

The Charak Festival in India

A Review and a Case Study From Delhi

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ABSTRACT The festival of *Charak* is known, in the actual use of the word, mainly from West Bengal. However, the period, timing and practices—primarily of the inflicting of tortures on the body—are common for many regions in India. As a result, we have decided to call them all *Charak*. Local names are given where possible. The review given here is not encyclopaedic. Rather, it is selected for completeness of description, in order to show trends and similarities. It could be that we have missed out certain major works. In case the reader is aware of any such work, we would be grateful to have them pointed out to us. A lack of previous reviews has led to the writers having written in isolation from others who have written on the issue. Initially, then, an account from pan-Indian cases are given. Later, an account of the festival as celebrated by Bengalis from Delhi is given. This leads to a description, however preliminary, on certain similarities and practices. The authors are continuing their researches on the issue and it is hoped that further issues will emerge with time, especially in association with fire-walking.

INTRODUCTION

The festival of *Charak* is known mainly from West Bengal, but the period, timing and practices—primarily of the inflicting of tortures on the body—are common for many regions in India. As a result, we have decided to call them all *Charak*. Local names are given where possible. The review given here is not encyclopaedic. Rather, it is selected for completeness of description, in order to show trends and similarities. It could be that we have missed out certain major works. In case the reader is aware of any such work, we would be grateful to have them pointed out to us. A lack of previous reviews has led to the writers having written in isolation from others who have written on the issue. Initially, then, an account from pan-Indian cases are given. Later, an account of the festival as celebrated by Bengalis from Delhi is given.

CHARAK IN INDIA

In Eastern India, the practice of fire-walking

was frequently related to the practice of the inflicting of tortures and conducting penances at certain festivals. These festivals were called *Manda* or *Charak*. One of the early anthropologists in India, Nirmal Kumar Bose, wrote of the *Manda* festival in the Ranchi district of Chotangpur in the middle of this century. This version was later translated from the Bengali and published in his *The Structure of Hindu Society* in 1975.

Bose (1994: 59-61) claims that in Ranchi district not only the Oraon and the Munda tribes but the blacksmiths, cowherds and *mirdha* (or *Dom*) castes also participate in fire-walking. He observed this festival in the villages of Tangratoli and Morhabadi (both near Ranchi town). While the *Charak* festival is practiced in Bengal in the Hindu month of *Chaitra* (the last month of the year between mid-March and mid-April), the *Manda* festival is celebrated in *Baisakh* or *Jaijtha/Jeth* (mid-April to mid-May). The godhead mainly associated with this is *Shiva* or *Mahadeva* (a godhead commonly worshipped for many occult purposes). A *Vaishnava Gosain* acts as a priest. Many of the participants usually undergo a series of rites for some days before the festival including the maintenance of ritual purity in their food and other habits. Such *Gosains* also have adepts who are known as *Bhoktas*, who behave as ascetics in the festival. Such *Bhoktas* are often possessed by the deity. On the second day of the ceremony, two major rites are performed by the *Bhoktas* - *Kandhaiya* and *Phulkudna* (Jumping over flowers. The flowers here symbolize or refer to the fire).

The *Bhoktas* are disciples of the *Gosain* of the village. The *Bhoktas* squat and the *Gosain* walks over their shoulders. If there are fewer *Bhoktas* then the last in line comes to the front of the line once the *Gosain* has crossed over his shoulders. This continues till the *Gosain* reaches the shrine of *Mahadev*. This part of the ritual is called *Kandhaiya* where *Kandh* means 'shoulders'. The *Bhoktas* also have

their attendants. These may be mothers, sisters or other women, normally within the household. They help the *Bhogta* and also maintain the same ritual restrictions as the *Bhogtas*.

As has already been stated, the *Charak puja* is also one of the major festivals associated with hook-swinging and fire-walking (Bradley-Birt, 1910: 54). Some of these practices were so abhorrent that the British made their practice illegal. As a result these events, though still practiced, were usually done in secrecy. A photo of the event is also reproduced in Bradley-Birt (1910) and he describes it in graphic detail:

"It is generally known as the Hook-swinging festival, the devotees being swung up in the air by means of hooks thrust into the flesh, and, though long since strictly prohibited by law, almost every year until recently cases of its having taken place with full rites were reported in the various districts. It is one of those ghastly exhibitions that a past race of Hindus most especially delighted in; and the devotees themselves, from all accounts, eagerly underwent the torture, probably well drugged to mitigate what would otherwise have been physical agony. Each devotee approached the priest in turn and fell full length on the ground before him, his back and shoulders bare. The priest, muttering his formula, stooped down, and, dipping his finger in a heap of ashes, made two marks on the back of the supplicant just below the shoulder-blades. His assistant, pinching up the flesh underneath these marks, thrust the two large hooks securely through. This done, the devotee rose amid the cries of admiration of the crowd, and marched off to the swinging post, swaggering along with pride and seemingly unconscious of the wounds made by the hooks, from which blood was flowing down his back. The hooks being attached to the ropes of the swinging machine with a sudden wrench that would seem as if it must have lacerated the flesh beyond endurance, he was swung aloft to the wild shrieks of the crowd of enthusiasts and the deafening noise of the drums. A loose band, placed around the man's chest, prevented the strain from actually causing the hooks to burst through the flesh, but so slackly tied that it mitigated little of the pain".

These accounts show that bodily suffering was meant to be an ordeal or as an

examination. If a person did not suffer during such ordeals, then divine intervention helped him/her, otherwise the person was taken to be guilty of various charges. After this, it was but a step to have people volunteering for various kind of bodily suffering after a period of penance and fasting as proof of their faithfulness to the gods. This is seen in an early account penned by Ram Comul Sen and read out before the Asiatic Society in 1829. Many of the instruments used were presented by him to the Museum. Fire-walking, though, was seemingly not a feature of the *Charak* as described by Sen. Perhaps, it entered into such ceremonies later (Sen, 1833: 610).

"The word *Charak* is derived by *Chakra* or *Charaka*, which means a circle, and is used to signify moving or swinging in a circular direction; *Charak Sanyasa* implies leaving off worldly business, living abstemiously, observing austerities, for the propitiation of *Siva*. It is a festival improperly termed by many *Charak Puja*, perhaps from the notion that every ceremony observed by the Hindus of Bengal, is a *puja* or religious worship; and whether it be performed by a *muchi* or *chandala*; is considered as Hinduism, and the whole body of the Hindus are charged with the absurdity of the act.

"There are two kinds of *Sanyasas* called *Siva Sanyasa*, and *Dherma Sanyasa*; the first is celebrated in the month of *Chaitra*, and the second in *Baisakha*; the people who praise these *Sanyasas* are termed *Sanyasis*, and the priest who presides in the ceremony is called a *Gajaneya Brahman*: The *Charak* festival is also called *Gajana* (*G'a* or *Grama*, village; *jana*, people) being observed by the villagers. There are several ranks amongst the *Sanyasis*, such as *Mula* or head; *Dhula*, or subordinate; *sain*, or followers. The time occupied by the *Charak sanyasa* is a whole month, and that of the *Dherma* is a fortnight; during this time the *Sanyasis* live abstemiously, and observe various ceremonies to be noticed below:

"This act is performed by the Sudra class only, and generally by the lowest castes and most dissipated characters; some of them consider it as an act of piety and religion, in commemoration of the austerities performed by VANA RAJA, a king and *Daitya*, who by acts of self-torture and denial obtained the special favour of MAHA DEVA, and who first introduced the festival; but the greatest number engage in it as a lucrative exhibition,

or form a desire to acquire a character for courage in the opinion of their friends. In some cases, the rite is compulsory: the parents make a vow to SIVA, when involved in trouble and disasters, that their children shall perform *Sanayasas* for a certain number of years, which the sons must fulfil." (Sen, 1833: 609-610)

There were originally 5 kinds of such performances at the Charak. These have been added or subtracted to in later years. Such events include:

- (1) *Phala Sanyasa* (playing with fruits); also with *Phala Bhanga* or *Kanta Sanyasa*;
- (2) *Phula Sanyasa* (playing with flowers);
- (3) *Nilā Sanyasa* (worshipping *Nilavati*, a goddess);
- (4) *Jhula Sanyasa* (hanging); and
- (5) *Charak* (Sen, 1833: 610).

Chattopadhyay continues with this theme in his description of the similar festival called *Cadak* in Bengal observed on April 6-13, 1934, in Calcutta and suburban areas. It usually begins a week before the Hindu month *Chaitra* ends and culminates on the last day of the month. It is associated with the vernal equinox, on the day of crossing of the equator (*Mahavisuba Samkranti*). At present, it misses the vernal equinox by about three weeks. On this day "King Vana, in order to please Mahadeva, drew blood from his body as an offering and propitiated him by dances (along with friends) which are favoured by Him" (Chattopadhyay, 1935: 397).

The biggest centre for this festival is that at Tarakeswar in the Hughli district where several hundred devotees came for the festival. However, the festival there is not as rich as the ones performed in the villages. The festival was also performed at Kalighat, Harish Mukherji Road, Monoharpukur, Paddapukur (Bhowanipur), Sastitola and Beliaghata. The most studied were Beliaghata with lesser emphasis on Monoharpukur and Paddapukur. Before actual observation, the details were gathered from the officiating priest in each case (Chattopadhyay, 1938: 397-398).

If no permanent temple of Mahadeva exists, then one is created with coconut leaves used as thatch and facing mostly South. The priest sits to the South, the image to the North. An earthen crocodile is made outside the hut, facing East, the body North-South, of six feet and is six inches above the ground. The jaws are open and the image of a child on its back lies across the length. Tamarind seeds indicate

the scales on the back. Two earthen pots with a green coconut on each, mango twigs dipped in water and a plantain shoot beside each is kept at either side of the entrance. The altar (*vedi*) is now prepared. A square mound of levelled earth is built up with a rounded projection in front.

The chief devotee (*Mula Sanyasi* or *Pat Bhakta*) performs these activities and then puts on an ochre loin cloth and sacred thread with the roots of a grass (*Eragrostis gnosuroides*) tied in a knot at the centre of a bunch of threads. He invests the other devotees similarly, sometimes with a cane stick in his hand, with a loop of cane as a handle. They fast during the day of 25th *Chaitra*, put vermilion marks and rice-paste on the water-pot, the deity *Siva* then being installed by the priest, invariably an *Acarya Brahmana* (*grahavipra*). At about 8 p.m. the devotees eat *havisya* (milk, sun-dried rice boiled in water, a little butter, fruits). This continues the next day. On the 27th they eat the *maha-havisya* (three grains of rice boiled in milk, one remaining in the pot, one chewed and spat out, and one eaten, all at midnight in solitude). Only fruit is eaten on the 28th (Chattopadhyay, 1935: 399-400).

During the afternoon the devotees bathe, keep the *Siva* on a copper water-pot, worship it and keep a flower on the head of *Siva*. The priest chants and sprinkles water on the deity, the devotees sitting in front. The devotees shake their heads to the kettle drum, singing praises to Lord Shiva. If everything has been observed correctly the flower on the head of Shiva is supposed to come down, if it does not the devotees march around the temples, sometimes doing some penances. These may include the wrapping up of devotees in towels and beating them, etc. Someone may go into a trance and claim his faults. Further penance is done and the flower may fall off. Then, the crocodile is worshipped. Vermilion is put on the image by the priest, with *bel* leaves (*Aegle marmelos*) and flowers; incantations to the sun-god being sung. The priest dips the image in Ganges water from the water-pot. The devotees break their fast. Each day also has a special ceremonial performed. These may vary in date but similar festivals are performed everywhere (Chattopadhyay, 1935: 400-401).

These ceremonials are:

1. The swing over the fire.
2. The jump on thorns.

3. The jump on knives.
4. The piercing with arrows.
5. The marriage of *Siva*, and fire dance.
6. The swinging on the *Cadak* tree.
7. The propitiation of the resuscitated ghosts.

For swinging over the fire, the devotees bathe, worship *Mahadeva* till the flower falls from the head and then go to the frame for swinging. They swing from West to East. A fire is lit with wood of *Zizyphus jujuba* at the bottom of the frame. The seed *Imperata arundinacea* is used to fire the stack. After it has burnt for sometime, live charcoal remains at the bottom. After marking the poles with vermilion and flowers, the devotee swings thrice, a towel holding his feet to the post. This continues till the *sesa* (the last devotee) swings. Then all of them dance on the embers and put them out. Some embers may be carried by hand and offered as flowers to *Siva*, after which the fast is broken. At Tarakeswar, there is no crocodile or swinging over the fire. Devotees crawl at full length to circumambulate the temple (Chattopadhyay, 1935).

Coconut or date palm leaves are laid at *Siva's* altar, on which are kept thorny branches of the *beyunch* tree. Devotees roll on these thorns shouting the name of *Siva*, after which they are pulled out. A big *gajan* (festival of *Siva*) is held at Ramnagar, near Tarakeswar, many devotees coming with thorny branches for this ceremony.

Jumping on knives is also a part of these ceremonies. The knives are of various shapes and sizes. Knives are stuck on the frame of the stem. The knives are taken ceremonially to a tank, washed and smeared with vermilion. A sack of straw is kept on which is the branch held by a man. The devotees climb up on the bamboo structure and jump on these knives. They may have to jump between 4 and 12 feet. This is absent at Tarakeswar. In some places it is preceded by *manibhanga*, where the devotees worship a date palm, climb to the top, and pluck the top thorny blade at the tip with their teeth, bring back to the place of worship, held all the while in the mouth till *phalchhoda* (ceremony of throwing the fruits) is over. This latter ceremony involves the distribution of fruits to the people present. The fruits included coconuts, *bael* and cucumber. These were considered to be holy (Chattopadhyay, 1935: 402-403).

The ceremony of the marriage of *Siva* is

described by Chattopadhyay (1935: 403-404) as follows:

"The next day (29th Caitra) is known everywhere as the date of the '*mita*'. On this day the deity, *Siva* is married to *Lilavati*. The bride is represented by a couple of concave earthen dishes enclosing five nuts, *hari taki* (*Terminalia chebula*), *bahara* (*Terminalia belerica*), areca nut (*Areca catechu*), coconut and *amlaki* (*Phyllanthus emblica*), some red thread and *alta* or lac-dyed cotton for colouring the edge of women's feet. The whole is tied up in cotton cloth dyed with turmeric. These articles are the same as those used in the *punarvivaha* or consummation ceremony. The double dishes, with these articles inside, are tied up in turmeric dyed cloth and placed on a water-pot with the usual rice flour and vermilion marks. The pot is kept on the left of the god, and on the dishes are hung the tinsel insignia of the bride at a Hindu marriage. The bride is sent as such by local blacksmiths to the festival of the locality. In the afternoon the devotees go to a tank to fetch water (*jal saoa*) to bathe the bride and groom just as womenfolk of the household have to do at a wedding. Sometimes a scarf is thrown over the head of these devotees at this time to indicate that they are doing the women's part. The usual *varana* and other ceremonies are also gone through and finally offerings of fried rice are made on a sacrificial fire. The details are in fact exactly similar to the marriage rites of people of the rank of pure artisans and similar castes in Bengal.

"The nine *grahas* or planets and constituents of the solar system are worshipped in connection with this marriage. A circle is drawn with rice flour powder tinted green with bean leaves, black by charcoal, red by vermilion, yellow by turmeric - and also white in its natural condition."

Earlier to this, a ceremony of piercing with arrows used to be performed. It has been made illegal but may have continued in 1935 in some interior areas. They were pierced from the back, between the ribs, to the front. In Calcutta and surrounding areas, these arrows are tied to the sides of the devotees with towels. Incense is burnt. A hut may also be put up and burnt after the chief devotee has gone in to pray and meditate. The wood must always be collected, never purchased. The embers fall on the devotees till put out. It may be that the hut is burned ceremonially by the enemies

of the chief devotee. It could also be that it is in connection with food given to the ghosts. The skin of the body would also be pierced by sharp instruments in many places. The role of *kalika patari* was one of these where thin short arrows pierced the skin at many places, the red *jaba* (*Hibiscus rosasinesis*) being stuck at each end. Carrying curved sword (like *Kali*), he would go off into a trance from which he would return only on *kakanda purava* (description of *Dharma* worship) being heard in different places. Donations are collected in the morning by the devotees wearing bells on their feet, singing and dancing (Chattopadhyay, 1935: 404-405).

The *Cadak* is created like the swing of the *Manda*. The devotee goes around thrice on it after a human figure of clay at its base is worshipped. Earlier, hooks would be used to tie the person's back muscles and then swung around. Worship is offered to Mahadeva and the fast is broken with milk, fried paddy, curds, sweets or food cooked in fire, butter or milk (Chattopadhyay, 1935: 405).

On the next day, the first of the new month of *Vaisakha*, devotees bathe in the morning, worship *Siva*, take off the sacred thread and ochre robe, paying the dues to the priest. The dead are resuscitated (*dano barano*) on this day by ghostly possession. A shed is erected and roofed with coconut palm leaves. *Sol* fish is cooked on the embers here by the chief devotee, with parboiled husked rice, rice-wine poured on fish and rice and placed in an earthen pot taken at midday and poured on a plantation tree in a lonely meadow where the dead are cremated for the ghosts. It is also known as *hajara puja*. Devotees may smear their faces with mud or red lead and impersonate demons, dancing, shouting, even eating the fish and rice. These are the *san* of *Cadak*. The firing of the hut is a part of this ceremony.

"The whole of this ceremony of resuscitation of ghostly beings is however falling out of use and is not actually observed anywhere near Calcutta in detail. The songs and dances that accompanied it have now been replaced in Calcutta proper by a big procession organized by the fishermen, with people dressed up to represent caricatures of well-known persons, or represented in different attitudes and acts with verses indited on banners held above the actors, satirizing modern customs and changes. In the suburbs

the friends of the devotees often drink beer or wine and spend the night in singing and dancing. The devotees are mostly men of castes of whom water is not supposed to be accepted". (Chattopadhyay, 1935: 406)

Based on this Chattopadhyay wishes to claim that *Manda*, *Carak* and *Dharma* worship are "based on a belief in resurrection, or coming to life after death, and are intended to celebrate annually the return to life of the deceased members of the community" (Chattopadhyay, 1935: 406).

The paper was discussed and the comments written down in the *Year Book of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (1936: 158-159). M. M. Bose, at this time, remarked that the word *Carak* is derived from the Sanskrit '*Cakra*' or wheel (of time). Hence, the festival symbolizes the end of one year and the beginning of the next. This is why *Siva* or *Mahakala* are worshipped since they are the great god of Time. He doubted their non-Aryan origin and hoped for more proofs before such assertions could be made. Van Manen inquired whether the festival was of aboriginal origin adapted to Hinduism or of Hindu origin. Chattopadhyay replied by asserting it to be of pre-vedic origin, but also said that the term Hinduism was undefined.

In the worship of *Dharma*, mention is made in the *Dharma Pujabidhan* of the practice of *hindol* or fire-swing of devotees (Chattopadhyay, 1942: 102-103). Later, in the *Dharmamangalas* of Manik Ganguli, of Ghanaram, and the *Anadi Mangala* of Ramdas Adak, Raja Harischandra and his wife offered their lives to *Dharma* by falling on a razor-sharp weapon to get a son. Ranjabati, queen of Karva Sen, was related this incident and she performed the *hindol* and the fall on curved knives (*Katari*) fixed on plantain stems, finally dying on sharp iron spikes. *Dharma* brought her back to life and granted her the boon of a son (Chattopadhyay, 1942: 103).

Vows like piercing the breast to bring out blood, taking the deity and walking over the heads of the devotees to the temple and back are both seen in *Dharma* worship (Chattopadhyay, 1942). *Hindol* and dancing on the embers is also seen in Labhpur, West Bengal. Nearby, in Bhaston village, people pierced their sides and tongues. At the *hindol* at Birsinha, the description includes a party of Muslim mummets, in beard and *loongi* (striped loin cloth), carrying an imitation *tajia*,

shouting '*Hassen Hossain*' and a display of sword and stick play (Chattopadhyay, 1942: 11). The devotees roll to the various deities.

At Udayganj, two miles from Birsinha, in 1940, the festival included a tongue-piercing rite with a *Hakanda* spear, as well as the flower falling afterwards from the head of *Kali* (Chattopadhyay, 1942: 119). The diameter of the spears was a little over one-fourth of an inch, while the length was between 6 to 12 feet. This was done at half-past four in the morning and the devotees stood in a pit till sunrise. Then, a fire was lit to the West and the devotees faced this as if it were a sunrise in the West, a part of the *Dharma* myth. The bleeding devotees got up and danced to a beat, circled the area thrice and then went to a shed to take out the spears in front of the temple. After this, they were given *bel* leaves to chew from the worship, and then betel leaves with lime, catechu and areca nut. They spoke normally and danced for some time (Chattopadhyay, 1942: 122-123).

At Tupudana, on the 7th May, 1965, at 4 p.m., was also observed the *chadrak* ceremony or *charak*. The devotees wore feminine costumes especially the auspicious red for swinging around. There is no mention of a fire underneath. The pagoda flowers worn keep swinging and falling on the watchers, who pick them up as holy relics. The devotee is helped down, carried on the shoulders of a male relative around the altar clockwise, putting him down on the stone plinth. He bows to the East and his feet are washed by his woman partner who approaches the *lingam*, drops some pagoda flowers on it, and then pours water on the feet of the *bhakta*. Some water is also poured into the new pot hanging over *Shiva* from which water falls onto the *lingam* drop by drop. This ceremony also occurs at Bikuadag (Rosner, 1966: 188-189).

This swinging in mid-air was earlier done by means of large hooks, 12-18 inches long, piercing the flesh about the loins. The *bhakta* were paraded in this condition before they were hung over the crowd. These wounds healed completely and left no ill effects. The old men regretted the end of these hooks, forbidden by law. Such skewers of iron were also seen in Birmitrapur (Rosner, 1966: 189-190).

On 8th May, 1965, the *bhakta* came to the *mandap danr* under the *bel* tree; the barber shaved their head hair, the Brahman broke their investiture thread and then the barber and the

Brahmin were both paid. Rice and flower were offered as gifts. The *bhakta* who have fulfilled their vow offer a he-goat in sacrifice and the Brahmin is then given a *dhoti* or loin cloth. Finally, a black he-goat is sacrificed near the *charak* posts, the blood offered to *Shiv-Bhuteswara* (Lord of Ghosts and Goblins), the flesh partaken by the *purohit* (Rosner, 1966: 190).

The act of hook-swinging was also recorded by Iyer in 1909 and reprinted in 1987. This account, with all its generalizations is given in full here:

"The custom of swinging as a religious or rather a magical rite was practiced not only in India but in all parts of world, by people in a low state of civilization to ensure good harvest, to secure a good catch of fish, to drive away rain, and to be expiated for suicide by hanging. There are two kinds of hook-swinging, viz., *Garuda Thookkam* (Brahmini kite-swinging) and *Thony Thookkam* (boat-swinging), and the ceremony is performed in fulfillment of a vow to obtain some favour of deity *Kali*, before whose presence this is performed. The performer of the ceremony should bathe early in the morning and be in a state of preparation either for a year or for forty-one days by worshipping the deity *Bhagwati*. He must strictly abstain himself from meat, all kinds of intoxicating liquors, and from association with women. During the morning hours, the performer dresses himself in a garment tucked into the waistband, rubs his body with oil, and is Shampooed particularly on the back; a portion of the flesh in the middle is stretched for the insertion of a hook. He is also taught by his instructor to perform various feats, called *payitta*. This he continues till the festival, when he has to swing in fulfillment of the vow.

"For kite-swinging, a kind of car resting on two axles provided with four wheels is used. On it, there is a horizontal beam resting on two vertical supports. A strong rope tied to a ring attached to the beam is connected with the hook, which passes through the flesh on the back. Over the beam, there is a small roof which is tastefully decorated, and the inside of which is spacious enough for two or three persons to swing at a time. There is a different arrangement in some places: instead of the beam and the supports, there is a small pole, on which rests a horizontal beam provided with a metallic ring at one end. The beam acts as a lever so that one end of it can be either raised or lowered so as to give some rest to the swinger. The rope tied to the ring is

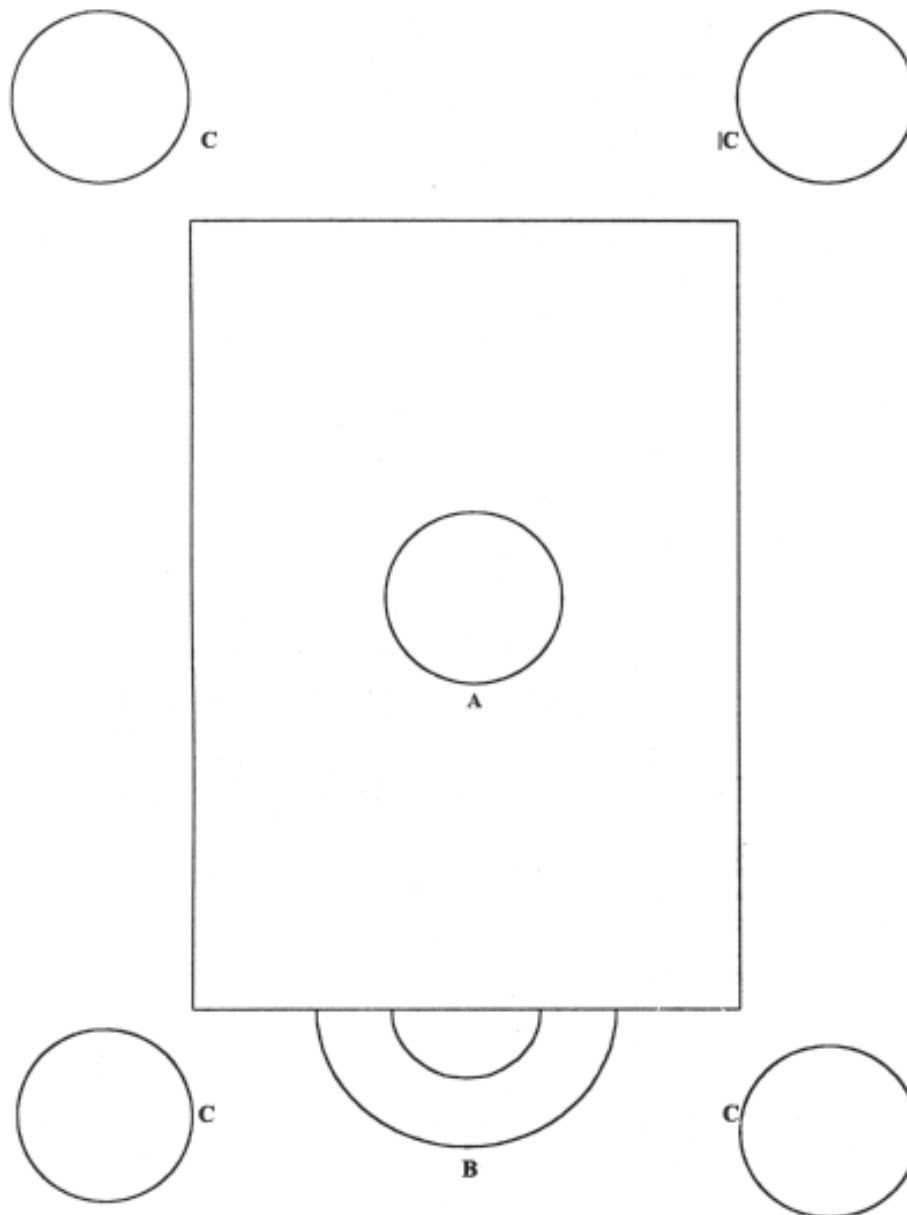


Fig. 1. the *charak* festival zones as mentioned in Chattopadhyay (1935)

- A- A depression in the centre where an earthen pot is kept with Ganges water, infusion of *Cannabis sativa* leaves and with a mango twig dipped in it. A stone phallic image of *Siva* is kept on an earthen dish and kept on the big pot.
- B- A smaller earthen pot is kept here at the projection, smeared with rice flour solution and vermilion outside. It also has a dipped mango twig and a green coconut on top.
- C- Four mud balls are kept at the corners, with bamboo sticks stuck upright on them, palm leaves in their clefts, and threads wrapped around.
- D- Four big earthen pots are kept at the centre and at the four corners of the hut. (after Chattopadhyaya, 1935: 398-399).

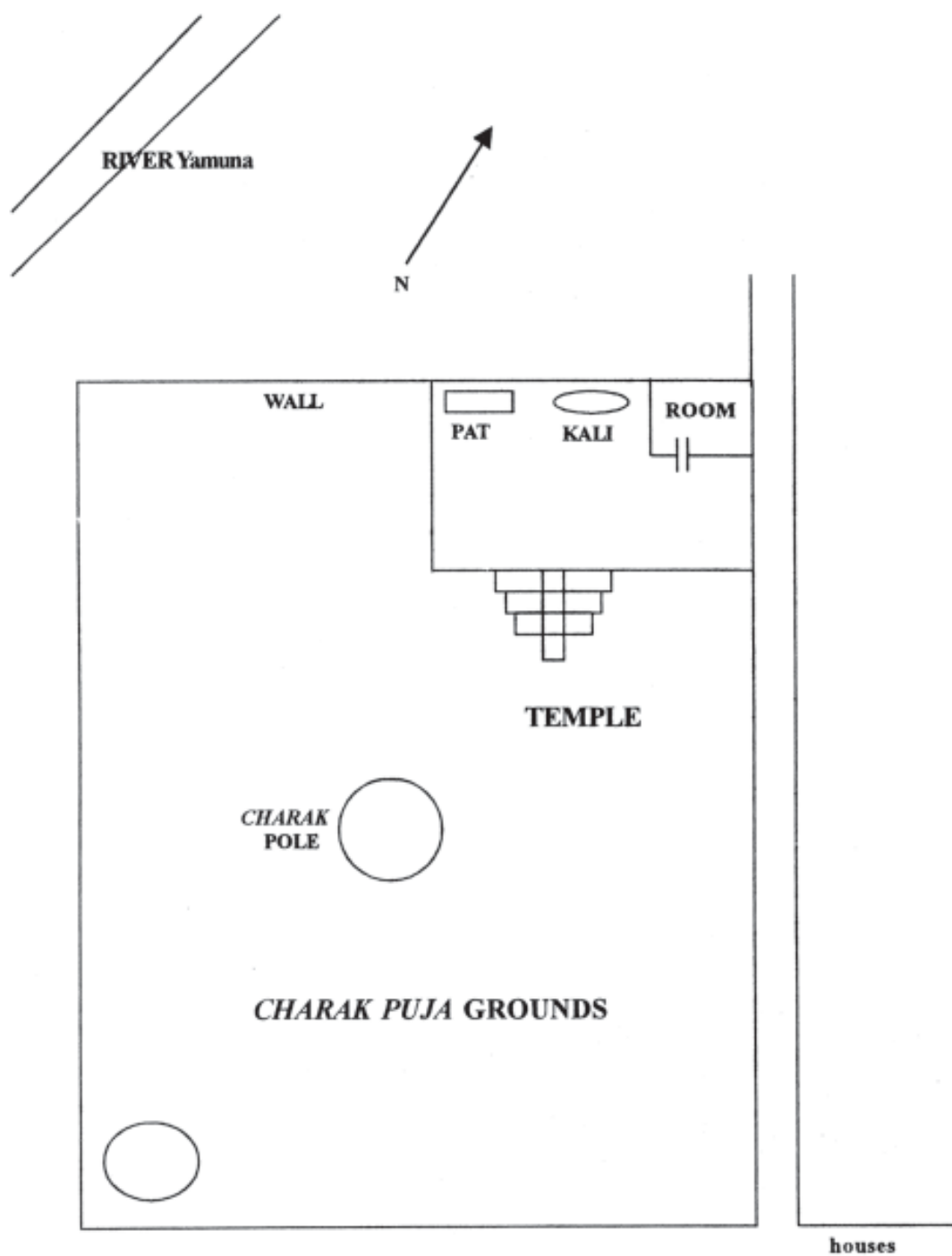


Fig. 2. The *Charak Puja* in Delhi

connected with the hook and the waistband. For boat-swinging, the same kind of vehicle without wheels is in use. For kite-swinging, the performer has his face painted green, and he has to put on artificial lips and wings similar to those of a kite. He wears long locks of hair like those of an actor in a *kadha kali* and the feats are in harmony with the tunes of the musical instrument. As he swings, the car is moved three, five, seven, nine, or eleven times round the temples. In boat swinging, he has to put on the same kind of dress, except the lips and the wings, and there is the covered car without the wheels. It is carried round the temple with the swinger performing his feats on it to the accompaniment of music as above mentioned.

"*Pillayeduthu Thoorkkam* is a kind of swinging with a child by the swinger in the fulfillment of a vow. The child, that has to be swung, is taken to the temple by his parents, who pay to the temple authorities, thirty-four *chakrams* [Travancore coin worth seven pies] in Travancore and sixty-four *puthans* in Cochin [Cochin coin worth ten pies]. The child is then handed over to the swinger who carries the child as he swings. These performances are sometimes made at the expense of the temple, but more generally of persons who make the outlay in fulfillment of a vow. In the latter case, it costs as much as one hundred and fifty rupees for the kite-swinging, but only thirty rupees for the boat-swinging. During the festival, they are fed in the temple owing to their being in a state of vow. It is the Nairs, Kammalans (carpenters, blacksmiths, etc.), Kuruppan, and Izhuvans who perform the swinging in fulfillment of a vow. In the fight between the Goddess Kali and the demon Darika, the latter was completely defeated, and the former, biting him on the back, drank his blood to gratify her feeling of animosity. Hook-swinging symbolizes this incident, and the blood-shed caused by the insertion of hook through the flesh is intended as an offering to the Goddess" (Iyer, 1987: 322-324).

In 1974, Chattopadhyay describes a *Charak* festival which he had observed in Calcutta 'some years ago'. The area was in Central Calcutta, opposite a hospital on the Lower Circular Road. A narrow lane led to the site of a triangular plot belonging to the sons of Late Shashi Bhusan Chatterjee, 'a cartographer and Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society of London'. It was bounded by a wall, had a cemented floor, and an almost dried up Banyan tree, with 'several black, round stones' under its trunk. These symbolized

the Hindu God *Siva*. There used to be a Brahmin priest, (Late) S. Chakrabarty, who worshipped a *Siva Linga* under the Banyan tree. This person then sold it to Shri S. B. Chatterjee. This was told to the author by the son, (Late) M.N. Chatterjee. During the celebrations, the *Siva Linga* was brought from the present family of (Late) S. Chakrabarty. It occurred in the later days of the last week of *Chaitra* (April). The *pujas* were performed at night. The main events included the community organizing the festival, the *sannyasis* participating and the marriage of God *Siva* with *Leelaboti*, the Goddess of Water, a joyous occasions that would enable *Siva* to protect the community from heat, drought and other natural calamities all through the year (1974: 161-162).

Subscriptions are collected by members of the committee in cash or kind. The *sannyasis* selected by the committee were all locals. The *sannyasis* eat once a day after sun-set during the course of festival, having cooked it themselves. They could not take meat, eggs or fish. A *gamcha*, (towel-like cloth) for covering the upper body and a longer piece of cloth dyed yellow (*dhoti*) for covering the lower body was to be used. They slept on a mat on the floor without a pillow for their heads. They may use their *gamcha* for this purpose. They go bare-foot and abstain from sexual activity. Their leader is called the *mul-sannyasi*, who ensured that all the restrictions were followed accurately. The *sannyasis* collected the rice and vegetables from door to door as alms, to the sound of drums. The drummers were hired at Rupees 20 plus one meal, tea and breakfast. The day before the actual ceremony, the *sannyasis* in fours, bathed in the Ganges, wore a yellow *dhoti*, marking their foreheads and chests with sandalwood paste. Except for the *mul-sannyasi*, the others had to provide their own clothing, they wore *paltas* or sacred thread after bathing and returned to the shrine. The idol of *Siva* was carried by the *mul-sannyasi* on his head from the house of (Late) S. Chakrabarty to the place of worship (Chattopadhyay, 1974: 162-163).

At this point, a man is found lying on the floor, face downwards. The *mul-sannyasi* drops a little water on the head of the man from a pot of Ganges water and the man rises up again. This is an act that symbolizes the bringing to life of a dead man by the grace of Lord *Siva*. The *sannyasis* then rest in a tent erected for them. They take a bath very early in the morning and go out begging till noon. The day's collection is given to the

drummers. At 3 p.m. the *jal-sai* or water-cleaning ceremony is conducted in which each *sannyasi* lies on his face and chest on the floor of the shrine. Others with pots of Ganges water, in an anticlockwise direction, in a file, gripping the *dhoti* of those in front. After one round, a little water is dropped on the man's head, he gets up and joins the file while another takes his place. This is repeated four times. A *brahmin* priest chanted *mantras* or spells to the idol and placed four flowers, one for each of the *sannyasis* by name. Each *sannyasi* came forward and sat cross-legged before the idol, putting their hands in front to support their stooping posture; they jerk their heads like hysterics vertically and horizontally till the flower(s) dropped off. The number of flowers is one, two and three on the first, second and third days respectively. Without this, further ceremonies cannot be performed. Some *sannyasis* faint from their exertions. They rest for a while and then continue till the flowers fall from the head of the idol (Chattopadhyay, 1974: 163-164).

Then the jumps take place as follows on three consecutive days:

(a) *Jhul-jnhap* or *Swinging Jump*: Two vertical and one horizontal poles are set up like a goal post in front of the shrine under which a fire was lit with wood chips and cotton. The *sannyasis* stood in line, one behind the other, holding the *dhoti* of the person in front at the waist by the right hand, their left hands on the neck, elbow joints being perpendicular to their bodies, they circle the structure in an anticlockwise direction chanting "O Lord *Siva*! we are going to the *jhul-jnhap*. The flowers have blossomed. *Siva* and *Sivani* are passing, we worship their feet."

The *sannyasis* paid obeisance to the deity. The priest sprinkled holy water with a *bel* twig on them. Then, they climbed the structure. One by one, they swung with their heads down over the fire, arms hanging loosely. Two volunteers helped them to swing rhythmically to the chanting and the drums. Another person kept the fire burning with resin and incense. This went on for 2-3 minutes for each, after which the fire was doused with Ganges water and offerings to the deity were distributed to the *sannyasis*. No other food was allowed to them that night (Chattopadhyay, 1974: 164).

(b) *Kanta-jnhap* or *Thorn-jumping*. Bushes of thorn of *Sun acacia* (*Babla*) were collected by volunteers from nearby areas and put into water for softening. The *sannyasis* show obeisance to the deity, receive holy water from

the priest and move around the thorns thrice as before. In line, as before, they jump one by one on the bush, embracing it with their bellies and then repeating it with their backs. The priest performs the nightly prayers (*arati*) and distributes *prasad*. They felt no pain, nor did they carry any scratch mark on their bodies. The routine was followed as before till noon. A crocodile was prepared with cow-dung by the *sannyasis* at 3 p.m., with cowries for eyes and the dorsal coat with tamarind seeds. This is the symbol of the carrier of *Leelaboti*, the goddess of water, whose marriage ceremony was to be observed the next day. Finally, the *sannyasis* went to the Ganges for a bath (Chattopadhyay, 1974: 164-165).

(c) *Bonti-jnhap* or *Jumping on Knives*: A bamboo framework is constructed of 14'-15' height. The *sannyasis* pray and circle it, reciting *mantras*. Fruits were distributed to the assembled public, who scrambled for them. Nine *Bonties* or fish-knives were supplied by the committee, along with jute rope net and several bundles of straw, which were sanctified by the priest. The net was held below the framework. The straw was placed on the net, and plantain stems with the *bonties* embedded in them were placed on the straw-bundles. The *sannyasis* fell face down on the *bonties*, all being helped out of the net. The *mul-sannyasi* was carried with the net from the tent where he received a sprinkling of Ganges water from the priest before coming out. It is said that the Lord *Siva* protects all his true worshippers from any danger. Later, the *sannyasis* took their food and rested for the night. The drummers collect subscriptions from door to door. The priest worshipped the deity while offerings were given and returned to the respective devotees after keeping a share. The marriage of *Siva* with *Leelaboti* then took place. A stone idol and a picture of Goddess *Durga* or *Ganga* were used. The priest chanted *mantras*, offered a *sari*, a little vermilion, iron bangles, etc. to the Goddess and a *dhoti* (long cloth for wearing around the hips and legs) to the idol, procured by the local committee. He showed obeisance to the picture and after the ceremony these items were taken by the priest. The *Sannyasis* cooked rice and burnt a *Sol* fish. Between 1:30-2:00 a.m., this *sol* fish and the rice was taken by the *sannyasis* and thrown in the nearby tank to the beating of drums. A myth from the *Purana* told by the priest and the *sannyasis* related to the coming into life of the burnt fish. The idol was then carried back the next morning to the house of Chakrabarty. A

bath was taken in the Ganges, the sacred thread and dyed clothes removed. The incidents of the *sol* fish perhaps indicates a belief in "sympathetic magic" (Chattopadhyay, 1974: 165-166).

In the divinatory rite, where the flowers drop from the head of the idol, some years previous to the incident described above, a *sannyasi* called Shyama Chandra Das (25-26 years of age), unintentionally and unconsciously entered a room where a baby was born a day or two earlier. This made him impure. As a result, the flowers did not fall till midnight and on questioning the *sannyasis*, the mistake of Mr. Das was noted, and under the supervision of the priest, he took a bath and swallowed cow-dung, declaring his guilt in front of all and asked for pardon. The flowers dropped immediately after (Chattopadhyay, 1974: 166-167).

A belief also exists that the fruits distributed before a *bonti-jnhap*, if taken by a pregnant woman, then the sufferings of childbirth are not experienced. Such magical beliefs were found to be more associated with the lower castes. Newcomers were mostly neutral, while most of those who had stayed there for a very long time were believers. People from higher castes accepted fruit, water and other food items from the *sannyasis* even if they were of a lower caste since it was believed that their rigours and sacred thread elevated them to a higher status during this period. The community could be divided into "active" (volunteers, committee members, *sannyasis* and priest) and "passive" (donation, subscription, petty advice from the general public). Among those who were "active", two groups could be identified – "participants" (priest and the *sannyasis*) and the "cooperators" (volunteers, committee members). The volunteers were unemployed teenagers, on the whole. The middle-aged men were in the medium strata both socially and economically. They formed the local committee. The patrons were of mixed social positions but higher economically. The *Sannyasis* were from the lowest economic and social strata. A lack of the priest may stop the festival but a lack of the *sannyasis* has led to the transformation of the *Carak* festival into the *Siva-Durga puja*, with the *bonti-jnhap* disappearing in many places. The *Smriti* writers of the 15th-16th century in Bengal like Govindananda and Raghunandana made no mention of the rites related to *Carak puja*. Hence, the transformation of *Carak*, in some cases, to the *Siva-Durga puja* is a Brahminization of the festival, from a magico-religious festival to a more religious one.

Different literary sources also note the fisherman and the lower castes used to conduct big processions in Calcutta who went through the streets caricaturing well-known persons of the community and satirizing modern customs and changes. There is a temporary elevation of the status of the lower strata and this procession forms, perhaps, a vent for the release of socio-religious tensions (Chattopadhyay, 1974: 167-168).

CHARAK IN DELHI: A CASE STUDY

Having received information through a friend that the *Charak* festival was conducted in Delhi also during the end of the Hindu calendar and the beginning of the new year, we decided to attend this festival. *Baisakhi* or the New Year fell on the 13th of April, 2000 of the English calendar this year. A bus brought us to the busy area of the old Kingsway Camp area, very near to the Delhi University. From here other buses, rickshaws or auto-rickshaws on the share basis travel to the outlying regions. By one p.m. we had reached the Sant Nagar area and were trying to locate the colony.

A walk of about ten minutes from the Sant Nagar bus stop brings one to the Bengali Colony in this area. A Bengali who had bought much land in this area set up this colony in this area. He was a high official in the government. He tried to set up the colony and he named it Bengali Colony. In later years, this person left, having sold his land, in bits, to many people. It now has about 25% Bengalis. As a result some people tried to protest against calling it a Bengali Colony. Bus stop markers were defaced and protests were lodged. Others complained to the police and these people were caught. Since then the others have reluctantly accepted this name.

The Bengalis of this colony are from many areas of West Bengal, but they are mainly from the Murshidabad area. A majority are Schedule Castes titled Haldar who were a fishing community. Even now, many of them practice fishing in the Yamuna but the number of canals in this region have made this river sluggish and often with only standing water. Further, pollution in the river also means less fishes. This caste used to practice this festival in their home areas earlier. Over here, the existence of Nadugopal Haldar (aged 67) and his persistent enthusiasm has fired the people to continue this tradition here. The festival began here seven years ago and has continued uninterrupted over this

period.

Since then, there has been a great enthusiasm to get this whole incident filmed by video cameras, or televised through Doordarshan channels. Officers were visited and forms were filled. However, at the correct time, due to one reason or the other, no one turned up to photograph the events during the festival. At present, this has resulted in an uncaring attitude towards the press. Perhaps, our unexpected arrival was a surprise, though photographs had been taken earlier by many of the inhabitants of the colony.

It was a warm day and it was almost one o'clock when we reached the small clearing in the Bengali Colony where this festival is normally held. It has a small temple consisting of a large open area facing the doorway of a rectangular area, and a small ante-room to the right side of the doorway for storing various items required for the various ceremonies. In the open area, to the right, facing the doorway was a statue of the goddess Kali, about 12-14 feet into the room. To its left were placed a rather large number of deities and sacred objects.

We were made welcome and having taken off our shoes went into the temple to sit with the priests and the other devotees. Some were lying on the ground or sitting quietly, in preparation for the events to come. A request was made to a woman and we were soon treated to a glass of *sherbet* made from lemon juice, salt, sugar and water. After a while, we were also given cool glasses of curd, sugar and water (*lassi, ghol*). In the meantime the outer husk of a coconut was used to clean and polish the various hooks and spears to be used during the festival. Hooks are called *borshi* or *kanta*. The long thin rods for sticking into the tongue, face or lips are called *bann*. The ones for sticking into the tongue are called *jib bann*. It was at this stage that we asked about the basic background and the main events of the festival.

We were told that there were no ceremonies for some time and were invited over to the house of an individual in the colony. Again we were plied with soft drinks and after a while to food cooked specially for us. We protested but to no avail. We were repeatedly told of the joy they felt in such visits from others who wished to learn more about the festival and to see it with their own eyes. It also became clear that even though the number of Bengali families staying in the colony was only 25% of the total, all of them participated in the festivals that were held. It was

boasted that no festival was left out also.

Sixteen or seventeen people actually devote themselves at this festival. A further 20-25 persons are devotees. In this connection, it must be remembered that for the purposes of this work, *pujaris* are either Brahmins who are ritually responsible for conducting worship according to the Hindu religion or the main incumbents of the festival like Nadugopal Halder who perform such worship even if from a lower caste. On the other hand, devotees are the other participants of the Charak festival who follow the rituals but do not actually perform the *puja*. These terms are sometimes used interchangeably by the participants. A block of wood consisting of a fairly thick and long log of *safeda* (*Eucalyptus*) was cut at the beginning of the festival seven years ago. Every year, after this festival is over, it is floated off in the Yamuna. It is claimed that every year this log of wood returns back to the same place just before the festival. The log returns without any marks showing its long incarceration in the water like encrustations, splitting, etc. It does not even require to be cleaned. It is, therefore, given the status of a minor deity.

Even as we watched, the log of wood was straightened and its top was kept at the top stair of the temple, its lower part inclining down to the open ground. By three o'clock, men and women came with covered containers and dishes covered with cloth to begin the first part of the ceremony. The top of the wood was cut into a smaller circle of solid wood to fit the cross-piece. Many people carrying water in small containers carefully washed the tree. Then milk was poured and smeared over its entire length. New containers of vermilion were emptied on it. Fresh mustard oil was also smeared all along its length. This part of the ceremony was carried out by about thirty to thirty-five individuals. Some paddy and sugar or *batashas* (round confections of crystalline sugar) were also added to these items as well as some *dubbi* or long grass. In the meantime others proceeded to dig a deep and squarish pit in the centre of the open area. People bent and worshipped this tree after having anointed it with various objects. Incense sticks were lit on and around the log. After a while some men brought the cross-piece and laid it under the pin which would hold it, at the head of the log. The same ceremonies were performed on it also.

Seven days' preparations are required before performing the difficult ceremony. Every day the pattern remains the same, though with some

modifications. They get up early in the morning, bathe in the River Yamuna and change into fresh clothes. They will not eat anything through the day. In the evening a *pūja* or prayers are held. Food is eaten after this. If any food is to be cooked, it is done in the temple precincts, with special utensils.

The food is different on each day. On the first day *dal* (pulses), *chal* (rice) and *subji* (vegetables) are cooked together without *haldi* (turmeric) or oil. On the second day, just dry rotis (unleavened bread made of wheat) are eaten. By the third day the participants stay and eat at the temple. They eat thrice whatever rice or pulses (uncooked) they can hold in one cupped hand each, which is later cooked. On the fourth and fifth days they eat fruits only. A little milk is drunk on the sixth day. On the last two days no food is taken except some *sarbat* (iced drinks). On this last day a *Bhagwat pūja* is held which consists of a *milan* (betrothal) between the Lord Shiva and his consort *Parvati*. According to the priest no one feels hungry until the main event is over. This variation of the *pūja* to Lord Shiva is to the *Bann Raja*, the descendants of *Usha Path Bann*, the teachings of a sect. The entire Hindu pantheon of 36 crore gods are invited to the *shashan* (cremation ground). The name of the specific *pūja* is called *Neel Pūja*. Food is prepared and given to the gods.

At the various ceremonies, people sit to the left according to seniority. This seniority is based on the number of years each has participated at this festival. As a result a father may sit in a junior position to his son. The sequence here was as follows: -

1. Sunil Chakravarti (47 years; *pūjari*).
2. Sukumar Mukherjee (30 years; *pūjari*).
3. Robindranath Haldar (40-45 years; *deuley* or owner).
4. Nadugopal Haldar (67 years; *parichalaki guruji* or organizer/teacher).
5. Chittaranjan Haldar (40 years; *dhup behenga*).
6. Keshto Haldar (50 years; *bhog patra*).
7. Chhidam Haldar (45-50 years; *diler chhadidar* or policing with stick).
8. Dulal Haldar (56 years; *mandaper jyatna* or maintenance of the surroundings of the festival area).
9. Sukumar Haldar (30-35 years).
10. Dulal Haldar (30-35 years).
11. Gopal Haldar (30-35 years).
12. Jiten Haldar (45 years; *bhog patra* number two).
13. Kartik Haldar (42 years).
14. Bimal Haldar (41 years).
15. Nirapada Haldar (42 years; *bhog* or food for the *devatas* or gods can only be cooked by him).
16. Baidyanath Haldar (35 years; bringing water from the River Yamuna).
17. Sanatan Haldar (35 years; bringing water from the River Yamuna).

The two major participants are the last mentioned Sanatan Haldar who had participated twice before. The second was Sukhdev Haldar who had participated four times before this and was aged between 35-40 years. The nights before the festival involve the dressing up of males as females and performing various acts, or 'jokes' or 'play'. There was also a ceremony the night before when the devotees had to roll on the ground over thorny branches.

By five o'clock a crowd was beginning to collect around the open area. A few vendors of ice creams, toys, food items and *prasad* (packets of offerings to the gods) had set up shop. A major problem was the collecting of money, since everyone was so poor. However, all claimed that they had never had an occasion when a lack of funds created tension. In the meantime six long bamboo poles were tied firmly on two sides of the crosspiece as well as on the top and bottom portions. These were laddered.

By five thirty, the priest began his prayers over the 5-6 feet deep pit. He dropped some packets (undisclosed as to contents) into the pit. He poured water from the river on it while praying and uttering incantations. He put vermilion on *pan* leaves and dropped them one by one into the pit. A string was tied around the open area to keep off the spectators and to mark off the sacred area from the profane. To enter it shoes had to be taken off. A group of youth prayed to the gods and then attached the crosspiece to the top of the log. Then, with the help of ropes and bare hands, the log was raised straight up and lowered gently into the pit, the earth being tamped around it to make it stand steadily. A pair of bamboo poles were used like a fork to support it while this procedure was being carried out.

Once the pole was ready, the paraphernalia for prayers and the sacred and religious items required for the ceremony were carried out of the temple and placed at the foot of the pole. A couple of large cylindrical metal containers were also kept here. From now till the end of the ceremonies people would arrive with gifts to the gods. They brought fruits and especially *batashas*. These

batashas were given in polythene bags. A large portion was kept in these large bins. A small amount was returned back to the donor as a *prasad* or a gift of the gods. At intervals, handfuls of *batasha* were scattered among the crowds gathering around the open area. This was known as *hari dan* (the gift of the gods) and picked up eagerly.

As these preparations began the two drummers appeared on the scene and started drumming. The mask of the Goddess Kali kept in the temple was hung up on the pole. A deeply cut inscription heavily stained in vermilion-red could also be seen. It was an invocation to the Goddess Kali. The items kept for prayers included a new pot with *bel* leaves on which a coconut is kept. On this a red towel or *gamchha* was placed with some chrysanthemum flowers on top. A censer for burning incense and coconut husks was also kept. This made the area very smoky as the incense crept into all parts of the area. Iron tridents with garlands of chrysanthemum flowers or the round, wrinkled seeds of *rudraksh* could also be seen. Cut fruits, vermilion, pure water, milk, mustard oil, conchs, incense sticks and a long object with the hooks in it symbolizing the god of the *charak* festival were also kept. Various announcements were made on the microphone, a speaker being hung high up on the roof corner of the temple.

The priests wore *dhotis* and a long cloth wound around their upper torso. Nadugopal Halder wore a saffron-coloured upper garment with religious inscriptions on it. They had *rudraksh* garlands around their necks and in their hands. He squatted on the ground, and a turban made from a red *gamchha* was kept on his head. On this was balanced a smoking censer. In this position, he sat still for some time and meditated. Then he got up and went over to the devotee who had agreed to participate. He was standing in a *lungi* tied around his lower parts and an orange undergarment on his torso. The sides of his cheeks were patted and the inside and outside were held firmly with a *gamchha* to steady it. A long, pointed needle was then skewered through his cheeks. A similar needle was pierced through his other cheek. There were no cries of pain though the cheeks quivered for some time. There was no blood. After a few moments, water was splashed on his face and a chrysanthemum flower was stuck on each of the four points to make them more prominent. In this position, till the end of the ceremonies, the devotee walked around among the people but within the circle.

He was also given a small inch-long twig from a packet by Nadugopal Halder. He refused to disclose the name of the twig. It was kept under the tip of the tongue. It was said that since this ceremony was truly under the tutelage of the gods and showed their power, there were those who were very jealous and wished to do harm to the participants by calling on evil forces or incantations. If such a thing happened, the twig would show signs of restlessness. In such a case, the devotee was advised to gently bite on the twig. As he bit, the perpetrator, no matter how far-off the person might be, would be brought closer and closer until he was brought right within the arena. It also had an ill effect. During the entire ceremony, one could not swallow any saliva, because that might have an ill effect.

Then the second devotee came in. He lay down on the ground exposing his entire back. It was pockmarked with his previous participations. A clear area was selected, the skin on one side was raised, and a long thick hook tied to a piece of rope was stuck through the flap of skin. It was held taut. In the meantime, skin was raised from the other side of his back and another hook was shoved in using the same procedure. They were pulled taut and he then got up. There was no blood. He stood for a while and water was splashed on him. He stood around and walked for a while.

In the meantime, two men had dressed up as women with terrible visages. One carried a red-smeared sword-like implement in one hand while the other had a staff. Both carried plates for collecting alms. The drummers and the cymbal-players followed them around all through the festival.

The devotee with the hooks on his back was then raised and tied with the pieces of rope to the two ropes hanging down from the bamboo tied to the cross-piece of the pole. He was not supported in any way by any other part of his body apart from the hooks in his back. To balance it, two or three people hung from the rope at the other end of the length of bamboo. The bamboo cross-piece was then swung fast and the man swung around with it. This continued for about an hour. In the meantime another woman (Neela Halder) was suddenly caught in a trance and started rolling about on the ground. A group bent about her to hear if she mouthed any words of wisdom at this stage. Just before she became unconscious she did mutter something but it was too low to catch. In about ten minutes or so, she was able to get up and walk off on her own.

The man hung up on hooks is supposed to be in an exalted and pure state by the others. He is an emissary of the gods. He is worshipped and touched frequently by the spectators. Money and food are gifted to him. Children are held up to him and these children are taken around for one full circle by him in the air before being returned to the parent. The amount given to him may vary but for taking the child for one circuit usually means a gift of Rs 101. Others offer fruits and sweets. All of these items are kept in a pouch or fold of the *gamchha* tied tightly around his belly.

Finally, about 7 p.m. the ceremony is at an end. The *gamchha* in his hand holding the wound tightly from both sides, Nadugopal Halder carefully removes first one needle from the mouth of the devotee and then the other. The twig is then spat out and a mixture of pan leaves crushed with sugar and vermillion is applied to the wounds. In a while he starts drinking regular water. This same procedure is used to pick out the hooks from the other devotees' back. In this case, only from one wound were there about four to five drops of blood flowing. From the other wound there was no blood. All of this was done in gaslight since there was an electricity failure and there were no lights. While we waited we were plied with more lemonade in bottles.

Nadugopal Halder was also a practising tantrik of sorts. He had helped to remove a ghost's takeover of a girl. The girl's parents and the girl came regularly for the ceremony. Nadugopal claims that he does not know if he will survive for another year since he suffers from acute asthma and carries an Asthalin inhaler. The people really look up to him. The devotees feel more confident of undergoing the ordeal when he is around and others claim that he brings life to the ceremony. He also claimed that he had started participating in the ceremony in Murshidabad district of West Bengal at the age of five years and has not missed a single year since then.

CONCLUSIONS

Like fire-walking, hook-swinging and other activities that may be included in the ambit of the *Charak* festival are meant to do penance or to undergo and suffer tortures in front of the gods. The gods, seeing signs of this devotion, are then supposed to protect the devotees from pain and actual, permanent damage to the body. At that point the devotee is, so to speak, 'one up' on the gods. He can then ask the gods for favours. The

gods are also supposed to be closer to humans or more alert or in a 'woken up' condition also called *jagroto*. Gods in such a state are ready to perform miracles at will. Little things like the touch of a devotee, or the flowers that he wears are supposed to have tremendous powers to do good or to heal ills.

While in this 'woken up' condition, gods are also likely to do a great deal of harm at the slightest displeasure. They can harm any of the devotees who does not follow the instructions for purity and pollution. The early Britishers understood little of this attitude. While to many these were supposed to be signs of wisdom or awareness of the spiritual side of human beings, the colonials interpreted them as superstitious beliefs that were unseemly and dangerous, worthy of being rooted out.

Bradley-Birt was one such. His descriptions were coloured by this perspective. As a result, he 'feels' that they must have been drugged in order to perform these ordeals. His description of blood flowing freely down the backs of the devotees after the hooks were driven in, while they may not be lies, were perhaps slightly exaggerated. It was a matter of surprise to us to observe that very little blood flows at these proceedings, a fact which is proudly proclaimed as a miracle and a sign of the grace of the gods.

Ram Comul Sen, writing in 1833 is tainted by a similar social conception when he writes of the *Charak* festival. However, he does acknowledge that the festival is performed by all castes, especially those of a lower rank. It is well within the ambit of Hinduism, involving the deity Shiva in its activities. It is not surprising that Lord Shiva and Goddess Kali are involved at these festivals. Both are associated with occult practices also.

This gives a fascinating window into past Hindu culture. The lower castes are allowed in these few festivals to participate as devotees and supplicants, like the Brahmins. Even Muslims participate. It becomes a good way of releasing social tensions. Another aspect of this is the caricaturing of the prominent figures of the period as well as the satirizing of contemporary trends in Calcutta mentioned by Chattopadhyay. The calling up of the ghosts of the ancestors to propitiate them (a practice now dying out or dead) also signifies the addition of secondary symbolic meanings to the root symbol. It is perhaps not the primary or key symbol of the ceremony as proposed by Chattopadhyay. For a moment the participants are granted the powers of godhead. It is due to this that the participants take children

around with them when they swing. All of these things can be seen, in one form or the other, in the festival as observed by us in Delhi.

Religious faith can sometimes lift the consciousness and physiological status of the body to higher levels. As a result, healing quickens, there is very little blood due an excess of adrenalin and people do not feel so much pain. In an earlier era, the British government tried to put a stop to this. It seemed to them unnecessarily cruel and superstitious. In a more enlightened age we cannot yet hope to do so. It would be undemocratic. People volunteer to become devotees. They are not forced to do so. Little actual harm is done. There are also real benefits in healing and the building up of self-confidence. Some people feel free enough in the environment so created to go into a trance. Such people are eagerly listened to for their words of wisdom and advice.

Perhaps, in the past, such events were transferred by word of mouth. This could have resulted in the spread of such practices over a wide area. However, it must be remembered that mortification of the flesh as a part of religious gratification has been a part of a majority of religions. Perhaps, the feelings of pain are sublimated into other channels, which open up new ways of thinking and acceptance, thus leading to healing. These require sophisticated testing with better equipment and a more multi-disciplinary team. What is apparent is that it is, even now, a very popular festival among a majority of people, especially in rural India.

As a result of this popularity two events can happen. The event can look for a greater support, more acceptance and a wider popularity. The background texts for such a move towards universalization are already available. The transformation of the festival into a *Shiva-Durga* one has already been commented on, especially in urban areas. On the other hand, in spite of its popularity it can remain linked closely to local ways of thinking and local mythologies. In such a case it can become even more parochialized. While being stuck in between these two ends, the symbols associated with this festival are open to contestation and a multiplicity of meanings. Other meanings, myths, symbols and cultures

can then be attached or removed from the set of meanings that constitute the key symbols of this festival. As a result of this process, the same festival would have different meanings in different locations, some of which are more important. This is why Chattopadhyay's study need not be wrong. They are different explanations of the same festival separated by time and/or space.

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