

Karma Festival of the Banjara Tribe in Bargarh District, Odisha: A Celebration of Faith and Rituals

Ramesh Naik

Research scholar

P.G. Department of History

Sambalpur University, Jyoti Vihar, Burla

Abstract

This present paper is based on the Karma Festival of the Banjara tribal community in Odisha, with special reference to the Bargarh district. India is home to many tribal cultures, and the Banjara tribe is one of the largest in the country. In Odisha, there are 64 Tribal groups found. Among them, the Banjara Tribe is the most important. The community migrated from different regions like Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Gujrat, Telangana, Rajasthan and settled in the different district in Odisha. They had a unique cultural identity from other tribal groups in Odisha. Festivals play an important role in their social life, with the Karma Festival being significant. It is celebrated every year on the Ekadashi tithi (eleventh day) of the lunar fortnight in Bhadraba or Bhado (August-September). This harvest festival is dedicated to Karma or Karam Devta (Karamsani). A series of activities and rituals marks the festival, such as worship, dancing, storytelling, folklore, sacrifices, and reverence for ancestors. This study explores how the Banjara community fosters social unity through their everyday traditions and practices. This study focuses on the Karma Festival celebrated by the Banjara community in Bargarh District, Odisha, offering a symbolic interpretation of the event. It provides a deeper understanding of the tribe's traditions and belief systems, shedding light on the rich cultural legacy that is showcased during this important festival. For the Banjara people, the Karma festival is not merely a celebration but a vital expression of their long-standing customs and traditions.

Keywords: Karma, Karam, Banjara, Tribal, Bhadraba, Devta

Introduction

Festivals are an important part of the cultural life of Bargarh district of Western Odisha. It is also an integral part of human society, serving as expressions of cultural identity, religious beliefs, and social unity. They mark important occasions in the calendar be it seasonal changes, historical events, or spiritual

milestones and are celebrated with joy, devotion, and togetherness. The festivals bring people together, offering a break from daily routines and strengthening community bonds through shared rituals, music, dance, food, and storytelling. Odisha, in particular, offers a vibrant tapestry of festivals that not only celebrate religious devotion but also honor nature, agriculture, and local heritage, making them a vital part of the state's cultural fabric.

A festival is an occasion that reinforces the presence of God in the life of an individual and their family, while also strengthening their bond with the wider community. It serves as a reminder of spiritual values, cultural heritage, and shared traditions. Festivals are not only about religious devotion but also about fun, enjoyment, and social harmony. They are celebrated by specific religious groups, sub-groups, tribes, or communities, though some festivals transcend these boundaries and are observed more broadly. Whether rooted in faith, nature, or cultural history, festivals play a vital role in enriching human life and fostering unity among people. **(R. D, Tribhuwan, et.al: 2003)**

Odisha is known as a land of festivals. There is a local saying, "Bara Masare Tera Parba," which means "thirteen festivals in twelve months." This shows how many festivals are celebrated throughout the year. These festivals are different in each community from tribal and semi-tribal groups to people in towns and cities. They are important not just for fun, but also for keeping traditions and customs alive and helping people live together in harmony.

The Karma festival plays a crucial role in preserving the Banjara tribe's culture and identity. This study explores how the Banjara people foster stronger community bonds through their everyday practices. The research draws on both primary data collected from interviews, observations, and focus group discussions, and secondary data from books, libraries, and government archives. By interpreting the actions of the people through the symbols they use and decoding these within their cultural context, the study highlights the depth of the Banjara tribe's cultural practices and their importance in Indian society. This festival is observed in the different villages (Tanda) in the district likes Khuntapali Tanda, Patharla Tanda, Pandaripani Tanda, Bhukia Tanda, Dangabahal Tanda, Kalangapali Tanda, Kamalpadar Tanda, Kanekbira Tanda, Mahulpali Tanda etc.

India has a rich cultural heritage that has developed over time. Festivals are celebrated all over the world, and each country has its own special traditions. Karam, also known as Karma, is a harvest festival. The Karam festival is also celebrated by various communities such as Banjara, Munda, Ho, Oraon, Bagal, Baiga, Binjhari, Binjhal, Bhumij, Kharia, Kudmi, Karmali, Lohra, Korwa, and others in several Indian states, including Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Assam, and Odisha, and in Bangladesh. It honors Karam-Devta (the God of power, youth, and vitality), seeking

blessings for a good harvest and health. The festival takes place on the 11th day of the full moon (Purnima) in the Hindu month of Bhado, which falls between August and September. Unmarried girls observe a fast and grow seedlings for 7 to 9 days. On the following day, groups of young villagers go to the forest to gather wood, fruits, and flowers for the Karam God's worship. During this time, people come together to sing, dance, and celebrate. The entire community joins in rhythm to the beat of drums, marking the "day of the phases."

Study Area

Bargarh, located in the western part of Odisha, is known for its rich cultural heritage. Before 1992, it was part of the Sambalpur district, becoming an independent district on April 1, 1993. The district is named after its headquarters, Bargarh town, which sits on the left bank of the Jira River. The town is situated on National Highway No. 6, around 59 km west of Sambalpur. Bargarh is bordered by Chhattisgarh to the north, Sambalpur to the east, Balangir and Subarnapur to the south, and Nuapada to the west. Historically, the area was known as "Baghar Kota," as noted in an 11th-century inscription (DSR 2019). The name "Bargarh" is believed to have originated during the reign of Balaram Dev, the Chauhan Raja of Sambalpur, who established it as his first headquarters and built a large fort for defense along the Jira River (N. K. Sahu et.al: 2021).

Bargarh district lies in the westernmost region of the state, between latitudes 20°43' to 21°41' N and longitudes 82°39' to 83°58' E. It shares borders with Chhattisgarh to the north and Nuapada district to the east. Major rivers like the Ong (Ang), Jira, and Jhaun, which are tributaries of the Mahanadi, flow through the district. Natural springs at Nrusinghanath, located at the foot of the Gandhamardhan Hills in the Padampur subdivision, create beautiful streams cascading down steep slopes. Bargarh district has two main hill ranges like Barapahada in the Bargarh subdivision and Gandhamardan in the Padampur subdivision. Barapahada covers an area of 777 square kilometers and reaches a height of 2,267 feet (691 meters) at its highest point, Debrigarh. Narsinghnath is part of the Gandhamardan hill range, which runs along the southern border of the former Borasambar Zamindari and separates it from Balangir district. On the Gandhamardan hill ranges, there are rock structures that look like walls. These might be remains from the Megalithic culture. Locally, these wall-like rock formations are known as "Bhojagardh." They are believed to have been built by Bhojaraj Deo, the fifth Chauhan king of Patna, who ruled around 1430 to 1455 (A. D. M. J. P. S. Deo). The district covers an area of 5,837 km² of which 269.329 km² is covered by forests. Agriculture is the main livelihood for the tribal population, although they also depend on forest resources for various needs.

The Mahanadi is the main river of Western Odisha. In Bargarh district, its major tributaries are the Jhaun and Jira rivers, which flow through the Bargarh plains and join the Mahanadi near Baipur and Turum in the Bheden block. The Danta River is a major tributary of the Jira and meets it at Bheden. Then, the Jira joins the Mahanadi near Bramhan Turum. Similarly, the Ong (also called Ang) River originates in Nuapada district and enters Bargarh district at the southwestern corner of Borasambar. It flows in a wide semicircle from west to east and exits the district near Gaisilet. Finally, the Ong River joins the Mahanadi in Subarnapur district.

The Bargarh district is divided into two Sub-Division like Padmapur and Bargarh and again it is divided into 12 blocks and Tahsils (Paikamal, Padmapur, Sohela, Barapali, Bheden, Bargarh, Bhatli, Attabira, Gaisilet, Bijepur, Ambhabana, and Jharbandh). Each and every block and Tahsil have Banjara settlement or village. More than 80 Banjara villages are found in the district with their unique cultural identity likes: Sandi, Sakri, Bijadihi, Kamalpadar, Kalangapali, Jharmunda, Sujia, Padhanpali, Kanekbira, Dangbahal, Khuntapali, Patharla, Latiapur etc.

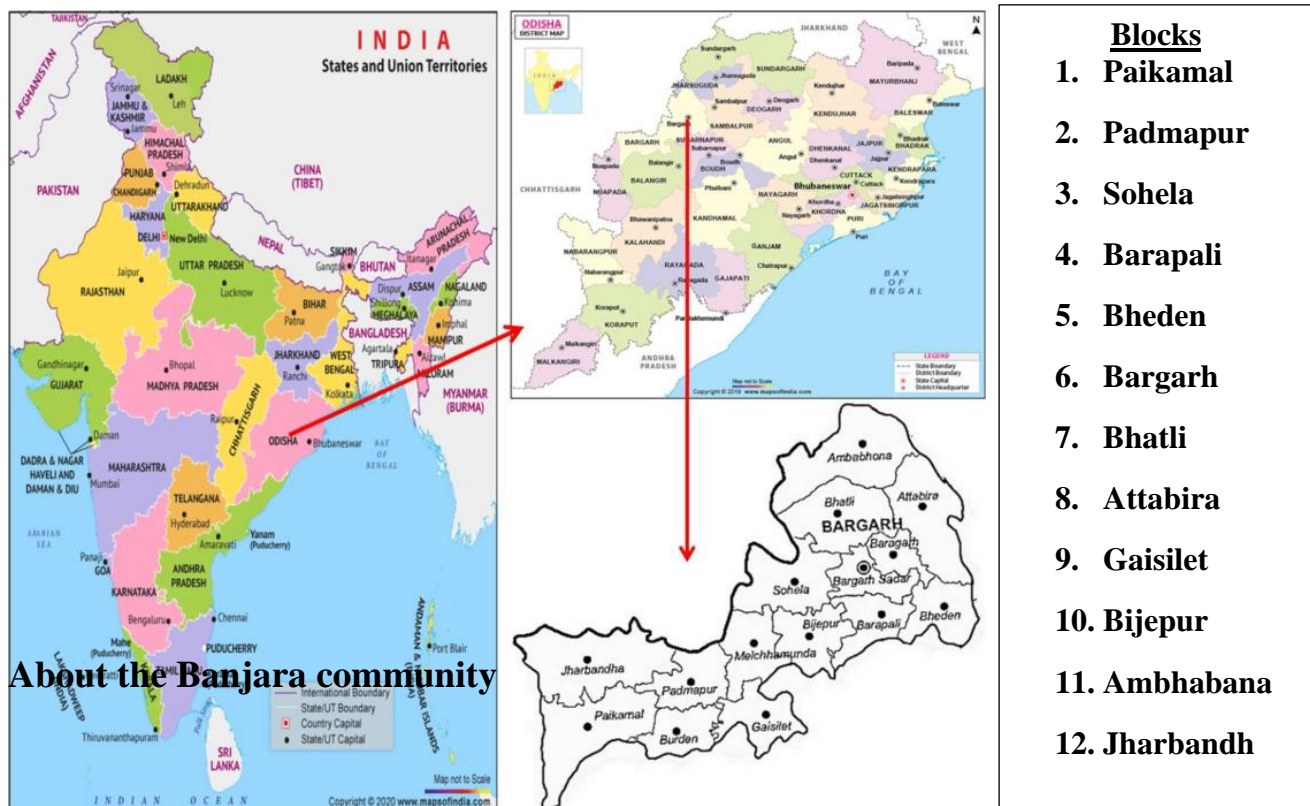


Fig. 1: Map of the Study Area

In Odisha, there are 64 tribal communities and in Western Odisha, there are 44 tribal communities

found. Among them the Banjara is one of the most important tribal groups found in the different districts of the state. They have a unique cultural tradition and identity in across the country. The Banjara, also known as Banjari, is a nomadic tribe recognized as a Scheduled Tribe (ST) under the ST list of Odisha, listed at Sl. 03. Traditionally, they are carriers and drivers of pack-bullocks. Originating from Rajasthan and migrating through Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, and Bihar, their primary population is found in the southwestern region of Odisha, especially in the areas of Bargarh, Balangir, Nuapada, Kalahandi, Nawarangpur, Sundargarh etc.

The word "Banjara" is derived from the Sanskrit term *Vana Chara*, which means "wanderers of the jungle." It is also thought to come from the words *van* (forest) and *Jara* (go to the jungle), (Naik, D. B.:2000) reflecting their nomadic lifestyle as they migrated from place to place for trade. The Banjara people have settled in various districts of Odisha, including Bargarh, Sundargarh, Nawarangpur, Nuapada, Kalahandi, and Balangir. They originally migrated from regions such as Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Telangana, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, and Marwar (M. Choudhary: 2018). The Banjara community stands out among Odisha's tribal groups due to their unique traditions. While they traditionally spoke the Gor Bali language, today they speak local languages such as Hindi, Odia, Telugu, Gujarati, Marathi, and others, depending on their settlement. Known for their rich cultural heritage and vibrant traditions, the Banjara community has long been an essential part of India's diverse social fabric. In Western Odisha, where they have lived for generations, modernization has brought notable changes to their traditional way of life. This article examines the effects of modernization on Banjara traditions, the challenges they face, and their ongoing efforts to preserve their cultural identity.

The Banjaras, once known as nomadic traders, have established communities in various parts of Western Odisha, including districts such as Bargarh, Balangir, Sambalpur, Kalahandi, Nuapada, and Sundargarh (Panda, G.: 2021). They live in distinct settlements called Tandas, where they maintain a unique way of life specific to certain regions. The Banjara people have their own culture, customs, and religious practices that distinguish them from other tribal communities in both Odisha and Western Odisha. Over time, their lifestyle has shifted from nomadic trading to settled agriculture and labor-intensive work. Tribal modernization refers to the change in traditional roles and lifestyles within tribal communities, introducing new values and practices that help individuals and groups adapt to modern social structures and norms.

Objectives of the Study

- To know about the Banjara Tribal Community in Bargarh District, Odisha.

- To know about the cultural activities of the community.
- To know about the festivals of this community and how its impact on social life.
- Briefly know about the karma Puja of the community in the region.
- To identified how the community prepare the festival among themselves.
- To growth their cultural identity in the Bargarh district as well as in Odisha.
- To know how they preserve their cultural identity in Modern times.

Research Methodology

For this study, the researcher visited each tanda or settlement to collect data about festivals. In this regard, the researcher met with the Karta, Deheri, and other family members of the households and discussed the cultural festivals with them. The primary data was collected using methods such as in-depth interviews, schedules, observations, surveys, and case studies. The interview questions covered different aspects of festivals, including their history, significance, rituals, special foods and their preparation, folk music, dance, and musical instruments. Secondary data was collected from articles and academic journals. Both random sampling and purposive sampling techniques were used in this study.

The Karma Festival

Festivals play an important role in the community's social and cultural life. The Banjara community celebrates festivals like Teej in the month of Shraavan, and the Karma festival is celebrated on the Ekadashi tithi (eleventh day) of the lunar fortnight in Bhadraba or Bhado. Besides the Teej and Karma festivals, the Banjara community also celebrates Dasahara, Diwali, Holi, and Puspuni. A series of activities and rituals elaborately marks the festival, such as worship, dancing, storytelling, folklore, sacrifices, and reverence for ancestors.

The Karma, also known as Karam, is a harvest festival celebrated by the Banjara community of the Bargarh district in western Odisha. It is both a communal and household festival. The celebrations occur during the bright fortnight of the month of Bhadraba (August-September), coinciding with the rainy season (Behera, L.: 2017).

The festival integrates three key components: rituals, dances, and songs. Central to the ritual is the worship of the Karam or Kadamba tree, an indigenous Indian tree of immense cultural significance. The Kadamba tree or Karamsani tree, renowned for its shady canopy and blossoms during the rainy season, holds a prominent place in Indian epics and Puranas. It features prominently in the Krishna legend, where Krishna and Radha revered it as their meeting place, adorning themselves with its flowers. Over time, the Kadamba flower has become a symbol of love in Indian poetry and culture.

The ritual worship of the Karam tree during the festival is accompanied by dances of varied formations and a rich variety of songs. The Karma festival is a complex cultural institution. Understanding its evolution requires an analysis of its three elements rituals, dances, and songs alongside their geographical and ethnic distribution. This examination sheds light on how the ritual has transformed over time, how the dances have grown more elaborate, and how the songs have developed deeper ties to the festival.

The festival day is marked by joy and excitement. In the morning, families clean and decorate their homes, preparing a special traditional breakfast called Chhilka Roti, made from a liquid mixture of rice and lentils, accompanied by vegetables. Unmarried girls observe a fast, while the village men, along with the Pahan (priest), Pujari, and Panbhora (helpers of the Pahan), proceed to the forest with musical instruments like the Mandar and Nagada, singing and dancing along the way.

In the forest, they carefully select a Karam tree that has not been previously worshipped. After performing a ceremonial worship, they cut three branches from the tree and return to the Akhra—a communal gathering space—with the Mandar, the Karam branches, and more singing and dancing. At the Akhra, the ground is prepared with a layer of cow dung, followed by rituals that place the Karam branch at the center for worship. After completing these ceremonies, everyone heads home to prepare for the evening festivities. During the evening rituals, women don the traditional Laal Phat Saree with a white base and red border, while men wear a white cotton dhoti, an undershirt (banyan), and a white cotton towel (gamcha) embroidered along the edges. Before the journey to the Akhra, the senior woman of the household performs a sacred ritual.

Observing the Karma Festival

The Karam festival in deferent blocks of the Bargarh District particularly the Banjara villages (Banjara Settlement) like Khuntapali Tanda, Kanekbira, Kamalpadar, Dangbahal, Pandaripani, etc. are celebrated in a simple way. In the district more than 80 villages found. Among them most of the village or settlement celebrated the festival and supported by the whole village people in peaceful manner. Before festivals all the items which is used during the festivals are collected from different parts based on the Pujari or devotee itself performed the festival. It starts on the eleventh day of the bright half of the month of Bhado (Bhadra Month). On the first day of the Puja, at first devotee use seven things in sand like Mung, Dhan, Gaham, Surso, Mandia, Chana, Tali. Then the relatives and devotee performed Jua Jamai of the whole night. On the day of Karamsani or Karma Puja, devotee take rituals bath in the evening and going to take Karam tree or branch which is already put in a place because the unavailable of the tree in

local area. At that place devotee worship the tree and take to his native worship place along with their relatives with musical instruments like Nagara, Mandal. In this festival all the relatives and the villagers support and help in each and every field. The devotee is worshipping this festival for their Manashik and they believed on the Devta or God. The items which are used in this festival likes Liya (Fried rice), rice, Nadia (Coconut) fruits and flowers.

The Karma festival has several parts. The main part is a ritual where a Karamsani branch is placed in the middle of the festival area. The branch represents Goddess Karamsani, and she is worshipped in this form. The community priest or devotee itself leads the prayers, followed by a song of devotion:

Dhok Che Yaadi Karamsani

Tar Charne Me Karrechhu Guhari

Translation in Odia:

Juhar Go Maa Karamsani

Tor Pade Karuchhu Daini

Go Maa Karamsani

Tor Pade Karuchhu Daini

Translation in English:

Hail to you, Mother Karamsani

We bow at your feet

and offer our prayers.

The second part is singing and dancing. The Banjara and their neighbors take part in the music and dance, which continue all through the night. The festival is purely based on faith of the devotee. The devotee's name Nirakar Naik and his wife Uma Naik from Bijepur block of the district performed since last 5 years and his parents performed last 20 years. All the Banjara in every block of the district performed this puja and also non-Banjara people of tribal groups also performed this festival in Odisha like, Binjhal. The community also performed other festivals also but it is the most important among all festivals likes Holi, Diwali, Teej, Puspuni etc. The Banjara community celebrates the Karam festival with great emphasis. The key steps of the ritual are as follows:

- ❖ Cutting three branches of the Karam tree, referred to as Karam Raja.
- ❖ Carrying the branches to the village dancing ground with dance and music.
- ❖ Dancing and singing throughout the night.
- ❖ Garlanding the branches, the next morning while reciting the Karam legend.
- ❖ Offering flowers, rice, and curds to the branches.

- ❖ Placing red Karam baskets filled with grain in front of the branches and distributing ceremonially nurtured barley seedlings among the boys and girls, who tuck the yellow blades into their hair.
- ❖ Women lift the branches, carry them through the village, and immerse them in a nearby stream.

Karma Dance

The second part of the celebration is singing and dancing. The Banjara and their neighbors take part in the music and dance, which continue all through the night. The Karma dance is more popular and widely practiced than the Karma ritual. Even in areas where the ritual is not known, the Karma dance, in all its forms, is performed energetically. It is danced throughout the year, on any important occasion, whether in winter or summer, on moonlit nights, or even on dark nights lit by small fires around which young boys and girls dance. It is the main dance of the tribal people in these regions, and their social and romantic lives are deeply influenced by these nighttime celebrations. The dance rhythmically to the beats of drums and folk instruments like the Nagara, Mandar and Dhol.

Karma Songs

The Karma festival song is Sung during the Karma Puja, a festival dedicated to the Karamasani deity, these songs reflect themes of nature, fertility, social harmony, and devotion. Accompanied by rhythmic drumming and traditional dance, the lyrics often narrate mythological tales, agrarian cycles, and communal bonding, emphasizing the importance of trees and nature in sustaining life. The songs are performed in a call-and-response pattern, creating a lively and interactive atmosphere. This oral tradition not only preserves indigenous heritage but also fosters a sense of identity and collective belonging among the tribal communities of Odisha. Karma songs can be classified as follows:

- Songs dedicated to Karam Devta or God, celebrating and glorifying the ritual.
- Love songs that describe both marital and extra-marital love.
- Songs that relate to village gossip or record important events in the history of the village or tribe. These songs may also feature prominent individuals as subjects.
- Unmarried women are carried the Kalas on their head in the Kalas Jatra with chanting Karamsani song.

Rituals Bath

At the end of the Karma festival celebration, a ritual bath is performed as a symbolic act of purification and renewal. This ritual holds deep cultural and spiritual significance among tribal

communities. After days of worship, music, dance, and communal feasting, participants gather often near a river, stream, or other water source, to take part in the cleansing bath. It is believed that this ritual washes away all negativity, fatigue, and impurities gathered during the festivities, allowing individuals to return to everyday life with a sense of freshness and spiritual balance. The ritual bath also reinforces unity among community members, as it is often performed collectively, marking the peaceful and harmonious end to the celebrations.

Conclusion

The celebration of the Karma festival, as described above, highlights the deep connection between the Oraon community and their natural environment and agricultural practices. The festival is an expression of gratitude and hope for a bountiful harvest and a prosperous life. It also serves as a much-needed break from the routine of daily life, offering moments of joy and communal bonding. The diverse rituals performed during the festival carry profound symbolic significance, functioning as a means to promote mental and physical well-being. They provide the community with tools to cope with emotions such as fear, anger, and greed while fostering a sense of purpose and spiritual fulfillment. Devotion to these rituals is believed to invoke the protection of deities, revered as guardians of the people, their land, and resources.



Fig: 2 Karam Tree worship



Fig: 3 Beda Bulia

**Fig: 4 Prepare the rituals****Fig: 5 worship Karam Devta**

References

1. Behera, L. (2017). *Major Festivals of Mayurbhanj*. The Researchers' International Research Journal.
2. Bhagat, N. (2017). *Chhotanagpur ke Oraon Reeti-Riwaj*. Jharkhand Jharokha.
3. Bhukya, B. (2010). *Subjugated nomads: The Lambadas under the rule of the Nizams*. Orient Black Swan, Hyderabad.
4. Choudhary, M. (2018). *Trade, transport and Tanda: Shifting identities of the Banjaras*. Manohar Publisher.
5. District Administration Bargarh, Odisha. (2019). *District survey report (DSR) of Bargarh district, Odisha on sand mining/river bed mining* (p. 3). Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change (MoEF & CC), Government of India.
6. Ghosh, A. (2003). *History and Culture of the Oraon Tribe: Some Aspects of Their Social Life*. Manohar Publications.
7. Mahanand, A. (2015). *Performing rituals, performing identity: The Karma festival of the Binjhals*. An International Refereed e-Journal of Literary Explorations, 3(2), 107. ISSN 2320-6101.
8. Naik, B. C. (1998). *Banjara charitra samskruthi-pragathi*. Hathiram Bhavaji Publication, Tirumala, Andhra Pradesh.
9. Naik, D. B. (2000). *The art and literature of Banjara Lambanis: A socio-cultural study*. Abhinav Publications, New Delhi.

10. Panda, G. (2021). *Banjara tribe of Kalahandi: Culture, rituals, and religion*. Delta Book World, Bhubaneswar.
11. Ranjan, M. (2021). *Jharkhand Public Service Commission Prelim Exams Comprehensive Guide Paper* (p. 50). Prabhat Prakashan. ISBN 978-9390906321.
12. Roy, S. C. (1915). *The Oraons of Chota Nagpur: Their History, Economic Life, and Social Organization*. Abhijeet Publications.
13. Roy, S. C. (1928). *Oraon Religion and Customs*. Gyan Publishing House.
14. Sahu, N. K., Mishra, P. K., & Sahu, J. K. (2021). *History of Odisha* (p. 249). Nalanda Binod Bihari.
15. Singh, S., & Pandey, K. (2024). *Festival and its symbolic interpretation: An anthropological study of the Karma festival of the Oraons in Ranchi District of Jharkhand*. *International Journal of Humanities Social Science and Management (IJHSSM)*, 4(4), 606-616.
16. Tribhuwan, R. D., & Tribhuwan, P. K. (2003). *An Introduction to Tribal Fairs and Festivals: Theoretical Consideration*. *Fairs and Festivals of Indian Tribes, New Delhi*, 3-8.
17. Vidyarthi, L. P. (1981). *A Socio-Cultural Profile of the Oran of Chotanagpur*. *Collegium Anthropologicum*, 5(1), 3-19.
