Social Aspects of Sadani Oral Literature*

By

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0.1 *The setting*

The area from which the bulk of Sadani literature was recorded is the Chotanagpur Division of Bihar and the areas neighbouring it to the South (Orissa) and to the West (Jashpur Dt., Madhya Pradesh). Sadani is the southernmost dialect of NIA Bhojpuri.

The speakers of Sadani fall into two categories, viz., the low Hindu castes and tribals who have lost their indigenous languages or have been gradually losing them and who have taken to Sadani as their new mother-tongue. This process of language change has been working quite smoothly due to the bilingualism of practically every individual in the area concerned. More precisely, the following castes or tribes belong to the categories just mentioned; among the low Hindu castes there are for example the Ahirs, the Bhogtas (parched rice makers), the Ghãsis (fishermen, dancers, musicians and also a group employed to remove

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corpses), the Jogis (blanket weavers, musicians), the Savãsis (weavers), and the Turis (basket makers). These low Hindu castes live in the tribal villages and work for the tribals who live on rice cultivation. The rice cultivating and the therefore land-owning tribes form the second category mentioned. They are mainly the Uraons, the Mundas and the Kharias. The Uraons have very often switched over to Sadani from their original mother-tongue, the Dravidian Kuṛux. The Mundas and the Kharias do not concern us here.

The Sadani literature studied for the present purpose was recorded in the area where the Uraons form the dominant group. They live in socio-economic symbiosis with the Hindu castes just mentioned. Rice cultivation being the Uraons' traditional means of subsistence—recent development not being taken into account here—social life is regulated by the requirements of agricultural work. The yearly cycle of agricultural work is reflected by the festival cycle. And the festival cycle allows for the performance of the poetic oral literature, the songs. The most important festivals are the Phagua in March at the "end of the marriage season and the period of relaxation after harvest" (ARCHER 1940:35), the Sarhul in April having the vegetation ceremonies as its theme, and the Karam celebrated in August–September or October–November to promote the ripening of the crops. These festivals are followed by the marriage cycle stretching from about November to March, that is, from the end of the harvest to the beginning of the sowing season. Besides, there are the important inter-village reunion festivals (*jatras*) reinforcing the social ties among the people scattered over wider areas.

0.2. *Sadani oral literature*

Sadani oral literature may be roughly divided into prose tales, songs and riddles. I concentrate on the songs here of which I have translated a corpus of about 3000 specimens. The songs are of the utmost social importance, because they are mostly dancing songs sung in the dancing ground of the village where members of all social groups gather on the occasion of dance meetings or seasonal festivals. The songs are sung by everybody who dances irrespective to sex. There are no individual professional singers.

0.3. *Formal characteristics of Sadani songs*

The formal characteristics of Sadani songs need hardly concern us

here. It will be sufficient to state that Sadani songs share one particular universally valid characteristic, namely, their being made up to a very large extent of ever-recurring formulas, so that the effect and the suggestiveness of a song is largely dependent on the use of the traditional and traditionally accepted formulas and not on the imaginativeness of an individual. The songs are usually short, four to eight lines on an average, two or four lines, respectively, being very often the reverse of two or four lines, respectively,[1] or, according to a different frequently occurring pattern, two to four lines followed each by a refrain.

Sadani poetic art is in a way the art of combining given formulas. This will already suggest that there is a relative uniformity in the songs. At least, the contents of the songs is not so much a manifestation of individually and spontaneously developed ideas, but of traditionally valid ones which are supplied by the formulas.

1.0. *Kinship relations as described in the songs*

Social relations as described in the songs are prevalently kinship relations, *jati* and political relations being treated less frequently. The kinship relations have been selected to be studied subsequently. I will first describe in a rather sketchy way those relations which are relevant to the sphere of Sadani song poetry. The conventional description of the kinship relations in the songs may be schematized as follows.

Father and *mother* (baba and aio) are the protectors of the children. Without their parents or at their death the children are doomed to misfortune and poverty. At the same time the father of a girl is looked upon as the exacting one when it comes to her being given away in marriage, while her mother is more permissive and is sometimes imagined as surrendering her to her fate only because she cannot do otherwise.

Father-in-law (sʌsur) and *his household* (sʌsurair) are to be ap-

1. For example:
kʌhãʌpale bhʌia tului lusui phul re,
kʌhã pale mʌiã neḍʌir khosa. (1)
bona mẽ pʌualõ tului lusui phula re,
ḍiha mẽ pʌualõ neḍʌir khosa. (2)
Brother, where did you get the fluffy flower?
Girl, where did you get the blossoming twig for your chignon? (1)
In the forest I got the fluffy flower.
In the village I got the blossoming twig for my chignon. (2)
(Urãu 1951: 84, p. 29).

proached by the newly wedded bride with deference, even with fearfulness and awe. Deference may turn to hatred. The in-laws according to conventional poetic description ill treat the bride who by marriage joins their household. She is often tempted to run away from her new home.

Father's younger brother (kak) takes an active part in a girl's wedding. He may meet half of the marriage expenses and assists in various other ways.

The *husband* (sʌia) or, seen from a different angle, the *son-in-law* (dʌmeda) is an ambivalent person. From the point of view of the girl's family and herself, he is poor, a drunkard and a beggar, one who may suddenly abandon her. He is the hunter who kills the deer. But on the other hand he is the brilliant winner of the bride, the one to whom the girl's parents gladly yield, to whom the girl is sold at the bride-price, whom the bride approaches with deference and whom at the time of the wedding she awaits quivering with curiosity and joy.

The *son* (beṭa) is mainly described as impatient to find a suitable bride.

The *daughter* (beṭi) is sold away in marriage, and hence she is regarded as a dearly loved person who one day will be lost to strangers, and whose fate is uncertain. She herself is sorrowful but glad at the same time when the day of marriage comes, because she loses and gains in status by this passage rite. In spite of her fear of the dangers of her new home and her affinal relatives she constantly dreams "the dream of oil and cinnebar", that means, of becoming a bride.

A daughter stands in sharp contrast to the *unmarried or divorced girl* (ḍinḍa chõḍi) who is the coquettish girl fluttering about in amusement and dance, but not at all interested in any household work. The *ḍinḍa chõḍi* is the typical outsider, envied and suspected at the same time.

The *bride* or the *newly wedded girl* (kʌnia) is a poor thing, a nothing in her in-laws' house. Robbed by the "enemy", that is, by the bridegroom, she is surrounded by all kinds of unfavourable emotions and by the danger of not succeeding in her new position by turning out to be barren and therefore being abandoned. And some day she will be the unhappy widow. She is perpetually longing to return to her parents. But still she is the beautifully adorned bride who has reached her socially accepted and instituted goal which is accepted by her, too, without question.

This attitude towards marriage is also shown in the songs accompanying the marriage negotiations. These negotiations are a fight at the end of which the bride's parents are subdued by the bridegroom-"enemy",

but they result also in satisfaction for both the negotiating parties when everything is settled successfully.

The *husband's elder brother* (bhʌisur) and *his wife* (bhʌuji) are the newly wedded girl's enemies par excellence.—The *bhauji*'s joking relationship with her *husband's younger brother* (deuʌr) is often described.

The *bride's [younger] brother* (bhʌia) is the favorite of his sister. Full of woe he bids her farewell when she sets out for her new home at the end of the marriage ceremonies. He is, however, also culpable for having allowed her to be given away, he is a gambler who uses his sister as a pawn in the gamble that the marriage negotiations are.

Finally, *mother's brother* (mam) and his *sister's son* (bhʌgina) have a very affectionate relationship.

These are the most important kinship ties described hundreds of times in the songs. But the sketchy description I have just completed is in no way different from what you will find in the index to any Indian village study under the entry of "kinship". The statements made in the songs are just commonplace statements found to be valid all over Northern India.

But let us look a little closer and try to discern what social performances combine with what kind of songs, or, to pose the problem precisely: from what angle do songs combining with a particular festival depict kinship ties?

For this purpose I have selected a particular seasonal festival, the Karam, and its songs. The most salient features of the Karam I will describe now.

1.1. *The Karam festival*

As mentioned before, the Karam is a vegetation festival. It probably has Hindu origin and it is one of the most important seasonal festivals in many tribal societies in Northern and Central India.[2] It is celebrated on the 11th day of the month of Bhadõ (August–September) or of Asin (September–October). Three branches of *karam* (*Nauclea parvifolia*) are erected three days before the Karam day in or near the dancing ground of the village by the young unmarried men. When the *karam* branches have been erected by the young men the girls—and nobody but them—are privileged to walk unhindered through the fields of the standing crops (ROY 1928:241). For the Karam festival all young married

2. Cf. for example for other tribes Dalton 1971: 198 (Ho), Elwin and Hivale 1944:3 f. (Gond, Baiga, Pardhan), Hermanns 1966:427 f. (Gond).

women born in the village return home to take part in the festival.

The day after the ceremonial planting of the *karam* branches unmarried girls

> put cucumbers in their Karam baskets to represent human babies. Flowers are also heaped over various kinds of grains in these Karam baskets. These baskets are reverently placed before the Karam Rājā. A quantity of barley-shoots sprouting out of seeds sown by the maidens of the village in sand of the floor of their common dormitory, is also taken to the ākhṛā by the maidens in baskets. It is interesting to note that the germination of the barley seeds has been sought to be hastened by the maidens who have been for the preceding nine days carefully sprinkling water over them and sitting up late at night singing songs to them and watching them germinating. These maidens must abstain from eating flesh, fish and crabs during those days (ROY 1928:243–44).

Then the Karam myth is recited by the village priest. The myth says

> Long—long—ago, seven brothers lived with their . . . wives as members of a joint family. Once the brothers went abroad with their pack-bullocks laden with grains, for purpose of trade, . . . After some months, they set out on their return journey home. . . . On the day of the Karam festival, they reached a village only a few miles distant from their own. But the bullocks were dead tired and refused to move a step further. So the brothers were obliged to halt there for the day. As they were very anxious for news of their wives and children, they deputed the youngest brother to go home and return with news. But when the youngest brother reached his village and saw his wife, brothers' wives, and other people of the village merrily dancing and singing before the Karam Rājā at the village ākhṛā . . . he took up a drum . . . and began to dance . . . and forgot all about his errand. When his brothers grew tired of waiting for him, they deputed the youngest among themselves to bring them news. [And all the brothers, except the eldest, did the same as the youngest.] . . .
>
> . . . the eldest brother . . . grew impatient and ran home to his village, leaving the bullocks. . . . Arrived at the village ākhṛā, his indignation knew no bounds when he saw his brothers and their wives and even his own wife all dancing and singing. . . . And in a fit of aanger he kicked at the basin of boiling milk meant for offering to the Karam spirit and left the place. . . . The milk, thus spilt, scalded the Karam Rājā badly. And the Karam Rājā got angry and was about to leave the place in a huff when the wife of the youngest of the seven brothers carried the deity reverently back in her arms and reinstated him in his place (ROY 1928:244–45).

Karam Rājā, however, is said to bestow wealth upon his devotees.

Other versions of the myth exist among the Uraons (HERMANNS 1973:355 f.) as well as among other tribes like the Bhuiyas, the Gonds and the Pardhans (ELWIN 1944:3 f. and 1949:437 f.). Mostly, but not always, the role women play in securing the benevolence of *Karam Rājā* is prominent. Obviously a lot of common folktale motives have been attached to this festival.

After the myth has been recited

> some of the barley-shoots . . . are also offered to the Karam deity. The rest of the barley-blades are distributed by the maidens to the young men; and young men and women all wear these yellowish barley-blades generally in their hair. It may not appear unreasonable to infer that these barley-shoots that have been ceremonially nurtured by the maidens and, after consecration, presented by them to the young men, may be intended to stimulate, by a process of sympathetic magic, the fecundity of the young people, or perhaps to stimulate the growth of the standing crops on the fields, or perhaps to serve both ends. After this all present prostrate themselves and bow down to the Karam Rājā, the girls and women singing in Hindi, . . . "For our own good (lit., religion) and that of our brothers, bow down to Karam" (ROY 1928:245–46).

1.2. *Discussion of the Karam ceremonies*

The ceremonies and the version of the myth as given by ROY show several traits which I would like to discuss here. Women play a dominant role in the festival. This dominance lies in the frequency with which they act and also in the character of their actions. The prominence given them in the festival becomes obvious in various ways: They are allowed to walk in the paddy-fields, men are not. In the myth it is a woman who reconciles Karam Rājā, but a man who defies him. The unmarried girls perform the rite of raising and distributing the young barley blades which conveys the idea of fertility. It is hoped that fertility will be granted to the fields during the Karam festival. The aspect of human fertility is elaborated by the ceremony of the cucumber-babies which the unmarried girls carry in their baskets.

This prominence girls and young women gain during Karam runs quite contrary to the normal social role they play in Uraon society. Women normally keep in the background while men are dominant. A girl experiences this male dominance in her father's house and later on even more so in her husband's house, because then she is even more subject to her husband's family, because she is cut off from her patriclan and her village.

The Karam ceremonies seem to suggest that the ceremonial dominance women have at the time of this festival compensates for a year of pressure they have experienced.

1.3. *The Karam songs*

The dominance which the Karam festival procures for women may

at first glance seem to present a harmoniously balanced socially instituted compensation for a group otherwise underprivileged. And the impression it makes on the observer seems to be in full harmony with this idea: it is the impression of gaiety and youthful joy.

But the Karam songs which number about a thousand add another aspect to this idea which contradicts bluntly the concept of "harmoniously balanced compensation". Above I have described the kinship relations as depicted in the songs. These kinship relations are very often harshly criticized in the songs, as will become obvious from the schematized description of kinship relations as viewed in the songs. The critique is exclusively directed against the in-laws of a girl and against her treacherous agnates who just sell the girl away to these often malignant strangers. Of course, one finds this type of songs in the category of the marriage songs, but there the point is clear—they accompany the then actualized most dangerous period of change and isolation a woman has to face in her life. These songs are also scattered in other seasonal cycles, for they form an essential social theme. But what strikes one in the Karam cycle is that the songs uttering critique occur so profusely. And not only is the critique striking but also the sheer opposition against, and sometimes even the denial of, the kinship rules to be observed. Thus, for example, there is a song imagined to be sung by a girl who confesses to have had sexual intercourse with her *bhaṭu* (her elder sister's husband). She apologizes to her sister that, alas, she could not help it because she was drunk and had lost her self-control.[3] Actually to a woman her *bhaṭu* is a classificatory elder brother. If such a nefarious act really occurred, this would mean an upheaval of the established social order.

When we try to find a solution to the occurrence of such songs in an otherwise harmonious and gay festival cycle, I think, we again have to link up the relevant songs of opposition with the actual position of women in Uraon society.

By marriage women lose the support of their agnates, they become minors in a new and often inimical household, they become alienated to their patriclan. In short, they have to endure, though mostly temporarily only, isolation and pressure. The isolation becomes obvious during a woman's first pregnancy when she is ceremonially cut off from the connection with her ancestors' spirits and with the deities of her village to

3. mʌtalõ citalõ bhʌṭu sʌnge rʌhalõ,
didi ge m ti gosa hobe, . . .
I was drunk and I was sleeping with the bhaṭu.
Didi, do not be angry . . . (Archer 531, 1941:531, lab).

prevent these from having a claim on her offspring (cf. ROY 1928:117). Women are always dangerous, because during pregnancy they may attract the evil haunting spirits, or due to their eventual death in childbed they may become themselves members of this unfriendly host of spirits.

During Karam, however, the young women return home. This means to them a periodical re-establishment of the security and homeliness they enjoyed before their marriage. And, moreover, at Karam they act in ritual. This is in contrast with the rights they have in their husbands' villages, because there they are strangers to the clan and its rituals, and therefore they hardly have any prominent ritual function in the rituals of their affinals' clan. Their ritual function in the Karam festival is an essential one, they act as reconciliatory mediators between Karam Rājā who grants fertility and wealth to the village and the village population. This conclusion can be drawn, I think, from all the fertility ceremonies they take part in during the festival and it can also be drawn from the contents of the myth as recorded by ROY, where a woman reconciles Karam Rājā with men.

In this periodically powerful function women are socially entitled to verbally rebel against the established order. But this, at least nowadays, is exclusively displayed by the songs. This rebellion is directed against the very rite which they, too, wish to pass and which they yet feel is a source of pressure, namely, the marriage rite.

The verbal rebellion reduces the tension they endure because of their social position which they experience as an ambivalent one. They, of course, would not even dream of changing the established order. They accept it, but they cannot do so without feeling tension. And the tension has to be reduced in order to secure a smooth functioning of social life.

The first to explicitly draw attention to the dichotomy of the social tension expressed by a depressed group and the ritual rebellion allowed for it in the sacred traditional system, was MAX GLUCKMAN in his famous FRAZER lecture of 1952 on "Rituals of Rebellion in South-East Africa". Among several other ceremonies exemplifying the "instituted protest" which "renews the unity of a system", GLUCKMAN describes a Zulu vegetation rite performed when the crops start growing. This rite shows traits astonishingly similar to those of the Karam rites, even in many details, as for example, the ritual of raising the plants in a separate seed bed or plot of land just for this particular ritual (GLUCKMAN 1952:5). On this occasion Zulu women who live in a patriarchal society play the dominant role which is "an instituted protest demanded by sacred tradition which is seemingly against the established order, yet

which aims to bless that order to achieve prosperity" (GLUCKMAN 1952:6). GLUCKMAN concludes

> The acceptance of the established order as right and good, and even sacred, seems to allow . . . , very rituals of rebellion, for the order itself keeps this rebellion within bounds. Hence to act the conflicts, whether directly or by inversion or in other symbolical form, emphasizes the social cohesion within which the conflicts exist. Every social system is a field of tension, full of ambivalence, of co-operation and contrasting struggle. This is true of relatively *stationary*—what I like to call repetitive—social systems as well as of systems which are changing and developing. In a repetitive system particular conflicts are settled not by alterations in the order of offices, but by changes in the persons occupying those offices (1952:21).

Songs of complaint and critique do not only occur in the Karam cycle, they are to be found in all the other seasonal cycles, too. But on any occasion, their significance is not reinforced by the ritual and it is not stressed by the presence of all the young women of the clan or clans of the village.

Songs praising kinship relations established by marriage and describing the more romantic aspects of life as, for instance, love and wooing, commonly occur in all seasonal cycles, including Karam, of course. At Karam, however, the point is that a particular aspect of kinship relations, that of tension and pressure, is vividly traced inspite of the seeming evidence of the gay festivities. But this is done exclusively in the performance of particular songs. Anthropological work would be necessary to study how far the institutionalised protest testified by the songs is still conscious to the people or whether it is a survival of a once consciously performed ritual.

However, the Karam festival does not only provide for the institutionalised protest of women.—At Karam another group which normally has no officially approved but yet extremely important function gains prominence. This is the group of the *mātis* or *deoṛās* who act as witch-doctors and who also "practise anti-social magic for their own ends" (ROY 1928:263). These witch-doctors are often recruited from the depressed groups of the village, that is, from those who do not own land, but who for subsistence depend on the semi-*jajmani* relations they have with the land-owning Uraons. At Karam the witch-doctor and his disciples come to the fore and they all become spirit-possessed. Each disciple when recovering from this state

> runs frantically towards the village and plucks pumpkins, cucumbers, maize-pods, or any other vegetables, fruits or flowers he places his hands on; and no one resists them (ROY 1928:242).

This again is a process which at Karam periodically integrates an otherwise marginal and potentially and actually dangerous group.

In Uraon society the Karam festival is, of course, not the only occasion to make social tensions visible. Here I cannot dwell on other institutionalised processes of this kind provided for by the social order. I will just mention one more most conspicuous ritual, namely, the women's hunt occurring every 12 years, for the last time in spring 1972 in the Ranchi district. This hunt exhibits again in a most ostentatious way a periodical dominance of women who at this time act as men, donned in men's garments, and who rebelliously sweep across the whole of the tribal territory attacking the villages in their neighbourhood and hunting the village animals without being hindered. At this time men are confined to the house doing the housewife's work and looking after the children.

2. *Conclusion*

The Karam festival and other festivals providing for the restitution of the social equilibrium are by no means singular phenomena belonging —as far as India is concerned—to the inventory of the social life of unrepresentative marginal groups. The most conspicuous of the festivals allowing for ritual rebellion is the Holi festival celebrated all over India. The pattern underlying Holi has been described by MARRIOTT (1966:212) who says:

> Under the tutelage of Krishna [author's note: he refers to the Northern version of Holi], each person plays and for the moment may experience the role of his opposite: the servile wife acts the domineering husband, and vice versa. ... Each actor playfully takes the role of others in relation to his own usual self. Each may thereby learn to play his own routine roles afresh, surely with renewed understanding, possibly with greater grace, perhaps with reciprocating love.

Finally, and although this refers to the complex problem of how the intellectual tribals please to interpret their traditional social order according to a more or less nativistic ideology, I find it tempting to view in the light of what I have tried to show in this paper the nowadays very fashionable proclamations of the tribal leaders on the role of tribal women. Even the Dhebar Commission Report for 1960–61[4] chimes in

4. India, Government of: *Report of the Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Commission, 1960–61*, Vol. I–II, Delhi 1962.

the eulogy of proud tribal womanhood:

> "In trival society woman is not a drudge or a beast of burden. . . ." (Vol. I, 2.79). But curiously it ends by saying "The woman thus holds an important position in tribal life. She, however, does not usually enjoy any political influence. She does not sit in the village council or panchayats. Nor is her voice heard in taking decisions affecting public life." (Vol. I, 2.84).

I may also quote from two additional ambitious publications, the first being THOMAS and TAYLOR where one is informed that

> The importance of the place of women in our society cannot be overemphasized. . . . The worth and value of womanhood has been preserved by simple customs such as the practice of the payment of the bride price (1965:37).

The second publication is the Indian Independence Anniversary Number of ĀDIVĀSI where we read:

> The position of women in [author's note: tribal] society is important, because in many ways they are beneficial to their families. The "gonong", that is, the bride-price, has to be given by the bridegroom's people. The custom of [giving] the bride-price is an original Indian custom which we also find in Vedic literature (1971:11 .[5]

A relative freedom of women we also find on all the low levels of the Hindu caste system. The reason for this is to be sought in a less puritanic outlook on life as compared with the middle classes and in the economic importance women of these groups develop in helping their families to survive. And being integrated in the economic life gives them a somewhat greater radius of action and of personal freedom.[6] This, I think, should also be taken into account when evaluating the position of tribal women. Tribal women, as a rule, do enjoy more freedom as compared with the Hindu lower middle-class women, but in the light of the social facts[7] and also in the light of the tribal oral literature, one must not overemphasize this phenomenon.

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5. The sentence is found in a Hindi article by S. P. Sinhā: "*Choṭānāgpur kā janjīvan, samskrti evam sāhitya*".

6. Unless they have already entered a reverse process marked by Sanskritization which brings about the ideal of female seclusion insinuated into the low castes by the high castes who are used as a reference category in the process of Sanskritization.—Cf. M.N. Srinivas.

7. I think, the social facts were summed up quite realistically by Sinha 1958:512 who states "There is a significant male dominance in social life (of tribal societies—author's note)."

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Abbreviations

ANS=Urãu 1951
BL =Archer 1941