

## **Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia**

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**Lecture 56**

**Tribal Traditions and Performances V**

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religion in South Asia. So now we are discussing tribal traditions and performances and today our lecture is going to mainly focus on the Santal tribe. So before we start the lecture, let us take a look at the Jaher than. This is the sacred site of worship for the Santals and similarly all tribes have these sites, and these sites are located at the heart of the nature. So like I was telling, the core philosophy that informs, that inspires the Santali religion as well as the religion of the tribal people in India, in South Asia is, you know, preservation of forestry, preservation of vegetation. So this is the picture of Jaher than in a village in Baripada, Odisha.

So usually it is made up of Saal and Mahua trees, which are considered as very useful and thereby sacred trees for the Santals. Now the first festival that we discuss today is Hariar Sim. Hariar Sim is celebrated in the month of July and August on the occasion of germination of seeds, when seeds start germinating after they push out the new shoots, Hariar Sim is celebrated. So the Santals offer their sacrifices to the spirits of bongas with the intention of a lush paddy harvest.

This is just harkening back from our previous lecture where we are talking about how the tribal religions are very much interested in the secular motives, the motives of survival and the socio-economic interests. So you know, sustenance and protection of cattle, of crops and harvest are some of the, you know, reasons, some of the incentives that lead to the, you know, that lead to the origin or that explain the origin of these festivals. So before the day of Hariar Sim, the Naeke or the village priest fasts and he is the one that has to observe some kind of, you know, austerity prior to the rituals. On the day of Hariar Sim, after taking a bath, Naeke visits the Jaher than, the picture of Jaher than that I have showed just now, right. The Naeke or the priest visits the Jaher than with a winnowing fan containing flour and other items such as Sindur or the vermilion and fowls for sacrifice.

So the Naeke or priest sacrifices the fowls on behalf of the entire village. The sacrifice is made, you know, or dedicated to the spirits of the village, the major spirits being Marang buru, Jaher Era, Gosai Era, Moreko Turuiko, Pargana bonga and the Sima bongas. When the Naeke returns home, he makes an offer of rice beer or Haria to all the villagers. So here the picture that emerges is that of a very pan village or a pan communal celebration where prayers are not made, you know, looking at or keeping in mind individual interest. So, you know, it is the protection of the entire community, betterment of the entire village that is sought through these worships, through these rituals.

Just like in the case of Erok Sim, a festival that we have already discussed in our previous lecture, in the case of Hariar Sim also people are refrained from transplanting the paddy unless the public worship is performed and completed. So no individual family can, you know, go ahead in transplanting the paddy before the performance of Hariar Sim. If the family does so, it would bring a curse, it would bring calamity to the entire village, to the entire community. So that is considered as a taboo. The entire village has to function alike, in tandem.

Next we are going to discuss Janthar. Now Janthar is a festival that is celebrated as the first fruits of the harvest are considered as sacred; as a way of celebrating the ripening of or the blossoming of the first fruits, Janthar is observed. The importance of all these rituals, right, Hariar Sim, Erok Sim, Janthar is reflected in the fact that anyone eating the produce, it could be paddy, it could be the fruits, before the ritual is observed is considered as a taboo. So no one can partake a share of the harvest or the produce before it is offered to the respective deities. If one does, then the person will incur some kind of wrath from the deities and the community could face some hard times, some, you know, difficult times after, you know, after transgressing the laws.

So the honouring of the spirits is done through offering them these first fruits. Just like I was saying, all the first harvests are dedicated to the different deities, just so they are propitiated, they are pleased. The Santals have multiple festivals related to offering the first fruits to their bongas or spirits and this includes Iri-gundli-aawai and Janthar. Now in Janthar we see the Naeke or priest putting the ears of paddy in the winnowing fan along with other items that are intended for sacrifice, intended for being dedicated to the deities. Accompanied by other men, Naeke goes to the Jaher than and he salutes, he pays his obeisance to the Sarjum tree, Sarjum tree which is one of the sacred, you know, trees in Santal belief system and Sarjum actually represents the Pargana bonga.

So it is very, very sacred and it needs to be worshipped. What is observable here is that women are throughout absent from these direct ritual performances. So, I was showing the picture of this Jaher than where women would usually not visit, right? Women's bodies are not considered as pure and so they cannot visit the direct site of worship, only a man has the prerogative to carry out the rituals. Women can only accompany the males of the village from background, through some background services. So, following the ritual of Janthar, an animal is sacrificed and its head is, you know, offered to the Naeke, it is taken to the Naeke's house.

Further, offerings are made to the spirits and the ancestors of every household. I also mentioned how the ancestors play a seminal role and a very important role in the belief system, in the worldview of the tribal people. It is believed that the ancestors may have, you know, given up their earthly bodies, their earthly bodies may have been demolished and decayed but the spirit still remains in the bhitar of the household, and that needs to be worshipped, that needs to be kind of propitiated at the beginning of all festivals. So, the end of the rituals lifts the taboo on eating the fruits. So, once Janthar is properly observed and performed by the Naeke, the rest of the village can now partake a share of the new produce of seasonal fruits.

Next, Magh Sim, this festival of the Santhal community is also related to the production of first fruits. So, the celebration is made in January, February before the reaping of the thatching grass, which marks the end of the Santhal year. Again, there are sacrifices that are made by the priest to the village spirits invoking these, you know, demigods for the multiplication, for the flourishing of the sauri crops, which is followed by elaborate meal of the villages together. So, along with religious meanings, we see that these feasts also carry socio-political aspects, such as during the Magh Sim, it is time for the heads to give up their positions also. So, if the positions of the headmen and the other important men of the village need to be changed, they need to be replaced by someone younger or some other member, Magh Sim is the right time. During the feast, you know, the next head or the next, you know, officiating men from the village are also decided.

So, they are not only religious in nature, they also have their own secular socio-political significance. Next, I am going to talk about Karam, Karam Puja or Karam festival. Now,

unlike other festivals, Karam festival is not an annual ceremony and it is not meant to be performed regularly. Scholar J. Troisi who has extensively worked on the Santals writes that it is believed that Karam has been borrowed from the neighboring, you know, Hindu society by the Santals.

Further, W.J.Culshaw would say that many songs that are written during the festival, that are written to celebrate the Karam Puja contain references to the heroes from Ramayana. So, they have direct allusion to Ramayana which is a Sanskrit myth which belongs to the mainstream Hindu culture. So, we see Karam as an evidence, as an instance of exchange between the tribal population and the abetting Hindu population, right. There have been many such instances of exchanges between the Hindus and the Santals, a lot of their culture, their rituals, their marriage, birth and death ceremonies match, right. So, now scholars would say that this could mean that the cultures, you know, the tribals and the Hindus drew on each other's traditions.

It could also mean that they individually had these beliefs in their own culture. They have not actually taken from one another, right. So, for example, nature worship to an extent is also present in the Vedic chants that are part of the Brahminical tradition. In Karam Puja, the songs of the festival are recited by the elders from the village, and these songs contain the story of the origin of a man and the division of the tribe as per the Santal custom, how the different clans were formed, the origin of the Santals from Pilchuharam and Pilchuburi, the first man and woman respectively. So, during the Karam Puja, the villages go for merry-making through dancing and singing.

Two branches of Karam tree are brought from the forest. So, the youth that bring the branches from the forest go there dancing and singing accompanied by the drums, right. So, it is a festival of performances we can see and afterwards we see that the elders from the village start reciting the Karambinti, which is the story of creation and division of the tribal clans and sub-clans. The end of the recital is again followed by dancing and singing.

So, J. Troisi writes that the festival, the Karam festival leads to the creation of certain taboo relationships, certain relationships that are otherwise considered as taboo within the village community. For example, young unmarried people from the same sex who want to formalize, who want to socialize their relationship and give it the form of a lifelong friendship enter into a kind of understanding or into a bond publicly into a, you know, into

a friendship alliance within the public domain during this festival. So, in front of everyone they confess their lifelong friendship. The two individuals, the two parties involved in this process of confessing their friendship exchange Karam buds and they fix these buds in each other's hair as a way of formalizing their friendship in the presence of all the villages that are gathered for the festival. Along with linking the two friends who promise each other mutual economic assistance in times of needs, the alliance puts one of them into a new relationship with the other's family.

This is to say that this friendship is not only restricted or limited between the two men, but it is extended to the respective families too. Now the families also become alliance in a or allies.. now the families also become allies in a formal manner and they vouch, they promise to assist one another economically in times of needs. So, now the friendship is extended to the families, the respective families too such that they vouch, they promise that they will be assisting one another in times of economic crisis and other needs. Let us take a look at the Karam dance which is a very prominent, you know, style of dancing among the Santals, the Santal tribe.

Let us take a look. And when we talk to the Santal people, we ask them how, why they dance the way they do, they would say that they are emulating the cosmic movements. And we will see, you know, Karam leaves in their hands, ideally they have Karam leaves in their hands, if not they have some coloured, you know, handkerchiefs in their hands with which they dance. They are wearing very colourful clothes. Especially in this video, the lower garments are traditional, we can see that they are wearing their traditional attire in the lower part of the body and even the peacock feather in their headgear is part of their traditional attire that they wear during their performance. So, we see that the men are emulating what they call as the, you know, the symbolic moves representing rotation and revolution.

So, they are exchanging positions among themselves and then they are also making a circular progress, circular movement around the field. So, they assert that this is following the cosmic movement, the way the planetary bodies, the cosmic bodies move in an orbit, right, even the steppings. So yesterday we were talking about the ritual codes. So here, dhvani, mudra, mantra, everything kind of goes together to create a fantastic impact, right. The hand movements, the leg movements, all of them according to the Santal have their, you know, scientific meaning.

They follow the natural order. They are just representing the macrocosm through the microcosm of the body or the mind. The microcosmic movements of the body, right. So we have the drummers here playing the tamak and the tumbak and we have an audience comprising the tribal population that sits and watches this performance, right. So this is happening in a natural environment and this is, you know, the karam dance. So next we are going to talk about Jom Sim and Mak More.

Jom Sim is a clan based celebration. It is a celebration to honor the sun god that is known as the Singbonga by the, among the Santals. So, it is in honor of the sun god that is called as the Sing bonga by the Santals. Now Jomsim was originally supposed to be celebrated once in a lifetime. Similarly, Mak more festival was intended to be celebrated at the interval of five years.

In Mak more festival, the sacrifice of a white goat was supposed to be performed as an offering to the deities in order to keep the village free from sickness. However, we see that these performances have become rarer with the progression of time. In the current times, not always are festivals like Jom Sim and Mak More observed, right. They are not observed in the way they should be traditionally observed. They are prescribed to be observed, right.

The possible reason for the disappearance or kind of the evanescence of some of these festivals could be the expense of the sacrificial animal required for this purpose. It is cost-bearing for the Santal to carry out these festivals, these observances, right. Next we are going to talk about the annual hunt. The annual hunt or disom sendra as the tribals call it is another festive occasion which manifests the intimate relationship between the Santals and their deities. So along with agriculture, hunting also used to be a principal mode of living for the Santals.

So, although the Santals are settlers and have an agro-based economy, they also used to be hunter-gatherers, right. These were the two primary modes of living for the Santal people. Now hunting was supposed to be done only by the men and those men who avoided hunting were considered as cowards. From this one can see how gendered definitions of certain activities are etched out and correspondingly women are excluded from certain, you know, certain very masculine activities such as hunting. Women are not supposed to take part in hunting among the Santals.

So there are two types of Santal hunting expeditions. One is the disom sendra, the other is por-sendra. On the eve of the hunt, the naeke priest from every village sacrifices the fowls for the safety of the villagers who will, you know, go out on hunting and also as a way of praying for a good catch. So on gathering together, the dihri, the hunting priest also known as dihri performs the sacrificial ritual to the bongas. A ritual involving sindoor, flour, rice and a fowl is carried out and then once the sacrifice is over, the instrument tamak is played and this serves as a sign of the hunt to commence.

So at this point it would be important to note that traditionally the Santals would not have very calendrical sense of time, right? When would the hunting festival commence for the, you know, especially the forefathers of the Santals that we have today who did not have, you know, the concept of calendar or time as a measurable physical unit; they did not have the sense of clock or calendar. So for these, you know, these ancestors, it is said that on the day of, on a particular day of full moon in spring, the Santals from Anga, Banga and Kalinga referring to, you know, the entire eastern belt of India. So from Jharkhand, from Bengal and Kalinga meaning from Odisha, the Santals from Anga, Banga and Kalinga would gather in the Ayodhya mountains for hunting. They would understand that full moon day is the time for hunting. So they had a very seasonal understanding of time rather than calendrical, you know, conception.

So even during the hunt, certain rituals are observed, such as when hitting a small game, its name needs to be shouted so that the other villagers are informed. And I was also talking about Santal people being a very shared community. So a hunt is not or a game is not enjoyed or, you know, taken entirely by the person that has hunted. It needs to be shared with the other village members and the hunter himself will only partake a certain share of the game.

That is how the understanding goes. So next we are going to talk about annual hunt and women. So though women are not allowed to take part in the hunt, they observe several taboos while the men are away hunting. So the purpose of these taboos is to avert the evil eye, so no harm befalls the men. So for example, women are not allowed to wear flowers in their hair or even iron bangles. On looking closely at these customs, some of the contemporary critics and scholars would say that one can deduce that while men are away busy in their revelry, in their merry-making, you know, preventing the woman from decoration could be a way of stopping them from, you know, any kind of sexual activity in the absence of their menfolk.

So women not decorating themselves means that they would stay chaste while their men are away. These rules are meant to regulate the feminine sexuality among the Santals. Now Dihri or the hunting priest's wife is actually held responsible for any malevolent activities that happen while the men are away hunting. The hunting priest's wife takes care of the womenfolk and kind of curbs all their excesses while the men folk are away. So Dihri's wife is supposed to stay back in her home and should not approach anywhere near the forest or the village outskirts, lest something befalls on the hunters.

So it is a kind of, we see very male-centric belief system also, where women's presence in some of the homosocial activities, be it, you know, performance of rituals in jaher-than or hunting is considered as something pejorative, something having a negative value or meaning. So this can be seen as a way of restraining the movement of the Santali women. No animal or fowl is supposed to be killed by the Santali women in the absence of the men and this could be understood as a way of restricting women from participating in the mainstream communal activities. These infringements are believed to prevent the success of the hunt. So if women transgress any of these prescriptions handed down by their ancestors, then it would bring about bad luck to the men that have gone out for hunting.

So I would like to stop our lecture here today and before stopping, here is a fantastic, wonderful video of the Santali women dancing together and the men playing their traditional instruments and it has a resounding effect. It echoes especially when performed in an open field like this. We can see that the leg and hand movements are so beautifully coordinated; even though they are not looking at their own feet, they are moving together. So with this, I am going to stop my lecture here today and I will meet you again in another lecture. Thank you.