

Select Mundari Songs of Karam Festival in Translation

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The translator's note:

Karam is basically a festival of cultivation by the Adivasi communities like Santal, Munda, Lodha Sabar, Kharia Sabar, Bhumij, Oraon among others, belonging to the states like Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Assam and Odisha. It is celebrated on the eleventh day of a full moon in the month of Bhadra (August-September) in the worship of *Karam Bonga* (Karam God) to ensure a plentiful harvest and to find solutions to everyday problems. The folktale of Karma and Dharma is narrated by the elderly people to all those who gather and participate in song and dance of the festival. The Mundari Songs of Karam that I have selected for translation into English also include the myth of Karma and Dharma. The present Karam songs are taken from *Mundari Sasankir*, edited by Srihari Sing (Munda) and published in 2012 by 'Paschim Banga Adivasi Munda Samaj Susar Sangha, Jhargram Town Committee'. In the tradition of indigenous folklore, these songs truly represent the essence of Mundari culture. They not only speak of the age-old rituals associated with the festival but shed light on various aspects of the life and worldview of the Munda community as well. Thus, we come to know of their hardship in day-to-day life, their thirst for education despite socio-economic backwardness, their sense of loyalty to Adivasi religion and cultural practices, their abiding belief in indigenous ecocentrism, and above all, their worship of Birsha Munda as 'Dharti Abaa' (the father of the earth) and the pillar of their support.

To translate indigenous cultural texts into English is always a challenge. The Karam songs in Mundari have their own cultural specificity and regional flavour. They are packed with allusions to various rituals and practices integral to the Munda religion and way of life. The vocabulary at times seems untranslatable. That is why certain words and expressions like 'Karam-Dong-Jadu', 'akharah', 'Sarna' etc. have been retained in original and italicized. At the end of the songs, glossary is given to all such words to facilitate the reading of those who don't know Mundari. While translating these songs, I have tried my level best to remain faithful to the original, and in this regard, I am indebted to two persons in particular – Sri Ramjiban Sing who teaches Bengali at Salboni High School of

Paschim Medinipur and Dr Sandeep Chattaraj who teaches English at Talpanija Junior High School of Jhargram District.

1. We are dancing in the *Karam*.
Kith and kin have gathered in the village.
O Brother, who started the *Karam Puja*?
They were Karma and Dharma, the brother said.
Penury and privation made them distraught.
By worshipping *Karam* God
they overcame all hardship.
Karam Bonga is worshipped since then.
2. The basket is filled with sprouted peas.
The wooden container with *sindoor*.
My father-in-law will go to *Karam Puja*!
O Brothers and Sisters, let's worship *Karam Bonga*
with all devotions.
Let's offer the puja with pure heart.
3. When *Karam Raja* was in the forest
he was a glory of that place.
When he is in our home
all is gorgeous with his grace.
4. The month of *Bhadra* has come.
The invitation of *Karam* will arrive soon.
I shall dance to the festive tune.
Buy me, O Brother, a pair of anklets
that will jingle on my feet.
What flowers make the garland for *Karam* God?
The brother said, they are waterlilies
that grow from the mud.
5. The *Karam* dance is going on in the village.
Please stop me not from going there.
The *madal* sounding *digda didang dumang*
makes me restless.
You are the partner in my life.
Take my word, I'll not bring another wife.
Just stop grumbling about music and dance.

6. We bid you adieu, Karam Raja.
Next Bhadra, we'll bring you home again.
Last day the deity was at our place.
Today he is at the river's edge.
With *panta bhaat*, we'd bid him farewell
and prepare for next year's festival.

7. The year has come to an end.
Yellow leaves are falling off.
We'll never stop hunting
in hills and forests.
You are Munda.
So, why be ashamed of dancing?
We'll never stop our song and dance.
We'll practise *Karam-Dong-Jadu*
whenever we get a chance.
We'll build an *akharah*.
We'll play on the new *madal*.
Poverty and distress may be there.
Even then, O Brothers, we won't abandon
our culture, ancient and rare.

8. Who is playing the flute on the cool hill?
"I am the son of the Karam King", the answer came.
You are Karam God to us,
our *Marang Buru*.
We worship you with *chire* as offering.
Please come down from heaven by *bandu nari*
amid the suffering mankind.

9. Who is playing the flute on the Dombari hill?
Where are you Birsha, our God?
Are you there on the hill or in Chalkad village?
Storm rages, fog envelopes the sky.
Lawlessness and violence everywhere.
Mother earth moans
as enemies move forward.
You are our God.
You are the father of the earth.
Please come down by *bandu nari*
amid our sorrow and agony.

10. You grew like a mountain.
You became strong like a *Bonga*.
O Birsha, why did you leave us?
Where did you disappear?
The sahibs left us long ago.
And we've forgot them.
But forever will live your name.
It'll be recorded in books.
It'll be remembered by men.
You are the father of the earth.
You are the provider of shade.
Please come back to our lap again!
11. Listen, Brothers and Sisters, today.
You must answer it, all:
When will we stop drinking alcohol?
By getting boozy we lose all work.
Our society gets pallid and pale
like liquor, day by day.
12. A broken boat is sailing for Tamar.
Ferry carefully, my friend.
Don't allow the water to come in and never stop.
If you succeed, you will find a fair society
under a cool canopy.
Never stop, my friend.
13. I have caught small fishes
with a fish trap.
I have grilled them in leaves with spices.
Take it, my love.
You may make a tasty dish with tamarind.
You'll find fishes still caught in the trap.
Love me dear like a *richi* bird.
14. O Munda community –
You have no other path apart from education
for your help.
Alas! the time is running out.
The people get directionless day by day.

Let's help the society progress
with education proper.
We'll certainly get educated,
and we'll forge ahead.

15. You, Munda, why use the language of *Diku*?

Please speak in your own tongue, Brother.
Our society is at stake.
The use of Adivasi language
will give us a definite edge
in advancing the society.
Hence, speak in our own tongue.
Our rich language is in crisis!

16. I was born in a hut.

I grew up amid hardship,
gleaning grains of corn in fields.
Out of hunger I went to far-off places
as a migrant labourer.
I almost died toiling there.
Alas! my own brethren
alienated me and left me alone.

17. Give me the last day's stale rice

along with fish grilled in leaves.
If I ask again, give me more please.
Give me a pinch of salt too, if I ask you.

18. We, the Munda community –

We've built our own society.
We work to make both ends meet.
But being not conscious, we ignore studies.
Others may befool us, cheat us too
if we don't go to school.
Friends, let's shun jealousy
and the feeling of hate.
Let's have a mission to educate
the people and march ahead!

19. We were at the bank of Indus in past.

We have settled in the hilly and wooded Ranchi.

We are neither the Aryans nor the non-Aryans.
We are the Munda, by tribe, Brother.
And *Sarna* is our religion.
We will speak and sing in Mundari.
We will play on *tuila* and *banam*.

20. The night is dark like jamun
Thunder rolls ...
Roads are muddy
and the canals full to the brim.
O dear, please come back
when the work is done.
Are you on the other side of the river?
Are you in the forest?
Please send me a message
by whistling a tune.
Or play on a flute
to give your voice.
Take care, my dear, wherever you are.

Glossary:

Akharah: A cultural centre where Munda young men and women sing

Banam and tuila: Indigenous musical instruments with a single string

Bandu nari: A kind of strong curly stem found in forest areas

Birsha: Birsha Munda was an iconic tribal freedom fighter and folk hero.

Diku: An outsider

Karam Bonga: Karam God

Karam-Dong-Jadu: Cultural performances including song and dance of the Adivasis

Madal: A musical instrument of the Adivasis

Marang Buru: Supreme God of the Adivasis

Panta bhaat: Stale rice

Sarna: A religious belief of the Munda and other Adivasi communities

Tamar: A place in Ranchi district in Jharkhand