

THE LIFE AND AFTER-LIFE OF ORALITY: *KARAM BINTI* AND THE SANTAL IDENTITY

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Lecture at the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich on 13. September 2018

Discovering this story in a book, my theologian and pastor father wrote, as his doctoral thesis, much into my adulthood, stumped me. Until then the only creation story I knew was of Adam and Eve. But I was also a descendant of the geese, from whose eggs the first Santals were born. I felt cheated of my identity, by not knowing this account. How did the Biblical creation tradition become the only narrative for a Santal?

The realization that this telling, retelling and sharing of our traditional stories were not common anymore, more so for families that took on a new or different religion or lived in cities or environments where the oral art form or storytelling was not a living practice, filled me with a sense of loss; a mourning for a knowledge system I did not inhabit or inherit.

But I was not going to resign myself to this reality. I was going to cross over and engage with my culture, negotiate those spaces, inhabit those narratives and live the ideas, philosophies, histories and expressions of my people.

My entry into publishing and cultural documenting was already a crossing over—born out of a threshold I had reached in my lived in experience of marginalization and discrimination, when I realized yet again that Adivasis (indigenous peoples of India) were excluded from national discourses or public forums where ‘Indianness’ was discussed, deliberated upon and projected. Were we not Indian? Or were we not capable of contributing to such conversations or did we simply not matter? We did belong to Another India and making the ‘Other India’ pay attention to us became my goal.

My work became a project of representation and claiming space for our peoples but also a personal journey inwards, into questions of identity and belonging.

One of my many work related wanderings led me to Switzerland, Thomas Kaiser and the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich, which is in possession of a twelve-hour audio recording of my people, my language, my traditions! What really are the odds?

Thomas, very generously, then passes on these audios to me and says ‘these are yours, tell us what we can do with these’? All I say is I’ll let the listening guide me.

But this is no ordinary audio, it is the *Karam Binti*—(roughly translates to prayer, plea or supplication of the karam—which is both a plant and also ordinarily used to imply festival or ceremony). The *Karam Binti* is one of the most pivotal institutions of the Santals, connected with the recitation of ‘... the history of the world from the creation and through the ages.’¹

This is a ritualistic expression, where central to the ceremony is the retelling and recalling of our creation traditions; stringing in narrations of instructions to live—the roles of the subordinate supernatural, spiritual beings, co-existing with the Supreme Being, Thakur Jiv enumerated, who coordinate the work of the formation of the earth and humankind. Maran Buru Bonga, is the emissary of Thakur Jiv to the early human beings; as the first Santal’s guardian and was entrusted with the task of bringing them up as human beings should. Maran Buru Bonga helped the parent geese feeding the human infants and when they grew up he taught them the art of fending for themselves—using their hands and labour to care for and provide for themselves. They were taught carpentry, making the plough, and other

household implements, agriculture and cultivation practices, animal husbandry, home science, health and hygiene, the offering of the first fruits to Thakur Jiv and how to brew rice beer *handi* and when to drink it. When they reached adulthood he led the early man and woman into the union of marriage to ensure the continuity of humanity in this world.

This retelling of the initiation of the early humans into the basic arts of survival and how to live in communion with Thakur Jiv, is a canon for Santal life, and what Thomas very aptly calls a “charter of being human/Santal”.

This musical and theatrical manner of reciting along with the planting of the *karam tree* (*Adinia cordifolia*), is a renewal of our covenant to live sustainably and co-exist harmoniously with all life-forms and its immediate object, is a call for abundance of life, renewal of lifeways and one’s over all well being.

The *Karam-Binti* is performed by knowledge specialists called *Karam Gurus*, traditionally through various significant life events of the Santals—initiation of children as ‘affiliates’ of the Santal society, at weddings, and at funerals with the *Karam* tree signifying regeneration and prosperity. This recitation has through the years dwindled in the varieties of practice, and is now reduced to a special festival, over three days, where the recital lasts all night long, an approximation of 12 or 13 hours.

The listening of the audio filled me with awe and wonder because as a city bred Santal and a Christian, I have not yet witnessed a *Karam Binti* recital, live myself. This audio serves as an interface to filling in some gaps in my identity, just as reading the creation narrative in my father’s book did.

These recordings most importantly stood and stand as a testimony to our tradition of orality—our rhapsodies and epics, recited, sung and performed, the recitalists guarding our History somehow, and the *Karam Binti* particularly stands as ‘the only institutionalized mode of saga transmission that still exists’ through *Karam gurus*.

What is the Life of Orality Then?

What is commonly, simplistically understood is that text is the death of orality. That makes orality a pre-literacy tradition.

But we are still not a literate society, we still have first generation learners and many will not go to school. In school we are not taught in Santali then how do we write in it?

The earliest recorded written literature of Santals began in the last century from the dictation of the very same *karam gurus* to folklorists and missionaries who published their tales. Writing meant having the knowledge and tools to do so but also understanding the significance and the power of the act—recording for posterity. We lacked that skill, we did not write ourselves, and thus we didn’t have the ability to enjoy the written text, gauge it for its value nor challenge what was going down as history. While writing can fix a text, for reuse–re-reading, annotations, it can also be used to manipulate it and change it.

How could the powerless challenge what was going down as history? Adivasis did not need to document their literature, scholarship or culture because we were living documents ourselves.

Our knowledge systems and all it embodies are kept alive through singers, storytellers and family, who in their oration and singing preserve and re-create their community’s idea of

itself. The oral tradition is a distillation of the shared community and corporal experience that gives language and culture meaning.

But the same questions of authenticity arise with traditions of Orality as well. Can that not be manipulated as well, and changed too?

Colonial anthropologist H. H. Risley's entry about the Santals, after his inclusion of an abbreviated version of the Santal creation myth and the traditional history of the Santal migrations said in his book:

"A people whose only means of recording facts consist of tying knots in strings, and who have no bards [!] to hand down a national epic by oral tradition, can hardly be expected to preserve the memory of their past long enough or accurately enough for their accounts of it to possess any historical value."

While his comments would appeal to logic but it has to be viewed in the context of intellectual bias and how Adivasis knowledge systems were, have been and continue to be undervalued and dismissed as unscientific. How are our *Karam Gurus* not bards? Like Homer, blind and poor, used to do in the Greek markets (accompanied by a musician or two) with *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. As those were for the Western world, *Karam Binti* is an ancient source for our literature: in the shared emotions, the reverence and the pedagogy and the simple beauty of the stories and but more powerful in the relevance it has for daily life—instructions for being and living.

What is Rejected as Myth is a Belief System for us

Our oral traditions "blends the material, spiritual and philosophical together into one historical entity, and it would be a clear violation of the culture from which it is derived if well-meaning scholars were to try to demythologize it, in order to give it greater validity in the Western sense of historiography" (Petrone 1990).

Though for the West documentation in the written word helped preserve those magnificent works of *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, you definitively lost something when these stopped being performed anymore in public spaces.

The seeds of doubt on our scholarship, creativity or traditions have been planted so deep, that when we, Adivasis, enter formal educational systems, we imbibe those same standards of judging and testing our own cultural tenets—of what is authentic or not and how much of it is. We too are plagued by these questions and traps of proving who we are. How do we know what is being re-told is still pure? Are we diluting ourselves as Santals by compromising on the efficacy and accuracy of the retelling?

But when we question our elders, they say, you know you are Santals and that is what is important and then what you experience from retellings, recitations, has to be taken in faith. The strength of the oral traditions and its inherent quality lies in the ability to survive through the power of collective memory and renew themselves by incorporating new elements. If we the community, live with, and accept this reality of invention and re-creation of narration as a natural process of life, then no one else should see in this a problem.

In that then, *remembering it*, digging into the depths of memory, becomes and fulfills the purpose both for writing as well as the oral act of telling our stories. Our retelling in either form, depends then on how and what we remember, reminisce and why.

Writing then for us is not the end of orality but a continuation, a co-creation in a new format.

The *Karam binti*, today exists both in the oral form as well as several written forms. That they exist simultaneously and are equally referred to and authoritative today among the Santals, is an acknowledgment of the life forms of Orality, a symbol of continuity of our knowledge systems. It is a parallel existence, at least for now.

The creation story in illustrations, I narrated to you, in the beginning, wasn't one I wrote; I simply recast it from a retelling in another book, which was recorded from another retelling from possibly a *Karam Kuru*. That's how orality changed forms; it looks like a lineal transition, but it's more a cycle—from the recitation to being fixed in book to being illustrated in another format and the life forms it can take are inexhaustible.

My retelling of the creation narrative, in my style, without having to seek permission from the elders, made of me an orator, a storyteller in my own right. That's what orality does to you, it makes you the bearer and custodian of your traditions and cultures, a guardian of your traditional knowledge and allows you to express them in ways you know or want to.

The Afterlife of Orality

We do not know the fate of the *Karam Binti* and the *Karam Gurus* in the future, but what we do know is that this was a tradition of my people and it meant something to our ancestors and honouring it in ways we know now, trying to make it relevant for our people or help them engage with it, is what we can hope to do.

As I turned up the volume on the *Karam Gurus* singings, I realized I was witness to an ancient legacy of passing on culture through stories, ballads and music. But I sat in isolation, listening to their voices, modulate, intonate, recount, chant and perform the creation scenes, through the speaker of my ear-phones, recreating in my imagination how it must be to sit with an audience—participants, who would imbibe the aura that is generated when our ancestral ways are delivered. Was this an authentic experience?

The oral transmission of a story is by definition a communal event as is the *Karam Binti*. What would happen when we don't have the luxury of a community retelling immersion experience?

But if this how a contemporary, formally educated Santal or one alienated from home, would be engaging with history and traditions—through tools of modernity and technology like an audio recoding or a book, we have to embrace it.

Many of us will still need to read aloud to our brethren—those who will still not know reading and writing and in that revive a new kind of orality, from one that originates in text.

When I've taken my books to fairs, most passing by the stall couldn't read but they could clearly tell the books were about them, about us, for them, for us.

The experience of having them flip through our illustrated books was an indescribable moment for me. I was treated to storytelling sessions of books I recast on paper, from people who couldn't read. Through the images and illustrations in the books they were able to identify characters and recall the creation stories they grew up hearing and telling and narrated it to me. In that moment we connected as descendants of the geese and thanked the tortoise for holding up the earth that has sustained us for generations. We were lost in time, space, saga, and reality. This was the power and passion of orality, originating in images.

We shared a language and a heritage. We shared memory. It didn't matter that I was a city bred Santal or that we didn't know each other personally.

Many of us will have to share our ear-phones, or organize public transmissions of these recordings, perhaps, for those of us who can't negotiate technology nor have access to it.

But most critically, we will need to know that such narratives and traditions exist in the first place. In that lies the responsibility of opening channels of information and platforms for the existence and continuation of Orality—and the *Karam Binti*.

This has to be an intentional and purposeful act, coming from a place of love for our collective and shared histories and heritages.

The Adivasi are being exposed to new methods of expression and documentation and using them either as a substitute or to supplement our traditional ways and we need to consolidate our efforts to magnify the impact of visibility and access. Our hopes are to memorialize and not necessarily immortalize.

There is a 9 part YouTube video series of the *Karam Binti* from early 2017. This version is a new treatment of it, where through puppetry the *Karam Binti* is performed, the *Karam Guru's* voices, accompanied by music. The almost life size puppets dress not in Santal attire but like the dominant castes and classes, their act takes places in front of Taj Mahal background. You can roll your eyes for sure but can anyone tell them this is not pure or authentic? Santal identity imbibes concurrent narratives, multilayered realities and multi-dimensional expressions of that.

We don't know if our traditions will survive the digital era, or how they will be in the distant future. What we know is that the more options available to us to articulate our cultural, political, social histories and realities, the more possibilities there lie of us being in circulation and being linked to our heritage. What no one can take away from us is that we are a part of this distinctive, ancestral tradition of orality, and that the traditions originate and emanate from us.

Culture has been lost for many reasons and not having a script or not being literate are not the only impelling ones. Land grab and displacement, making economic refugees of us in new environments, causes lifestyles changing, which in turn causes loss of language and with it, loss of culture.

If audio recordings and videos are all we have to connect us to our identities, what happens when what they say to us becomes gibberish, unintelligible sounds, because we don't speak the language anymore?

How do peoples of orality maintain their cultures when the essence of that tradition is not oral anymore? Is language revitalization one of the solutions to securing orality?

The life of orality is in its imbibing new forms—as a natural course of existence or to survive. As for the afterlife of Orality; we don't know what we don't know.

We just hope we will be able to answer questions of 'how we will recognize we're Santal, when everything that makes us so is taken away us from or is gone. How will our ancestors recognize us as Santals and how will the next generations recognize us and themselves as Santals?'

When I asked my parents why they didn't tell my siblings and me the Santal creation stories, they grew up on, within a tradition of telling, listening and telling; giving, receiving and giving, several times over, they quipped: "We're not *Karam Gurus*".

If nothing, I perhaps got my way with words from them—The gift of orality.

References and Notes

1. P. O. Bodding. 1994. *Traditions and Institutions of the Santals*. (New Delhi: Bahumukhi Prakashan). (First published 1942. Oslo: Oslo Ethnographical Museum Bulletin: 6.).
2. Herbert Hope Risley. (1981 [1891]) *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*. (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press).
3. Penny Petrone. 1990. *Native Literature in Canada: From the Oral tradition to the Present*. (Toronto: Oxford University Press).