, as well as pre-marital and extra-marital love is described.
- (iii) Licentious and obscene songs.
- (iv) Songs discussing village gossips and recording events of social importance in the history of the village or the tribe. People of prominence also form a subject of the *Karma* songs.

Jhumur songs can be further sub-divided into *Radha-Krishna Lila*, '*Darbari*' *jhumur*, *Patajhumur*, *Bhadariajhumur* on the basis of its content. The type of songs that are sung during *Karam* in Bali Geria village, or jangalmahal per se are the songs dedicated to *Karam Raja*. Hence, it is precisely known as '*Karam nacherjhumur*' or '*Patanacherjhumur*'. Moreover, as it is sung during the month of *Bhado*, it is also known as *Bhadariajhumur*.

Jhumur lyrics are short as they are orally composed. Generally, two or four lines are repeatedly sung. The crescendo typically changes from higher to lower octave. The fact that *Karamnacherjhumur* is solely dedicated to good harvest and nature worship shall be clear if some such *jhumur* songs from the region are cited and analysed :

- (i) *Gnaayermatijanambhumi, ma'erisoman,*
Ma go sal-mahulermatalhawayajmaate go poran.
 [This song equates one's motherland with own mother and also expresses the emotion for the local nature and trees like *sal* and *mahul*.]

- (ii) *Dungri-dahi-budapahar,*
Aar lalmatir bon-badar...
Subanrekha-Dulung-Knasaidhaare,
Janambhumir kole janam libo baare baare.

[This song expresses the wish to get the next birth again in the region that is surrounded by hills like *Dungri*, *Dahi* and *Buda* and which is drained by rivers like *Subarnarekha*, *Dulung* and *Knasai*. So, it basically upholds the love for nature into which one is born.]

- (iii) *Chumaidegochumai de, duyokaramdaurnayo,*
Degoayochumai de, duyokaramdaur.

[This is a call for greeting and welcoming the pair of *Karam* branches with utmost respect and affection.]

- (iv) *Aaj re karam Thakur ghare-duare,*
Kal re Karam Thakur shnako nadir pare.

[This is the immersion song referring to the legend of Karmu and Dharmu to be illustrated in the next section.]

The songs amply bear the testimony of love that these communities have for nature and that they feel intricately related to their surroundings and region which they are a part of. They actually cannot separate themselves from the environment that they have been gifted with at birth.

Patanacherjhumur is typified by its rapid movement and is very attractive. It is described by Elwin as one "in which the feet are alternately brought forward and back, very quickly. The right shoots forward and is back in its place immediately, and the left is out and back as quickly." The primary significance of the dance lies in the fact that it is meant to accompany the *Karam* ritual, hence it is religious. As a monsoon dance it is complementary to the harvest ritual. It implies certain magical qualities which are beneficial for a good crop. Certain movements in the dance are imitative of agricultural operations, which leads one to believe that the object of the dance is primarily magical.

Legends:

There are a number of legends about *Karam puja*. The first tale deals with seven brothers of the Majhwar tribe who used to live together. While the older six brothers used to go to the field for agricultural work, the responsibility of the youngest brother was to carry lunch for them in the noon. However, one day, the youngest brother, with his six sisters-in-law got engrossed in dancing and singing around a *karam* tree and forgot to feed the elder ones. The other brothers, tired with hunger, came back and got enraged seeing such a sight. They threw away the *karam* tree into the river. Immediately bad luck fell upon the whole family. When they realised their mistake they started looking for the *karamdevata*. Finally they found

him floating in the river. After much pleading *Karam Devata* was pleased with them and gave back whatever they had lost. Since then the deity has been worshipped by the tribe.

Another *Karam* legend is based on the story of Dharma and Karma - two brothers. Dharma was rich while Karma was poor. Once, on the request of his wife, Karma went to Dharma to get some money. However, repulsed by the rude behaviour of Dharma and his wife, he was returning, heart-broken. On his way back home he saw some women worshipping the *Karam* tree. These women advised him to worship the *karam* tree. He followed their advice and soon his misfortunes came to an end. He continued this practice and others followed his example.

These two tales however do not mention the origin of *Karam* worship, but only refer to the already-existing, though not a very popular practice. The tribals in the Jhargram region have a belief regarding the origin of worship of *Karam* deity. According to their *karam* legend the story is as follows -

Long back there were two brothers - Karmu and Dharmu. Once they were faced with severe famine. All the crops were damaged and the people had nothing to thrive on. At this point of time, people prayed to God⁴ to rescue them. So God sent *Karam* deity to the earth to save the tribes. *Karam* followed the instruction of God and came in the dreams of the elder brother. But Karmu did not pay heed to the dream. So, *Karam* deity again came in the dreams of Dharmu and advised him to plant a *karam* branch in the field. Moreover Dharmu was instructed to rear goats and dance around the *karam* branch everyday. Then only he would get back his lost wealth. Dharmu followed the instructions and his good days were back once again.

One day, Karmu noticed that his brother was engrossed in dancing. He got annoyed and threw away the branch into the river. Immediately an enraged *Karam* deity cursed the two brothers and they were again pauperized. On the advice of Dharmu Guru, Karmu and Dharmu started their journey to search for *karam* branch and get it from the banks of river Sindhu⁵. The bad luck because of the curse of *Karam devata* is described by the local tribes as '*Karam kopalbaam*'. On their way to Sindhu river, the two brothers faced a lot of obstacles. They could not have fruits from trees like jujube, jackfruit or fig ; the trees lamented that they were cursed due to their misdeeds, so they were unable to produce edible fruits. The brothers couldn't even quench their thirst as they found all water bodies infested with worms. When they requested a crocodile to carry them across the river, it said that it was unable to float as it was cursed due to its misdeeds. Again the cattle narrated the ordeal they had to go through during rains, storm and winter. The trees, water bodies, crocodile and cattle requested the brothers to pray to the *Karam* deity for them.

Finally Karmu and Dharmu reached River Sindhu. They started pleading and apologizing to *Karam Devata*. They promised the deity that they would never again disrespect him. *Karam* then decided to forgive them. Moreover, listening to the ordeal of the trees and animals, the deity instructed them to be the care-givers of trees and animals. Since then the Mahatos and other tribes in the region have been the nurturers of nature and environment. Not only that, they believe that their ancestors were the first ones to begin cultivation which started with the practice of giving *jawa*. That is why they begin the *Karam* festival with *jawa brata* to this

day. The story of origin of *Karam Parab* amply illustrates how close these people are with nature, how they live with nature, how they share their feelings with animals and plants, how grateful they are towards these plants and animals.

Conclusion:

Karam festival delivers a message to the whole world and especially the Indians that we all are dependent on land, water and forests : trees that sustain the environment must be worshipped, saved and planted more and more. Mother nature , if treated well and worshipped, can take away all our sufferings and shower us with all her blessings and resources. The philosophy of eco-spirituality reminds us that the interaction between human beings and environment has always been reciprocal. Both the environment and human society have a profound influence on each other. However, the technologically advanced society initially gains from nature, and then becomes regulator of nature. Indigenous people remain at a less advanced stage of exploitation of existing natural resources. Their intermingled socio-cultural life makes recurring effort to keep harmonious nature between man and nature. Tribal religions advocate nature as messiah, mother, protector or host for their people.

Eco-spirituality is a celebration of Mother Nature and her power as well as bountifulness. Festivals in which nature is venerated, indicate in a very obvious but subtle manner the need to conserve nature. An obvious analogy is that we don't destroy something that we worship. Therefore, *Karam* acts as a reminder to people the need to protect natural resources from mindless exploitation and destruction. These indigenous communities are celebrating and venerating nature through ages and much before the rise of any 'ism'.

The bonds between earth and *adivasis* is not only material, but also moral. Land is valuable to them not only because it provides them with livelihood, but also because it has been handed over to them by their ancestors. Hence it is morally binding to preserve it and hand it over to their descendants. Moreover, they also believe that nature is the abode of their ancestral spirits. So, by prayers and festivals they try to keep up a good relationship with the ancestors and the earth.

Eco-spirituality of the tribals brings together the concepts of 'Naturism' as propounded by Max Mueller and that of 'Sacred' as advocated by Emile Durkheim. The reverence for nature among the indigenous communities manifests itself in their belief that deities and supernatural powers reside within natural phenomena. Thus, the worship of nature stresses upon the fact that the 'sacred' can express itself in any form, be it plant, animal, water body, mountain or celestial bodies. In the process, nature becomes a symbol of something beyond itself, that is, it transcends its own self. *Karamparab* is only one example of such phenomena. The customs and rituals of this festival hold the codes to environmentally sustainable living, thus bearing testimony to the eco-spiritual worldview of these indigenous people.

Endnotes:

1. A portion of *jangalmahal* having a total population of 444 people (2011 census).
2. It falls in the English month of August-September.
3. Paddy, *kurthi*, *moong*, corn, *kalai*, *boot*, *birahi*.
4. They refer to the God as 'Thakur'.
5. The local tribals believe that they were the indigenous people inhabiting the banks of River *Sindhu*. That is, originally the tribes like santals, Kol, Bhumij, Munda, Oraon, Kudumi hail from the *sindhu* valley. They were the Dravidians, who, later on, had to flee and settle down in the jungles of central and eastern India to save themselves from Aryan invasion.

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