

A Second Charak Festival from Delhi

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KEYWORDS *Charak Puja*. West Bengal. Hook-Swinging. Ordeal. Oath

ABSTRACT The *Charak puja* is a symbol and forms a key symbol where a variety of other symbols cluster around. The festival is analysed in conjunction with the earlier *Charak puja* seen in Delhi. This gives an idea of the reasons that cluster around the key symbol of the festival. The elements of the festival, involving a period of preparation, fasting and then prayers and hook-swinging, are an essential fabric around which a tapestry of relations and needs are woven. The people then use the available local materials to keep alive a semblance of the rituals that these migrants from West Bengal used to follow. Thus this paper uses the concepts inherent in these local symbols to discover the universal referents of the general culture.

INTRODUCTION

Earlier a *Charak* festival was recorded in the pages of this journal in 2001. A second *Charak* festival was observed in Ashok Nagar, Delhi, near the borders of Uttar Pradesh at NOIDA in March 2003. Though the ceremonies observed were almost the same as the earlier festival some suggestions and comments were thought to be useful. Certain remarkable features were observed here which are now being recorded and commented about.

At this festival about a month to a week of fasting and serious praying was recommended alongwith the purity of food, clothing and thought. Aspects of purity seen in Vaishnavite sects are strictly adhered to. If these are not adhered to very strictly, it is said, the gods would punish the individual by hurting him during the festival. Followed correctly, these rituals help the individual to pass the ordeal without pain. Further, promises are made to the gods for the fulfillment of certain everyday tasks, like getting a job or a promotion or a child. After the task is fulfilled the person may agree to conduct the *Charak puja* and suffer the discipline for three years or more. Some have been doing it for many years. Like EMI (Equal Monthly Installment) payments in current-day parlance for buying household goods, the ending of one *Charak* vow may lead to the person vowing to do it again for another favour shown to him by the gods.

THE EVENT

By 4 p.m. the lower part of the *Charak* pole is covered with bright red cloth. Sacred red thread

as well as grass is tied around it as people pray. After this the part of the pole which fits with the cross-piece is attended to and prayers are conducted on this area with peeled bananas, sugar confectionary (*batasa*), grass, tulsi and other leaves and flower petals. To this is added oil, ghee, vermilion and milk (since this is what is used normally for prayers to Lord *Shiva*). Then the two bamboo poles are lashed together with the heavy wooden crosspiece. The crosspiece is prayed to in a similar manner. In the meantime, males dressed as women or as female deities with their entire bodies dressed in feminine attire with bodies smeared with mud, powder or other items start going around. Sections of the Hindu pantheon may be acted out as a tableau or an event may be acted out. The hole of the crosspiece and the section of the pole which fits this cross-piece is prayed to and *ghee* added to grease the area. Bananas are peeled, crushed into a paste to further add to this greasiness. The hole into which the pole enters is then prayed to before the pole is put up with the cross-piece attached.

At this point, a woman, in a state of trance, crawls across the ground to the edge of the pole and tries to pick up each piece of red cloth lying around. She is stopped by others, but is listened to closely in case she says something important. Such women, are often diviners and tell various important things for individuals, depending on the 'ghost' or 'demon' or 'entity' that takes charge of her.

Then, the spikes are fixed into the cheeks of the two devotees by the priest after their bath and while they are standing in the water of the canal. The spikes in their mouth are balanced on both ends with two lemons speared at either end.

They are brought back from the canal sitting astride the shoulders of two of their friends. They were yellow loincloths with religious inscriptions on them. They are blessed by the priest at the *shamiana*.

By 6:30 to 7 p.m. the hooks are fixed to the back of the devotee. He wears a *dhoti* or loin cloth, with a yellow cloth with religious inscriptions as a smaller band over it. The priest wears such a band on his head. He is carried on the shoulders of one of his acquaintances while the priest prays. As this happens, two other boys, their faces smeared with black colour, highlighted with red and white start crawling over the ground. Perhaps they symbolize evil forces that have to be driven out. Another boy in a trance, tries to attack while another holds him by the loincloth so that he cannot. The priest steps in, holds them by the hair, picks up mud from the ground and smears them with it while reading incantations. This releases them from the trance, though this has to be repeated from time to time till the end. All through this the drums beat. One of the devotees with a long spike through his mouth climbs up the pole to fix the hooks with the ropes.

The individual swung on his hooks for about forty-five minutes as the spectators cheered him on. Then he was brought down, taken the shoulder of his acquaintance, and a small prayer conducted before he goes home.

A BRIEF COMPARISON

Having conducted this discipline for about a month, the person is then brought to the area of the *Charak* festival (see diagram) and starts conducting the various modes of ordeal. These may be done sequentially by the same person on different days (as in the first case described in Delhi by Ghosh and Sinha, 2001). Or these various kinds of ordeal may be taken up by different individuals, either on different days or on the same day. There is a marked difference in the way they are conducted here and the way they were conducted in the villages of their origin. In the village, times may be followed according to the set ritual. However, in Delhi, all able-bodied males work outside their homes. Many are salaried workers. They cannot take so many leaves for these rituals. Hence, the rituals are modified to suit the practitioners as well as the audience.

The geography of the region also limits the rituals that may be performed here. Many of the

participants are fishermen and worked in the river. Now there is no river here but a part of the Hindon River has been diverted through a canal to force the effluents and city wastes in the eastern parts of Delhi and parts of NOIDA to flow into the Yamuna River. As a result, the water is thick with dark sludge, filthy, with a strong sulphurous stink. The participants go to this canal, wash in it, dip their heads into it for a part of the festival before they come out of it, 'cleansed' and pure. They then come to the central area and begin to either put long, thin shafts through both their cheeks, or have hooks attached to the skin at their back preparatory to being swung around. Many of those who participated had marks from previous sessions on their backs.

People not only think of them as being clean and pure but also think of them as being uniquely blessed by the gods. As they swing around they are sprinkled with water from the pure Ganges river, and the organizers throw *prasad* consecrated by the gods in the form of crystalline sugar confections on the public. This is picked up avidly and eaten or shared and taken home for safekeeping. The person swinging was also sprinkling rose or other flower petals on the public. The people would come to him one by one and either offer him a young child for touching or carrying or giving him offerings of money as part of a prayer for their own well-being. In fact, the *prasad* is paid for the donations of the devotees to the *pat* (seen inside the *shamiana* or tent).

In this case the young man seemed to be in pain from at least one of the hooks and could not sustain the pressure of the swinging for long. After some twenty or so swings he was rapidly taken down and complained of an ill-feeling.

The following members were its participants:

1. Nandu Chakraborty (aged 35 years), a *purohit*, stays in Ashok Nagar. He is originally from village and Thana Gangarampur, District West Dinajpur, West Bengal.
2. Ashit Haldar (36), a *sanyasi*, at Ashok Nagar, was from village Bulbulichandi, thana Habibpur, Malda, West Bengal.
3. Beshto Haldar (70), an *Ala sanyasi*, responsible for the *bhog*, etc. and an organizer, was from Ashok Nagar, village Bulbulichandi, Malda, West Bengal.
4. Tailaksha Haldar (72), a *Bithho Sanyasi*, responsible for taking care of the *bhandar ghar*, and is a *mala dhair*, is from Ashok Nagar, originally from village Bulbulichandi, Malda, West Bengal.

5. Anil Sarkar (65), an *Ala Sanyasi*, of the 16-*pak* variety, was involved in poetry recitations and writing as well as *tantra-mantra*. He is from Ashok Nagar but was originally also from village Bulbulichandi, Malda, West Bengal.
 6. Ashit Das ((32), is an *Ala Sanyasi*, from village Bamungola, Malda, West Bengal.
 7. Kashinath Haldar (66), was from Ashok Nagar, originally from village Shahapur, Pabnapara, Malda, West Bengal.
 8. Kalu Haldar (30) went up on hooks and stays at Balurghat, West Dinajpur, West Bengal.
 9. Nakur Haldar (26) had *ban* through his cheeks. He is brother to Ashit Haldar, mentioned above, and was from village Bulbulichandi, Malda, West Bengal.
 10. Sudev Haldar (30) had *ban* through his cheeks and was from village Bulbulichandi, Malda, West Bengal.
 11. Sahdev Haldar (25), is a cousin brother on his father's side of Ashit Haldar, from village Bulbulichandi, Malda, West Bengal.
 12. Manik Haldar (18), a brother of Ashit Haldar is from village Bulbulichandi, Malda, West Bengal.
 13. Chandi Haldar (40), is from village Shahpur, Pabnapara, Malda, West Bengal.
 14. Chandi Haldar (18), is from village Gangarampur, West Dinajpur, west Bengal.
 15. Dinu Haldar (24), is from village Rajmahal, Ghatpara, Shyamganj, West Bengal.
 16. Raghu Haldar (65) is from village Lakshipur, Malda, West Bengal.
 17. Swapan Haldar (35) is from village Gangarampur, West Dinajpur, west Bengal.
 18. Sumbu Haldar (45) is from Bulbulichandi, Malda, West Bengal.
 19. Siddi Haldar (36) is from Bamungola, Malda, West Bengal.
- The records show that in this region Chakraborties from the Barendra group usually conduct the *Puja* at the time of the *Chaitra sankranti* or spring equinox. It is presumed that such individuals not being available from Ashok

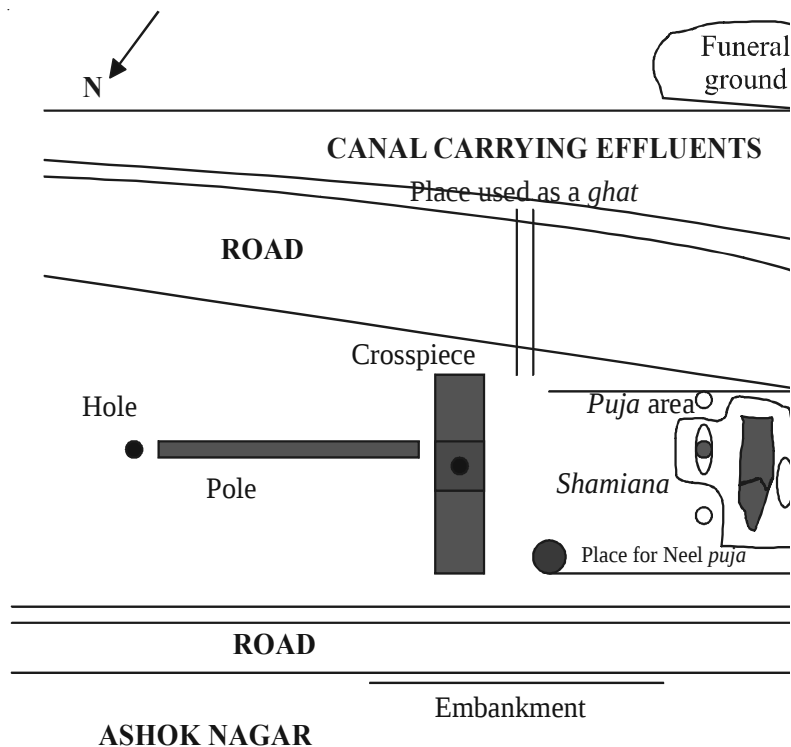


Fig. 1. Charak festival layout at Ashok Nagar, Delhi.

Nagar, a substitute from another region was appointed as a *purohit*. A significant feature is reading out poetry and taking a small group singing these and the prayers to lord Shiva from house to house. Often *debottar* land is present in the village, the proceeds of which are the principal aid for the conduct of the *puja*. At Ashok Nagar, a subscription was being collected for the *puja* in each year. One of the *bhaktas* is often 'taken over' by a deity and at this point a lot of good and bad things in the village are commented upon by this individual in a state of trance. At this point, many individuals pray to hear these comments to help themselves and pray for guidance. One of the *bhaktas* also starts singing and dancing after having drunk alcohol after carrying a skull (called a *manik*) and praying to the *devi*. He gets into a trance and starts singing and dancing with the skull. After this, the skull is ceremonially drowned in the river. Bulbulchandi is also having no specific mention of a famed *Charak* festival but the area is ancient and due to the number and amount of detailed workmanship in ancient statuettes found seem to indicate that it was much better off in the past than it is today. It was poorly connected until recently, though it has its own railway station (Roy et al., 1969: pp. 20-21, 61-62).

Gangarampur region is also known for its *Charak* festivals (Roy et al., 1969: 87) though no specific mention is made of the village itself.

In both of these cases the people of West Bengal tried to maintain the integrity of their original *Charak* festivals for their own psychological or mental or religious satisfaction, in spite of the changed circumstances. In the first, a larger body of individuals existed who were very much integrated together, had come from the same region and could practice this festival together. This festival itself, following Durkheim's function of it, would knit them together into a coherent community of relationships by raising it above the level of the everyday.

However, in the case of Ashok Nagar, fewer individuals had come from the same village. As a result local differences in practices crept in. Choosing between differences in geography, their own knowledge of such practices and the variety of experiences to choose from, the rituals were ultimately much looser in their form than those seen in the Bengali Colony, Sant Nagar. However, this very looseness incorporated parts of the local knowledges of a wider group of people, giving

them a part-feeling of being at home. This looseness or fuzziness in the definition of what constitutes accuracy in ritual practices incorporated a wider group of people into a local identity structure.

Captivated by the strong visual impact of the festival, a larger number of people came to view this festival. They were local people from a range of castes and communities from all over India. However, the main participants continued to be from West Bengal only. Perhaps, the localization of the festival as one from the rural areas of West Bengal unites those who participate into an identity different from the others who are mixed and from other areas and who are merely the spectators. Thus, this identity formation is private, covert, hidden and perhaps even subconscious even as the spectacle of the festival is overt, public, consciously and implicitly extended to all others.

Let us then take this mode of human behaviour, then, as a mode of religion intimately linked to its function. If this activity has a function and is important and if it is not possible to perform this function in public, then how do people perform these functions? Are they universal to the Bengal region? Can this behaviour, then, sublimate this activity (following psychoanalysis) allowing other activities to fulfill these necessary functions?

From 1856, the British began banning practices that seemed to them to be indicative of horrific torture and a mark of the 'Oriental' having a penchant for death and torture. This Orientalist view was coupled to a concept of the superiority of the British over others including their own so-called humanistic religion, Christianity. Reports from all over India showed at the time that the practice of hook-swinging was being practiced by many in India though it had never been mentioned as a ritual in any Brahminical work (Oddie, 1995).

It was mostly popular among the lower castes and the tribals though its usefulness and fervour caught up with the middle and upper castes also in many areas. In both these cases Brahmins were brought in to pray to the gods. In many areas as in Tanjore it is still prohibited though it is practiced surreptitiously. In other areas they practiced swinging animals and when that was looked down upon a pumpkin or other large vegetable or an effigy of a man was swung around with hooks in southern India (Oddie, 1995).

It seems to answer a deep-rooted need for control over one's life and destiny by propitiating the gods and also for procreation, health and sustenance. People also used it to improve their social status, to gain money and other benefits. Patrons saw it as a means of increasing their status and prestige. It provided income for blacksmiths, carpenters and others, thus becoming a group of individuals whose vested interests continued the festival even after being banned by the government. Arguments were raised by many regarding the so-called barbaric-ness of the practice and also whether people really suffered under the practice. It was felt by them that since the vows of many Hindus could not be fulfilled without this practice the British should not interfere with it. The Western-educated elites definitely agreed that such practices should be stopped since they were demeaning, barbaric and were a reflection of the superstition of the country rather its enlightenment (Oddie, 1995).

According to Niyogi (1987) it satisfies different urges of different sections of people. For the lower or 'unclean' castes, it offers a ritual binding. For the general mass it is a form of entertainment. For those in the village market economy, it offers a scope for financial exchange. Niyogi studied only a few villages in the 24 parganas region, especially villages Durgapur and Tulsighata in the Jaynagar P.S. and Jayrampur in Bishnupur P.S.

This brings up the issue of this particular section of the ritual being used as an aspect of many deities and many other kinds of ritual practices, including those of many tribals in India. Hence, this is not a unique concept used to gain identity by one community, though it has sometimes been used as such, but a spectacle whose value and worth was used by many in multiple spaces and times to enhance the power of the ritual of their own religion, or deity. Such a role of a spectacle was sometimes enhanced to ensure that people suffered cruelly or were even killed by the act as an appeasement to the gods in order that the others lived happily.

In other areas, especially after 1865 when the British started banning them, this spectacle was gradually becoming sublimated through fire-walking in southern India and in eastern India or became a ritual where no hooks were used and even children could be tied to poles and swung high above the crowd showering them with flowers without them suffering from any ill effect.

Sometimes, in southern India, local state rulers ensured that a safety rope or belt was used so that the individual suffered no injury through a sudden fall even if hooks were used. This is what happens at a *hindol* in tribal and rural Chotanagpur.

In fact, such promises are also made at fire-walking ceremonies even today. One such case was seen when K. Vijay Kumar walked on fire as a part of a vow he had made at the annual Bannari Amman festival near Satyamangalam, Erode district, Tamil Nadu. Kumar was an additional DGP and head of the Tamil Nadu Task Force, better known for the encounter killing of Veerappan. Hours after killing Veerappan he had come to this temple to tonsure his head. The state administration had also attended and Erode SP Balasubramaniam and the revenue divisional officer Gajalakshmi had also walked the fire. Others were also present (Anand, 2005).

The occult part of the festival is the lack of blood even though the hooks are pierced through skin and muscle. In this case there was some blood, more than the earlier event witnessed in Delhi. Further, witchcraft and sorcery during the practice, though definitely within the worldview of the individuals practicing it, is not taken very seriously here. The other item is the *Neel puja* which occupies a much more central place here than in the other case seen in Delhi. Perhaps, this could be attributed to a local variation seen in the villages of origin of the participants. Niyogi (1987) claims that the *Charak* or *Neel* is about synonymous. In the village/s studied by him a marriage of *Neel* and *Neelabati* or *Lilabati* was arranged. The identities and origins of these ideas could not be traced by him also. There seemed to be some identification of the two as Siva and Parvati. He also notes that in many places this particular part of the ritual may be abandoned. It is speculated here that perhaps in these outlying areas of the ritual, as in Delhi, where people from varying areas arrive and conduct the practices, it is easier to change certain aspects of the ritual based on the attitudes and knowledge of the participants. Further, in Sant Nagar the location was based on a well-developed sacred area within the precincts of a well-built temple. Here, it was a temporary *shamiana* or tent in a waste land presently unused.

Niyogi (1987) also claims that Dharma is a god found among the tribals of Chotanagpur (among the Oraons). There, this festival is conducted through the Dharmes, the sun-god. However, in

Bengal and other areas villagers conducted these ceremonies with Shiva. As a result, over the years, the Dharmaraja cult shifted in orientation to being a Shiva cult. The different timings of the two festivals (*Siver Gajan* in *Chaitra* and *Dharmer Gajan* in full moon of *Vaishakha* upto *Asada*) has also been telescoped to overlap them into one festival. The terms *Panchananda* and *Kshetrapala* have also been incorporated like this. These then become the field view or folk concept or *Lok Siva* which are parochial/Little traditions which are visualized by the Great Tradition as being a part of it and hence being a part of the more generalized book view.

CLOSING COMMENTS

Like Sherry Ortner's 'key symbols', this festival forms a nodal point at which many ideas, myths, concepts and thoughts merge. They get lumped together into one mass and investigators find it difficult to put a logical coherence into the totality of it as one worldview. As can be seen, it satisfies multiple ideas and many needs of its participants. The more diverse such participants become, the more diffuse, fuzzy and disconnected such a worldview becomes. The fewer and more parochial the event, the more focused it becomes, with sharply delineated logical constructs and a unity to its worldview. It is believed here that such a

system might have fairly universal referents, thus adding to the bricolage of culture.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Shri Gobindo Halder and his wife Smt. Renu Halder for helping us trace out this festival and its details. He has been participating in the festival in Murshidabad until he came over to NOIDA. He took us there on his rickshaw, pointed out the details and brought us back. Without him, this work might not have been possible.

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