

# Factors and Beliefs of *Karam* Festival: A Study among Oraon of Sundargarh

Laxmi Narayan Nayak

Research Associate, Academy of Tribal Language and Culture, Odisha. E-mail: [b4bapi85@gmail.com](mailto:b4bapi85@gmail.com)

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## To Cite this Article

Laxmi Narayan Nayak (2024). Factors and Beliefs of *Karam* Festival: A Study among Oraon of Sundargarh. *Studies in Indian Anthropology and Sociology*, 1: 1, pp. 57-67.

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**Abstract:** The *Karam* festival holds profound significance for the Oraon community, deeply rooted in their agrarian lifestyle and reverence for nature. As an occasion that celebrates the relationship between the Oraon people and their environment, the festival is more than just a traditional event; it is a pivotal element of their cultural and social life. The study tried to find out the significance and how the *Karam* festival is integral to the Oraon way of life, reflecting their deep connection to nature and their agricultural practices. Celebrated with enthusiasm, it embodies the community's beliefs and traditions, showcasing their reverence for natural elements. It has a notable effect on the social and psychological well-being of the Oraon people. It fosters a sense of unity and collective identity, enhancing social cohesion and community bonding. The study employs Relative Importance Index (RII) to rank various social and economic factors influenced by the festival. This approach helps quantify the significance of these factors in relation to the *Karam* festival, providing a clearer picture of its impact. The study encompasses primary data for the study collected from the 50 no. of respondents of Oraon community from *Sarana Padia*, Udit Nagar area of Sundargarh district. The study found that *Karam* festival also has a major impact in developing the social cohesion which helps in developing community bonding among the Oraon.

**Keywords:** Belief, Factors, *Karam*, Oraon, Relevance, Socio-Psychological Impact

## Introduction

### The Oraon

The Oraon also known as *Kurukh*, are a predominant tribal community of Eastern and Central India mostly found in Odisha, Jharkhand, West Bengal and Chhattisgarh. The language *Kurukh*, is a Dravidian language found intertwined with the neighbouring Austro-Asiatic languages. According to Griffiths (1946), *Kurukh* is spoken in abundance, still there seen influence of languages like Hindi and Bengali. Like other tribal community they have sustain their own affluent tradition and identity despite the

onset of urbanisation in their place of habitat. They are following the age-old tradition of exogamy (Roy, 1915) by strictly adhering to their clan or *gotra* system. The people living in their community have a close knit with each other and found to follow the rules fragmented by the village council, governed by elderly people. This council is responsible for the social cohesion (Toppo, 1989) by resolving issues among them, gatherings or meetings for community development, discussion regarding marriages and other social functions. Similarly the religious matters are controlled and adjudicated by village priest or *pahan*. The economic activities are primarily agriculture (Hoffmann, 1950) but tagging on the unfortunate factors like scarcity of agricultural lands and forest restriction added with meagre rainfall the member of Oraon community are now working as migrating labour (Chaudhuri, 1997).

Oraon are the prime propagator of *Sarnaism*. It is the worship cum thanks giving ritual to nature and their ancestors (Roy, 1928). This is reflected from their two festival *Sarhul* and *Karma* festival. *Sarhul* is celebrated in spring season whereas *Karma* in autumn season. *Sarhul* is the celebration of the season whereas *Karma* is to honour the mother earth for the harvest and fertility. But Troisi (1979) in his study demonstrate dual belief system in religion, where influence of Christianity is found in duality to *Sarnaism*. According to Tete (2004), the rich cultural heritage of the Oraon is reflected from their folk dances, songs and tales, which are integral part of their festival and social gatherings as observed in *Karam* songs and *Jhumar* dance. It narrates the historical significance, traditional and cultural values and also promotes rite-de-passage to younger generation.

The impact of urbanisation, globalisation and the onset of various developmental strategies has also impacted the livelihood of the Oraon community to a greater extent. It affected their cultural and spiritual bond (Sharma, 2003) with the mother earth. But Xaxa (2005) have dual view that in one hand they lost their cultural ethnicity in the other hand they are also benefitted economically by the integration.

### ***Karam* Festival**

The *Karma* festival is based on socio-religious realm of inanimate relation between nature, gods and goddesses, ancestral spirits and other supernatural forces. The psychological belief or psychological fear of both positive and negative aspects for social cohesion, economic security, good harvest, fertility or progeny, communal prosperity and protection (such as from diseases) is the core behind its celebration. It is performed with certain rite and rituals in their own ceremonial way which is partly based on agriculture and other subsistence economical activities. The festival is associated with melodious song, dance, merry-making, and feasts. Despite no *mantras* for this festival, it is seen assimilated and celebrated with other culture group of people. A folk-tribal

continuum (Pasayat, 2017:72) is also observed during the celebration of the festival. It is celebrated primarily in 11<sup>th</sup> day of *Bhadra Ekadasi* or the month of autumn by the tribal but the time of its celebration also varies with some tribal group such as Oraon celebrate it before planting their paddy (Guru, 1976:101) and in Chhattisgarh it is referred to as spring dance (Verma, 1973:123) by the Baigas, Gonds and Kols. Regardless of its diversity the *Karam* festival is celebrated as a festival of bringing mirth, fulfilment of desire and also to bestow value system among the tribal.

### Significance of the Study

*Karam* deity is regarded as the goddess of fortune among the tribal and other caste people celebrating *Karam* festival. It is a constructed belief that indulges the significance from both spiritual and economical concept. The festival revolves around socio-psychological indicator like desire and value of the people. It may be thus state that the festival has Symbiotic and Parasitic relativity with the people celebrating it.

### Brief Review of Literature

Festivals have a greater significance among the social being especially among the people with rooted aboriginal culture or the tribals. It symbolises their celebration of rituals (Brandes, 2006; King 1978 and Elwin, 1950). As Brandes (2006) talked about the *Dia de los Muertos* festival in Mexico which is celebrated to memories the dead, similarly (King, 1978) talked about the *Gawai Dayak* festival in Malaysia that is celebrated by offering the harvest to the spirits of their ancestors. On the other hand Elwin (1950) had a view that the festivals of tribal elaborated purely to appease the deity. His work on the Bondo tribe of Odisha provides the reference to his argument where he talked about the *Chaita Parab* festival celebrated with great pomp to appease the deity named *Patkhanda* who is the deity of well being.

Festival buttress social union among tribal whether intra-community or inter-community, as it many a times serve as a place of communal bonding than mere gatherings of community people (Srivastava, 1997). This communal bonding prospers through choice of bride and groom in the same event. It also serves as a unifying platform (McDaniel, 2004) for interaction of community members where they discussed several social issues for development which helps in fostering a feeling of belongingness and solidarity.

Tribal festival are generally observe through its religious and socio-cultural (Singh, 1982) characteristics but they also have momentous political implication (Troisi, 1978) and economic implication (Macionis, 1999). Troisi (1978) had illustrated the Sohrai festival of santal which is a harvesting festival and often serve as a political gathering for well being of community. But Belk (1989) had different view, according to him

the commercial importance eclipse the religious and cultural significance taking the example from the Kut festival among Kuki-Chin-Mizo tribe.

The perception towards *Karam* festival has been viewed differently by various scholars. They describe the concept of diffusion with Hinduism for the onset of this festival among the tribal. Singh (1982) with Roy and Roy (1937) believe that this festival celebrated among Munda, Oraon, Korwa and Birjia was adopted from Hinduism. Similarly Santals have brought this festival from Mahatos (Culshaw, 1949) and *Dikus* (Oran, 1965) or outsiders.

### Objectives

1. To study the belief system of Oraon about *Karam* festival
2. To understand the relevance of *Karam* festival among Oraon through various factors

### Methodology

The present study focuses entirely on primary data. The belief of oraon about the *Karam* festival is documented through the study. The primary data thus used to find out the relevance of *Karam* festival in determining various factors of social and economical significances among the Oraon of Sundargarh district, Odisha. The data is collected from 50 nos. of community members selected through purposive random sampling from the *Sarana Padia*, Udit Nagar area under Rourkela Municipal Corporation. The samples thus selected are randomly irrespective of their gender with 32 male and 18 female but are purposively selected between the age group of 20 to 70 years.

Relative Important Index (RII) has been calculated to show the rank of the factors with relevance to the festival.

Formula to find out RII:

$$RII = \frac{5n_5 + 4n_4 + 3n_3 + 2n_2 + 1n_1}{A * N}$$

Where RII: Relative Important Index

N: Total no. of Respondents

A: Highest weight

$N_4$ : No. of respondents for Strongly Agreed

$N_4$ : No. of respondents for Agreed

$N_2$ : No. of respondents for Neutral

$N_2$ : No. of respondents for Disagreed

$N_1$  : No. of respondents for Strongly Disagreed

## Background of the Study

### *Karam* Festival: the belief among Oraon

*Karam* festival is celebrated with pomp and pleasure among the oraon. It is celebrated in the odia month of *Bhadrab Sukla Pakhsya* (August-September) on the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the month. It is an agricultural festival which is being celebrated for a good harvest. The festival is celebrated using a branch of *Karam* tree, depicting the same as *Karam* Raja or *Karam* deity. For Oraon this *Karam* tree signifies not only the common association of the flora with tribal sensitivity but also depicts the symbiotic relation with their culture, tradition and ethnicity. It becomes impossible to debar this tree from the livelihood of the oraon. It also begets them with inner peace and posses super natural power. This may be the reason that the festival has become the most important religious festival among the oraon. It has been a part of their socio-cultural livelihood. The festival inspires the community to indulge in their religious and cultural activities with merry making and mirthful celebration. The oraon believes the songs of their life threaded with this festival. *Karam* festival is the interlink factor between nature and nurture of the oraon. As it is a common believe that, “as you sow, so you reap”, the karma is believed to follow the theme as such. It is being narrated in the stories of *Karma Dharma* the legendary story teller. These are two mystical characters assigned the role to tell stories on the eve of the festival. The stories are mostly dwelled in the life cycle rituals and community affluence. It may be predicted as being told especially to the younger generation to make them learn about their culture and also to nurture themselves as good social being.

The oraon are agrarian community and largely depend on agriculture and its products. Thus agriculture is not mere an economical activity but also demonstrate the responsibilities of oraon community. The *Karam* festival is celebrated for a good harvest and to propound prosperity. The celebration exhibits social cohesiveness as the produce is repository of distribution among the community. A good harvest would results in flourishing affluence among them. *Karam* festival is generally celebrated among the oraon for mirthful life, wealth, child bearing, peace and well being of the village, etc. *Karam* festival is celebrated with great enthusiasm by all the gender and age group. They sing and dance together all the night. This predicts the mutual inter dependence and solidarity among them. The festival is a repository of ending self ego and selfish attitude in lieu encourages common practices and communal we-being.

The sprouted grains (5 in nos.) are considered as *jaba phool* or the flower for the rituals. It is given to every members of the community as a symbol of love and affection which they receive with great respect. The deity or *Karam* raja i.e. the *Karam* branch then

taken out in procession to each house before being submerged in any water sources. The rituals of marriage like selection of bride or groom starts after the festival.

### *Studied Sample*

A total of 50 nos. of population have been studied with 32 males and 18 females. They have been further fragmented and studied accordingly. Response collected in likert scale from the respondent on the 4 factors that have been taken for the study.

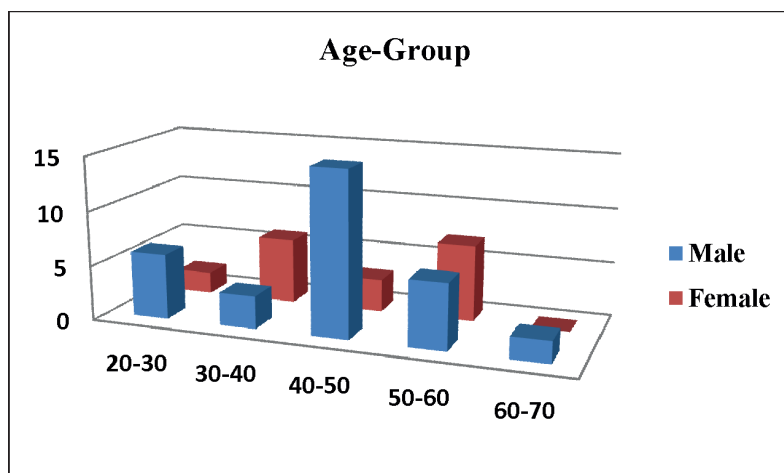


Figure 1: Age Group of the Sample

Source: Compiled by author

The above figure 1 depicts the age group of the sample thus studied. The age group has been divided into male and female. The majority of people are from the age group of 40-50 years with 36% of total population studied, of which male are 46.87% of total male and female are 16.67% of total female taken for study. The population with age group 50-60 years followed next with 26% of total population where male are 18.75% and female are 38.89% of their respective population. 34% of population are from the age group of 20-30 and 30-40 years taken together of which 18% are from the age group of 30-40 years and 16% are from the age group of 20-30 years. Only 2 nos. of male are from the age group of 60-70 years whereas no female are found to be from this geriatric group of senior citizen.

The above figure 3 shows the literacy level of the respondent which is considered here into two segments as literate and illiterate. The persons who had completed her/his education upto class 3<sup>rd</sup> have been considered here as literate. It is found that 68% of total respondent are literate having literate male to be 71.88% and literate female to be 61.11% of their respective population.

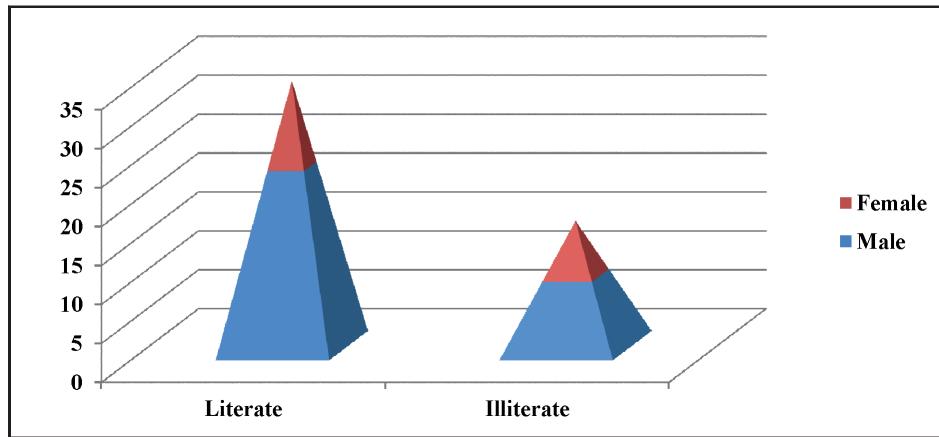


Figure 2: Literacy level of the Sample

Source: Compiled by author

Though literacy level has lesser or no major impact on the perception of Karma festival but it gives a rational view to judge the relevance of the festival on various factors. Factors tend to change synchronically in the dynamics of time, thus rational explanation is very much needed.

It is seen that the higher educated among the literate observe the *Karam* festival to gain a job. Thus it may be said that the festival has an economical significance with respect to socio-cultural and religious significance. The belief system that is being builds in with a hidden personal interest of oneself also encourages the other members of the community to garner the same. It thus promotes we-feeling among the community members and also strengthens the bond within them. The other factors that are discussed below also nurture the feeling of cohesiveness among them.

### ***Factors of Oraon and its relevance with Karam festival***

The *Karam* festival has greater relevance for the Oraon community. This relevance is determined by various factors considered through the community perspective which is further depends on the individual demand. In this study the authors had taken into consideration factors as social factors like fertility or child bearing and communal prosperity as well as economical factors like good harvest and job.

The above figure 3 illustrates the relevance of *Karam* festival towards the social and economical factors of Oraon community. An attempt has been made here to show the significance of *Karam* festival with social factors like fertility of a female or it can be said that offering *puja* in this festival helps the childless couple to bear child and also by the festival prosperity waved into the members of the community. The data reveals

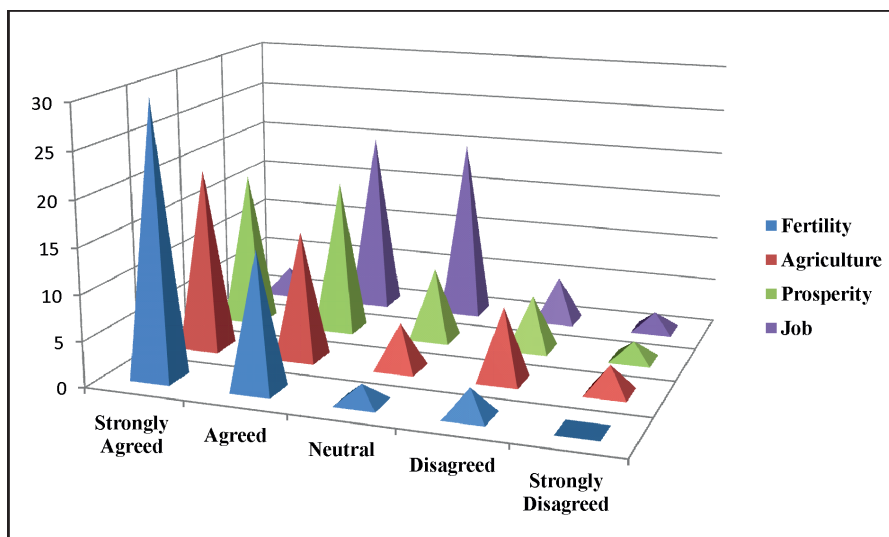


Figure 3 Factors and its relevance to *Karam* festival

Source: Compiled by author

that 60% of the sample strongly agreed that *Karam* is a festival for gracing fertility to childless couple whereas 34% of the sample strongly agreed that it is celebrated to bring prosperity among the community. For the economic factors like good harvest and job the no of people strongly agreed that celebration of festival has a greater significance with 40% and 6% respectively. Overall it is found that majority of the sample had a strong belief towards the relevance of *Karam* festival in providing fertility, good harvest and prosperity to the Oraon community members. Whereas less than 50% of sample agreed on the belief that festival has any relevance in providing jobs.

Table 1: Calculation of Relative Importance Index (RII) among the factors

Questions	Strongly Agreed	Agreed	Neutral	Dis-agreed	Strongly Dis-agreed	Total	N	A*N	RII	Ranks
Fertility	150	60	6	6	0	222	50	250	0.888	1
Agriculture	100	56	15	16	3	190	50	250	0.76	3
Prosperity	85	68	24	12	2	191	50	250	0.764	2
Job	15	80	60	10	2	167	50	250	0.668	4

Compiled by author

The above table 1 shows the ranks of the aspects for which the Karma festival is performed. The rank has been calculated here on the basis of Relative Importance Index (RII) method. The various aspects have been indexed here in accordance to the view



provided by the respondents arranged in likert scale. The aspects show the preference of the respondent for celebrating the festival. It is found that the respondents ranked the aspect of fertility in 1<sup>st</sup> position, followed by communal prosperity in 2<sup>nd</sup>. The aspects of agricultural abundance and job preference stand in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> position respectively.

Thus it is found that the social preferences like communal prosperity and begetting a child for family pedigree holds the position of prime choice than the aspects of economical preferences like job and agriculture productivity. This may be predicted as the Oraon community are more social being rather than individualistic. This also shows the social solidarity among the Oraon. Celebrating *Karam* festival for the prosperity of the community as a whole not only strengthens ties within the community but also helps in promoting the intra-specific growth of the community. Though *Karam* is generally celebrated for a good harvest, the study found it to be in 3<sup>rd</sup> rank in the above hierarchy. This may be predicted by the author as the sample respondent are living in urban areas they tend to inclined more towards any kind of job rather than agricultural activities.

## Findings

Oraon as an agrarian community soulfully attached to the mother earth. Like a child plead by her mother through different acts to gain something, Oraon gratify mother earth by *Karam* festival for a good harvest. The celebration of the festival with the use of *Karam* tree branch itself signifies the attachment of the Oraon with the Mother Nature. The festival also signifies the feeling of togetherness among the Oraon as they celebrate the festival together irrespective of age and gender. The heartfelt performance of the elderly encourages the young generation to participate fully. They are found to dance and sing the whole night untried on the eve of the festival, encourages by the elder through their lively participation. The festival embarks freshness and energy among them as they move to work the very next day of the festival. The belief system of the Oraon on this festival is cherished by their eagerness and solemnity. The festival also signifies the relevance to various factor associated with the day to day livelihood of the said community. It is found in the study that the *Karam* festival has a belief to bestow economical affluence through good harvest and social prudence through communal prosperity. Along with it the study found that the educated young generation as well as childless couple have a rational demand for a job and child respectively. The study through calculation of RII rank also reveals that the relevance of this festival is largely to fulfil the fertility than to a mirthful harvest.

## Conclusion

The *Karam* festival like other tribal festival has its own significance. It is celebrated in great pomp and pleasure particularly by the tribal residing in the eastern and central

zone of India like the Santal, Oraon, Munda, Binjhal, Kisan, Bhumija, etc inhabiting in regions of Odisha, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. As this zone have fertile riverine areas accumulating good harvest of kharif crops and *Karam* is a festival celebrated for fertility and harvest. This may be considered as a reason for its celebration in these areas. It is further seen to be observed between the months of August and September i.e. considered to be as harvesting months in these areas. In addition to harvest and fertility this festival has also socio-cultural relevance by promoting prosperity and social bonding among the communities celebrating it. The dance, merry making and songs associated with the festival are the repository of the community cohesiveness as all gathered to celebrate the festival despite of disparity. The *Karam* god is believed to be the god of fortune and destiny. The highlight of the *Karam* festival is the story telling session which is an old traditional custom, performed by the two legends *Karma* and *Dharma*. They are believed to be the proprietor of this festival. The ambience of the festival in the night (as it is celebrated the whole night) is very rhythmic and vibrant by the music and dance of the performers. This way of worshipping the nature or mother earth symbolizes the expression of gratitude towards it. Overall, the festival represents beautifully the belief and rich cultural heritage of the tribal.

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