

## CHAPTER 9

### FESTIVALS

THE two great village festivals take place in the spring and after the harvest. The name of the former, *Baha*, means "Flower festival". It is held after the full moon in the month of *Phalgun* (February-March). The hot season is about to begin, sap is rising in the trees, and the *sarjom* is resplendent with blossom and tender green leaves. Until the festival has taken place the women do not gather the *matkom* blossoms which provide them with both food and drink. It is held on different days in different villages so that the celebrations can be accompanied by a round of visits to relatives. The opening day of all festivals is a day of purification, known as "bathing day". On this day at the time of the Spring festival two temporary sheds are put up in the sacred grove and the young men carry out a hunt in the woods near the village. The priest completes his preparations and bathes certain articles in the waters of the village tank. At sunset three hens are taken to his house by the villagers, who remain there to dance. Three of the young men become spirit-possessed. One impersonates the "Five", another the Old Lady of the Sacred Grove, and the third takes the part of *Maran Buru*; they seize the implements which the priest has purified earlier in the day and make play with them. The priest receives them with respect; he washes their legs and, addressing the spirits, he asks for good fortune during the coming year. When this is over the young men are recalled to their senses by a series of sharp taps on their backs. Dancing is continued throughout the night in the village street just outside the priest's house.

In the early afternoon of the following day the priest is accompanied by the villagers in a singing procession to the sacred grove. On arrival there the same young men are again possessed and run away across the fields, being chased and brought back by the rest of the young men. The priest now assumes an attitude of great humility towards them. He receives them with a cloth tied round his neck in token of the submission of the village to the spirits. The hens are sacrificed and cooked in a hash with rice. The priest and his wife partake of one and the men of the village consume the rest of the food, after which everyone returns home except the priest. He has to remain in the grove until the young men return to escort him. He is then taken to every house in turn and received with great honour. His feet are

washed in each house and he receives presents of grain and beer. The subsequent merrymaking dies down during the night. The celebration is completed on the following day, when the co-priest offers drops of his own blood to the boundary spirits.

The following account of the Spring festival held in Barikul in 1939 was recorded by Babulal at the time, and it conveys, as no outside account could, the atmosphere of the festival. He begins:

*"March 17.* Today is the bathing day for the Flower festival. Early in the morning the bailiff called everyone to make the booths ready in the sacred grove. The women were busy boiling their clothes. One young man from every house took part in the thatching of the booths; some brought *sarjom* branches from the jungle, and others made small wooden seats for the spirits. The priest washed all the things for the spirits' house—the bangles, the necklace, a bow and arrow, an axe, also basket, broom, bells and horns—and he brought back to his house an earthen pot of water for luck. The place of sacrifice was smeared with cowdung, and oil and vermilion were placed there in readiness. When the young men had finished the thatching they bathed, and then said to the bailiff: 'We go now to Sona-dungri for the flower hunt; see that the drums beat and the horns sound at the foot of the banyan tree, for when we hear them we shall start. Do not delay, for we want to begin.' The bailiff completed his bath quickly, and taking four youths with the drums and the horns to the banyan tree by the stone fence he did as he had been requested. And so the youths went out hunting. They caught fourteen hares, thirteen jungle fowl, four partridges and ten squirrels. These they brought home hanging from a pole which was slung from the shoulders of two men. When they arrived back at the side of the large tank, the spoils were divided, and some we gave to the men of neighbouring villages who had joined in the hunt. The flesh was roasted and divided; some was given to the killers, some to the dogs, some to the villagers, and a special portion to the widows.

In the evening the bailiff called everyone to gather for the 'spirit possession'. We took three new winnowing fans and all collected at the priest's house. Three men were possessed, and each of them took hold of a winnowing fan. They were seated facing the east, and the priest put sun-dried rice on to the winnowing fan of *Maran Buru*. Immediately to his left sat *Manjhi*

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*haram*,<sup>1</sup> and on the left of *Mañjhi haram* there sat the Old Lady of the Grove, and to them also rice was given. The spirits spoke and shook the rice in the winnowing fans. Then they began to shake their heads from side to side, and called out, 'His-*sahāk!*' At this everyone called out, 'Greetings, Lords!' for the spirits had come. The Old Lady of the Grove placed the necklace round her neck, put on the bangles, seized the broom and put the washed basket on her head, and then ran away to the grove. *Marān Buru* and *Mañjhi haram* went after her with the bow and arrows and the axe, and in the darkness the Old Lady lost her necklace and the bangles. When they all ran back to the priest's house and the loss was discovered we told her that she must find them again. So she went once more to the grove and brought them back. After this we said to all of them: 'The horses are weary; let the spirit riders descend!' The priest then applied vermilion on their cheeks, their chests and their backs, and they came to their senses. So it ended. Next the villagers began to dance, and the first song was this:

High up in the *pipal*<sup>2</sup> tree  
Sings the crimson-breasted barbet;  
It wanders through the country,  
It flies over the land.<sup>3</sup>

Then they began the late evening dance and many other dances, such as the road dance, and they sang:

Down in the valley blooms the *hat*<sup>4</sup> tree, sister;  
Come, let us make flower chains, sister;  
Come, let us wear the flowers, dangling.<sup>5</sup>

The priest spent the night sleeping on a bed of leaves, while everyone else, old and young, men and women, danced the night through. Next morning the priest told the bailiff quickly to collect the hens; he himself bathed and went to the grove, taking with him *sarjom* and *matkom* flowers, sun-dried rice, flour, oil and vermilion, all in a new winnowing fan. He also carried a brown hen and on his open upturned palm a small

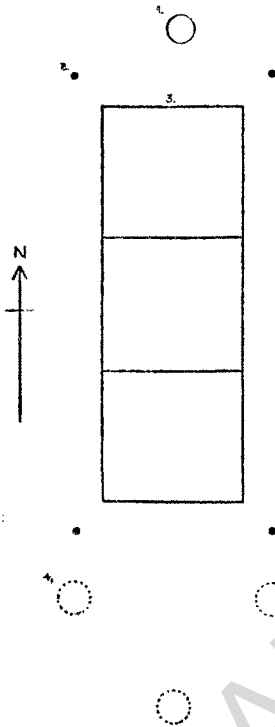
<sup>1</sup> *Mañjhi haram* is the title that denotes the founder of the village. Possibly in Barikul he is honoured instead of the "Five", though it might be Babulal's mistake.

<sup>2</sup> Santali *hesak' dare*: *Ficus religiosa*, L.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix B, No. 16.

<sup>4</sup> A small tree, *Holarrhena antidysenterica*, Wall.

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix B, No. 17.



brass water-pot, while his wife carried the earthen pot of water brought for good fortune. Youths and maidens conducted him to the grove, dancing as they went, and there he began to make the sacrifice. The youths and the maidens danced in the grove, the young men singing only the Flower dance songs, and while the dancing went on the priest proceeded with his work. With the flour he made the circles and the squares. A hen was offered in each of the circles; the brown hen was slain in the Moslem<sup>1</sup> fashion, while the other two had their necks cut. Again each of the spirits took possession of a man, and they sucked the blood of the slain birds. One circle was for *Maran Buru*, one for the Old Lady of the Grove, and one for *Manjhi haram*. In the squares the priest sacrificed to the village spirits, and as we had brought many hens it was not possible to offer them all, so some were killed by knocking their heads on the

ground. When it was all over, the priest cooked the heads of the first three hens with flour, making cakes of them, and then ate them and drank beer. This is called 'lifting the head'. Then the folk in the village who offer to the 'Five' took flowers from the trees of the grove, returned to their own houses and made mounds of the flowers. Near these mounds they offered either hens or goats. (Some of those who worship the 'Five' invite all their relatives at this time and make the sacrifice in the grove.) Meanwhile the priest drank beer and cooked a hash of rice with the brown hen.

Late in the afternoon the young men went to receive the priest back into the village. They went dancing to the grove and danced round the priest. Again the spirits took possession of the three young men, who danced with the others. The Old Lady again wore the bangles and the necklace and carried the

<sup>1</sup> This is Babulal's word. The offering to *Manjhi haram* is strangled and not beheaded.

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basket on her head; likewise *Maran Buru* took the bow and arrows and *Mañjhi haram* held the axe. Just before sunset the men came to their senses, the priest gathered up all the things, and his wife carried the lucky water-pot. As before, the youths and maidens placed the priest in their midst and again the spirits came and danced with the others. Then in every house, from one end of the village street to the other, they washed the feet of the priest. He put *sarjom* flowers into the hair of the girls who washed his feet, and all the people sprinkled water on to each other. On that day we are free to sprinkle water on anyone else.<sup>1</sup> When we reached the priest's house he poured out two pots of beer and we all drank. Again the dancing began and went on till a late hour.

*March 18.* Yesterday was the full Flower festival day; today is the 'stale' day of the feast. Yesterday everyone was drunk, and again today they began to drink early. There were many visitors in the village, for we had invited daughters, sisters and sons-in-law to be with us. We had to feed them well, and we were busy with all the preparations. One prepared rice, another flour, while the men killed cocks or goats or pigs, for yesterday they had no time to feast well. Even so, in some of the houses a few people became drunk before they had time to eat. Those unfortunates had no meat either yesterday or today. Most of the time went in feasting, though there was some dancing in the village street, and the dancers sang:

Let us gather, O elder sister, the *matkom*;  
Let us wear the *sarjom* flowers, elder sister, in our hair;  
Let us drink, O elder sister, the juice of the *matkom*.<sup>2</sup>

Most of the singing was done by a small band of old men and women who went into each of the houses and were given beer and *matkom* flowers by the people of the house. In our part of the village there was a fierce quarrel. Some of the men who went to stop the trouble were themselves beaten and returned very angry to their homes. Before midnight everyone was fast asleep, for all had been drinking heavily. I thought to myself, if anyone came here tonight with evil intent he could steal anything he wanted with the greatest ease; and, in fact, that is what happened. During the night someone stole from the headman's house five goats, male and female."

<sup>1</sup> Water "squirts" are made from bamboo and are used freely.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix B, No. 18.