

There are also Hindu priests, Brahmins, in attendance at the fire-walking rites in these villages. This is readily understandable as these villages have all a shrine sacred to *Shiva* known as the *mandap*, where the rites connected with the fire-walking are celebrated. The Brahmins are accredited to these shrines. They were retained by the former zamindars, or landlords of the villages, who defrayed the expenses incurred by the fire-walking ceremonies. The zamindars of Tupudana and Bikuadag are high class Hindus. *Mandap puja* for the tribals in the area means fire-walking and all the ceremonies that go with it.

On inquiring into the origin of the fire-walking in Tupudana, I was told that it was something that was introduced into the village by one of the former landlords – Kamla Nath Sahai of the royal dynasty of Ratu, the hereditary maharajas of Chota Nagpur.

According to my informant, Lal Jogendra Nath Sahadeo, the grandson of Kamal Nath Sadeo, who is now in his eighties, his grandfather saw the young women going every year in May to Hesag, a village one mile west of Tupudana. Kamla asked the girls not to go to Hesag. He would give them their entertainment in Tupudana. He kept his promise, inviting drummers and dancers for the masked or *chho* dances from Monharpur in Singhbhum District, about a 100 miles south of Tupudana. A *thakur*, or priest, accompanied the troupe. A *mandap* was built and dedicated to *Shiv Govinda*. Fire-walking was initiated in Tupudana. I would tentatively put the date of the beginning of fire-walking in Tupudana in the early 19th century (1820).

Today Tupudana along the Ranchi-Khunti Road attracts the greatest crowd. It is at Tupudana that the largest number of *bhakta* congregate to walk through the fire. On May 6, 1965 I saw 69 men and boys tread through the fire in this village. At Bikuadag, a week later, on May 15th, I witnessed another fire-walking. The number of *bhakta* in this village were 43.

I. The *Shiv-bhakta* or Fire-Walkers

Who are these *bhakta* who walk through the fire unscathed and for whom the *mandap puja* takes place every year in May, in so many villages around Ranchi? The literal translation of the Hindi word *bhakta* is "devotee", or "votary", a person given completely over to a cause, generally associated with religion. In the context a *bhakta* would be a person vowed to walk through fire and do so for five consecutive years, in thanksgiving for a favour received. The fire-walking accomplished in these tribal villages is intimately connected with *Shiva*, one of the manifestations of the deity in Hindu ritual and religion. This association with *Shiva* has given these *bhakta* the appellation of *Shiv-bhakta*².

² There is another group of *bhakta* known as *mansa bhakta*. The name *mansa* has reference to the Snake Goddess, in whose honour this rite of fire-walking is performed. The *mansa bhakta* are usually members of a scheduled caste, deemed socially low, due to the menial offices they perform. One of the places where the *mansa bhakta* do their fire-walking is in Birmitrapur, in the State of Orissa within the Republic of India.