

Kharamshing: A Festival of Chali

Kharamshing (ཁ་རམ་ཤིང་) is the most important component of the Kharam (ཁ་རམ་) festival celebrated in Chali village in Mongar district. The three day event is primarily dedicated to making offerings to ward off evil forces and takes place annually between the 27th and 29th days of the seventh lunar month of the Bhutanese calendar. The origins of the festival are unknown, but the events play a key part in the annual rituals of the local community.

Kharam means 'together,' reflective of the event's communal nature. It is believed to have evolved from a Bön ritual, and includes a particular wooden structure marked by a phallus. Similar Kharam rituals are held in other parts of eastern Bhutan but there are regional variants in their performance. The festival is celebrated mainly to protect cattle and other livestock from diseases, predators and misfortunes.

A few days in advance of the Kharam festival, villagers cut down a specific type of tree, make *kharamshing* and bring them home. Traditionally, each household would make three *kharamshing* from the local tree known as Robtang shing (Lat. *Rhus chiensis*, Anacardiaceae family). The kharamshing structure consists of a carved wooden phallus fixed on a pole erected to ward off harmful influences.

Day One

The festival starts when farmers abstain from working the fields, which is understood to cause the death of insects and other earth-dwelling beings. The day is called *sa kharam* or earth festival (སཱ་ཁ་རམ་), they erect *kharamshing* in the field to protect crops from pests and weeds, thereby ensuring a good harvest.

Day Two

The next day, villagers carry the *kharamshing* as they make rounds of everyone's cattle sheds. Holding fresh branches from different types of trees, they chant prayers to ward off ill luck associated with their cattle and other livestock. As they pass the animals, they rub the tree branches against their bodies in a gesture believed to cleanse them of misfortunes. This is accompanied by throwing ashes towards the cattle as a mark of washing away evils, and they pretend to send the animals off to the Kuri River. They believe the river can rinse away all the evils of people, cattle and crops. Afterward, one *kharamshing* is planted in the cowshed, which in return is believed to ensure productive livestock. Another is erected in front of the house to avert the ill effects of malicious talk, curses or backbiting from other people. By the end of the day, the entire landscape of Chali village is dotted with *kharamshing*.

Day Three

The final day is marked with good food and exchange of greetings. These ritualized greetings are believed to protect those living inside the house and also avert quarrels among the family members. Collectively, the families make offerings of food, milk and ara to the *kharamshing*.

During the three-day celebration, most women stay at home and cook for the family, while men indulge in outdoor games like archery and *khuru*. Villagers recall having grand festival celebrations in the past, which could at times last for weeks. Kharam has long been one of the main festivals in the Chali village, but much has changed. Villagers have traditionally believed if the festival was not conducted properly, the community would witness natural disasters. However, most of the practices are gradually being discontinued as people pass away or move elsewhere.

Sonam Chopel was a researcher at Shejun Agency for Bhutan's Cultural Documentation and Research.