

## **PERFORMING RITUALS PERFORMING IDENTITY: THE KARMA FESTIVAL OF THE BINJHALS**

**Dr. Anand Mahanand**

Asst. Professor  
Department of Materials Development  
English and Foreign Languages University  
Hyderabad- 500 605, India

### **Abstract**

There has been a shift of emphasis in the study of cultures. The shift has been from structure to process, competence to performance and from “the logics of social systems to the dialects of socio-cultural processes”(Turner 21). The shift can be traced if we give a close look to the works from Levi-Strauss to Schechner. Levi- Strauss studied myths by generalizing their structures. Following Strauss, Vladimir Propp studied folktales and made observations on their common patterns. Clifford Geertz regarded cultures as symbolic systems . He also made a distinction between human and animal instincts and ascribed culture to human behaviour and defined cultures as the symbolic universe within which acts are signs. Michel Foucault establishes the relationship between body and power in his *History of Sexuality II* and states that body is the agent of performing social practices. According to him, bodily practices are important performances. Victor Turner says that social processes are performative. Richard Schechner links rituals to performances and shows how rituals culminate into performances. He states, “performances are made believe in play, for fun”(Schechner XVIII). The objective of the paper is to show what kinds of changes take place when a ritual is turned to a stage performance. Using Schechner’s theory of performance it examines the Karma festival of the Binjhals and shows the changes in the process of transformation. In this paper the theories used by the above mentioned cultural theorists have been utilized as framework for the sake of convenience. This should not be understood that author is carried away by western theories and is averse to Indigenous thoughts. In fact, he will be using some of the available indigenous ideas in the process of his argument.

**Key Words:** Rituals, Performance, identity, Karma, Culture, theatre.

### **THE CONCEPT OF PERFORMATIVITY**

Performativity is used in Social Sciences as performance of daily behaviour of individuals based on social norms and habits. Performativity is also understood as “the capacity of speech and communication that consummate in an action.” Performance is associated with action though some theorists like Judith Butler argue that even common place communication and speech acts are performative and in that they serve to define identity. Thus the act of performance leads to identity formation. Hence we ascribe certain labels to writings such as dalit writing, tribal writing, women writing and so on. In relation to rituals too , we term certain rituals as Santal

rituals, Bhil rituals and Binjhal ritual and so on. In light of this, I would like to study the Karma ritual of the Binjhals of Western Odisha. It can be observed that the ritual is part of the Karma festival.

### **THE KARMA FESTIVAL**

The Karma festival is also known as the Karamsani festival. It is celebrated by the Binjhal tribes of Odisha on the Bhadra Ekadasi (eleventh day of Full moon of Bhadra) or August – September month. The Binjhals are the indigenous tribes of Western Odisha inhabiting primarily in the districts of Sambalpur, Jharsuguda, Bargarh, Balangir, Sudargarh, Nuapada, Kalahandi, Boudh, Mayurbhanj and Phulbani. They celebrate Karma festival in reverence to Goddess Karamsani. Karma festival is celebrated by different tribes in different ways. For instance, the karma celebrated by the Oraons is different. Here women also participate in it. The ritual is also different.

The karma festival described in this paper is from a tiny village called Balipata in the Bargarh district of Odisha. Here there is a sizeable Binjhal population. In addition, there are people from other communities such as the dalits OBCs who live together sharing many similar cultural practices. The Karma festival has many parts. The important part is the ritual which consists of installing the Karamsani branch at the centre of the stage. Goddess Karamsani is worshipped in the form of a branch which is installed at the centre of the festival ground. The chief priest of the community offers prayers followed by prayer song:

Juhar go ma Karamsani.  
Tor pade karuchhu daini  
Go Ma Karamsani  
Tor pade Karuchhu daini.

### **TRANSLATION**

Hail you Mother Karamsani  
We bow before your feet  
and offer our prayers.

The second part is song and dance as part of the celebration. The Binjhals and their neighbors participate in song and dance throughout the night. The musical instruments used are Mandal and cymbals. In between they have a short interval for drinking a drink called Kusma prepared from herbs and is slightly intoxicating which makes the participants spirited. Then there is another event in the festival in which the priest tells the story of “Karma and Effort” concluding that if you have fate, you can enjoy good results, if you don’t have it your efforts will go waste. The story of Karma is narrated by the story teller. Here Karma is not the concept of karma as understood by the dominant tradition as duty, but karma for the people here means fate. People usually say if it is there in your karma or fate you will get. Based on this philosophy the story teller tells a story which explains that because the character did not have good fate, karma, he did not receive good result. The full story has been appended below.

The festival is celebrated to drive away insects from crops, and diseases from cattle. It is celebrated for better yield of crops. It is celebrated for their wellbeing, for fostering fellow feeling and peaceful living. The song and dance goes from evening to morning. Though these rituals are performed only by the Binjhals, the non-Binjhal villagers also participated in the festival many ways. For instance, the one person who is good in playing mandar has been invited regularly to

play mandal in the author's village. The author and members of his family have witnessed and participated in it since his childhood regularly sometime as a singers or dancers.

## KARAMA ENACTED ON STAGE

Because the song and dance of the karma festival are unique and aesthetically very pleasing, commercial artists try to stage- show of the Karma festival and the rituals associated with it. There have been videos and programmes made to make them available in the market. It is worth examining how they try to "show the doing" in these forms. We need to notice what kinds of changes take place when a ritual is turned into a performance. Richard Schechner makes a list of changes in his book *Performance Theory*. We may list them below.

### Ritual

- Results
- Link to an absent other
- Symbolic time
- Performer possessed
- Audience Participates
- Audience believes
- Criticism discouraged
- Collective creativity

### Performance

- Fun
- Only for those present
- Emphasis now
- Performer knows what he/she is doing
- Audience watches
- Audience appreciates
- Criticism flourishes
- Individual creativity  
(Schechner 130)

We are aware that ritual is an actual practice and theater is an enactment and the both can't be the same, still we can make some observations on the process of change. Rituals are performed for cultural efficacy. They are not mundane activities but considered as sacred. In case of Karma it is performed to enhance good crops, please the goddess Karamsani so that she would protect crops and cattle. Through this there is ecological harmony as well as social fellow-feeling, but the stage performance aims at pleasing the audience. When a ritual is performed, the performers have mainly the deity in mind and they do it out of devotion, but in stage performance, the actors are conscious of the audience. In case of ritual, the performers are possessed with the spirit. So they are not self conscious, but the performers on the stage are self-conscious and conscious of their audience. In a ritual the participants participate and there is no audience, but in a stage performance, the audience is present. In Karma festival too all members of the tribe participate as participants. There is no audience watching without participating. Even the non-Binjhal members of the village feel as part of the ritual as they believe in the goddess as well as in the ritual. As it has been said rituals are not meant for criticism hence criticism is discouraged but in act of performance criticism is encouraged. Rituals enhance social knowledge. For instance, though the song people learn about the day of the celebration of the ritual. They sing:

Karma ke ekadasi  
Phool phute bara masi  
Karama gadile sarbe basi go maa karamsani  
Tor pade karuchhu daini

The song embodies the day of the celebration of Karma festival that it is celebrated on the eleventh day of full moon of Bhadra month. If we remember the song, we remember the day when the Karma festival is celebrated. A ritual is connected socially. The community feels obliged to perform the ritual but a theatre may not have social obligation. Because a ritual is a community event, ethos of the society are embodied in it but in a theater performance of

selfhood is associated in it. In ritual no individuality is performed but “dividuals” or collective identity is performed. The performers are just mediums not the creators. Rituals are performed following conventions but theater is performed as per the script.

Rituals are spiritually driven whereas theater is mostly commercially driven. In case of ritual one is not supposed to intrude, innovate but one has a lot of freedom to innovate, invent and intrude. This is not to say that there have been no efforts to link theater to liberate theatrical process to link with the masses. Ngugi Wa Thiongo did made efforts to link it with the community by encouraging spontaneity and audience participation in the performances to delink theater from producing a gallery of active stars. In India, the eminent dramatist Habib Tanvir also made attempts to link theater to the community by involving actors from the local communities and by contextualizing locally. But these were just efforts, the basic features of theatre otherwise remain as dominant characteristics.

One can notice the rising trends in commodifying tribal cultural forms by industrial houses and groups and marketing them in the forms of videos, albums and through electronic devices making the life world of the tribal communities into plastic arts. Tourists departments also include description of Karma in their travel brochure. One is not arguing to stop such activities, but would like to study how the new forms transform the indigenous genre and how they are received.

### **Conclusion**

Through the observation of ritual and stage performance, we can define identity of the performers. From the mode and style of performance we ascribe certain identity to the performers of rituals. For instance, we say that this is Binjhal Karma because it has been performed in this particular manner. The performers of other show also form and identity for themselves as they think that the ritual and associated performances such as song and dance are performed by people of their own region. So even being out-siders, they wish to show to the world this forms as they some way or the other identify with this form.

This is not to tell that because the stage performance of the ritual takes away certain elements, it should not be performed or one should discourage such activities. Our intension is not that as we understand that culture is a fluid thing and there is going to be change, innovation and intrusion of technology, but our intention is to understand what kind of changes that take place in such a shift. When such videos of the staged performances of the rituals were shown to the members of the community, who actually performed the rituals ( Supad Bariha and Mani Bariha), they pointed out the artificiality of the video and affirmed that it is not done in actual ritual).It is accused that we tend to use western theories in analysing local cultures, but I feel that as long as western theories are helpful to look at things from the subject’s point of view, there is no harm. The insights of scholars have helped the author to understand the process of change from ritual to performance without hijacking his thinking. They are just a tool for him to understand the change in a particular way. It is just one of the ways of reading. There might be other ways too.

### **Works Cited**

- Geertz, Clifford. *The interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.  
Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory*. New York: Routledge, 2003.  
Turner, Victor. *The Anthropology of Performance*. New York: PAJ Publications, 1988.

## Appendix Fate and Effort

Once the God of fate and the God of efforts were debating under a banyan tree that was situated at the end of the village. The god of Fate said, “People become rich or poor according to my wish. Without my blessings, they are nothing. The God of Efforts said, “If people don’t make efforts they cannot become what they want. It is my blessings that make people achieve what they want to achieve in life.” But the God of Fate did not agree with it. Both of them argued over it for a long time. At that time, an old man was passing by that way carrying a bundle of fire wood. The two Gods asked him, “Dear old fellow, we are discussing a serious subject. Please come and resolve it.” The old man replied, “I have no time to resolve your problem. I have to go home soon and give the firewood to my wife so that she would start cooking. The God Effort said, “All right, you take this bundle of coins and buy things of your choice and live a happy life. Now onwards, you need not have to collect fire wood. You can throw away the firewood and go home.” Then he told the God of Fate, “You will see the old man will become rich and his life will change all together. The God of Fate said, “Let us see, what happens.”

The old man threw away the bundle of firewood and reached home. He found that his wife had gone somewhere locking the house. So he put the bundle of coins somewhere near the door and went to call his wife. At that time the neighbour’s wife came and stole away the bundle of coins. The old man’s wife was furious to see him without any fire wood. The old man said, “You forget about the fire wood. I have got a bundle of coins. We need to collect firewood anymore.” His wife said, “All right give me the bundle of coins you have got. When the old man looked for the bundle of coins above the door, he did not find it there. The old woman got more furious and shouted at him. The next day the old man was coming that way carrying a bundle of firewood. The two ‘Gods saw him and asked, “I had given you so much money, but you still go to the jungle to get fire wood. Your fate has n’t changed. “The old man said, “No sir, the bundle of coins you had given is stolen. “The God of Efforts said, “Okay. You take these gold coins and they will change your fate.” The old man was happy to see such a big gold coin. He collected the coin and went to the pond to bathe. He kept the gold coin on the rock and got inside the water to bathe. In the mean time, the coin was swallowed up by a fish. The old man came out of the water and saw that there was no coin. He was sad and came back home. His wife who was waiting for him was again disappointed and abused him for coming empty handed.

The next day, the old man again went to the jungle to get firewood. On the way, he met the two gods. The god of fate said, “See the old man is like that due to lack of my blessings.” The God of effort said, “All right. You bless the old man and let me see how he does.” Then the God of Fate said, “Yes, your fate will change with in the seven days. You take the seven coins and buy things for you and your family and lead a happy and prosperous life. “The old man asked, “What can I buy with these seven coins sir? “The god of Fate replied, “You don’t worry as long as my blessings are with you, you will never be in wants.” The old man thanked the god of Effort and left for home. On the way he thought what to buy. Then he saw the fisherman with a big fish. The old man bought the fish and came home. He called his wife and said, “See I have got a big fish. You cut it and cook.” When his wife cut the fish, she could find a gold coin in the stomach of the fish. When the old man saw it he realized that it was the lost coin which was swallowed by the fish. He became very happy and danced in happiness as if he was possessed. He said, “Yes, I have got the coin. I will get back the money too.”

The neighbour's wife heard this and got frightened. She thought, " The old man is possessed. So he will make out that she has stolen his money. So she brought the money back and laid down before him and gave back the money. The old man and his wife became very rich. They bought land from the village chief and built a beautiful house and lived there. The God of effort and the God of Fate waited for the old man to come back to them. But he did not come back for quite a few days. Finally, they decided to visit him. When they went to see the old man he was happy to see them and offered them hospitality and told the God of Fate that it was due to his blessings his fortune has changed. God of Fate told him, " You should worship me as Karamsani once a year. For this reason , people worship the Karam tree once a year for they believe that he resides in it.