

# **Neo-Buddhists in Bangladesh: A Study on the Oraon Tribal Community, its Socio-Religious and Popular Culture**

A dissertation presented to the  
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By

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# 博士論文 要旨

## Abstract of the Thesis

### 1. Research Theme

Neo-Buddhists in Bangladesh: A Study on the Oraon Tribal Community, its Socio-Religious and Popular Culture

「バングラデシュにおけるネオ・ブディスト(改宗新仏教徒)ーオラオン部族コミュニティの社会宗教的民衆文化の研究ー」

### 2. Research Proposal

Though Islam is the dominant religious force, Bangladesh is a multi-cultural and multi-national country shared by Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and some animist groups. The Buddhist community of Bangladesh comprises various ethnic groups. Mainly they are Chakma, Tanchangya, Chak, Mru, Marma, Rakhain, Kheyang, Barua and Oraon, all of whom at present follow Theravada Buddhism and reside in different areas. Their languages, scripts, dress, foods, lifestyles and popular beliefs and culture are distinct from each other. Historical evidences suggest that Buddhism was introduced in the area from the time of its inception, and from the 7<sup>th</sup> century to the 12<sup>th</sup> century Buddhism enjoyed the status of state religion patronized by many Buddhist dynasties. As a result, Buddhism played a vital role to enrich the national culture of Bangladesh. In particular, during this period, Tantric Buddhism played a central role in the religious sphere of Bangladesh. Furthermore, the people of Bangladesh share a colorful common popular culture along with their respective religious rites and rituals. After the 12<sup>th</sup> century, due to various adverse socio-political developments Buddhism lost its glory and was reduced to a minority religion. With the decline of Buddhism many Buddhist

ethnic minority groups lost their religious identity and adopted animism and syncretic popular beliefs with the identity of *Adibasi* or aborigine.

The Oraons who took refuge in Buddhism claim that they are one such group and their forefathers were the original inhabitants of present-day Bangladesh and were followers of Tantric Buddhism. Like other *Adibasi* groups, they forget their former Buddhist rites and rituals and started to follow a highly syncretic popular culture as lower caste Hindus. However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century many Oraons took refuge in Theravada Buddhism. Though they follow the Theravada Buddhism, their popular culture runs counter to Buddhist ethics to some extent.

In my thesis, I will examine their claim and explore the socio-religious and popular culture of Oraon Buddhists in Bangladesh. Besides, I will analyze the explanation and ideas that the Oraons themselves express through these practices. Moreover, I will consider the characteristics of Oraon culture with historical background and argue that their socio-popular culture has helped them to survive as a distinct community. Finally, I will consider the elements which differentiate their way of thinking from other various ethnic groups of the Bangladeshi Buddhist community.

### **3. Objective of the Research**

The main objective of the thesis is to contribute to the anthropology and knowledge of Buddhism and its culture in South Asia, especially of socio-religious and popular culture of Oraons, a minor aboriginal ethnic group of Bangladesh. Anthropological identity, socio-religious and popular culture of the Oraons of Bangladesh is the focus of the dissertation.

#### **4. Importance of the Research**

The Buddhism of Bangladesh is of particular interest because it represents a minority religion that has survived for many centuries in a multi-cultural and multi-religious but Muslim-dominated country. Moreover, Bangladesh is situated within the Indian subcontinent and its geographical location facilitates an easy access of the Buddhist culture of South-East Asia. As a result, Buddhism of Bangladesh contains a colorful syncretic culture. Thus, it may offer a lesson to other religious traditions of the world where religious intolerance is causing serious problems. Besides, a detailed and comprehensive study of socio-religious and popular culture (popular rites and rituals) of the Oraon Buddhist community of Bangladesh will facilitate the understanding of how socio-religious and popular culture may help minor religious communities to maintain their distinctive identities in a Muslim-dominated country.

#### **5. Scope of the Research**

Despite its importance, there is no prior systematic academic research on the Oraons of Bangladesh. There are several reasons scholars both in Bangladesh and abroad have not yet focused on the Oraons. Firstly, the Buddhists in Bangladesh are a small community comprising various minority ethnic groups. There are fewer materials and original texts available in Bangladesh than in countries with larger Buddhist communities. Secondly, the Oraons are an ethnic minority group living in the remote and undeveloped regions of Bangladesh. Thirdly, the topic of minority community culture itself has been of little interest to most researchers. This research therefore aims to fill the gap in knowledge on this potentially significant theme.

## **6. Research Methodology**

My proposed research mainly deals with peoples of Oraon community, their behavior and society of Bangladesh. Therefore, I have adopted social science research methods, in particular content analysis and descriptive methods; content analysis method is adopted to determine the concepts within texts, such as books, essays, interviews, discussion, historical documents etc. On the other hand, descriptive method is appropriate when observation is the principal means of data collection. Moreover, it is used for describing situations or events. It has following specific purposes:

- a) To collect detailed factual information that describes existing phenomena;
- b) To identify problems or justify current conditions and practices;
- c) To make comparison and evaluation; and
- d) To determine what others are doing with similar problems or situations and benefit from their experience in making future plans and decisions.

As my thesis is mainly based on fieldwork and literature review, content analysis and descriptive method are the most appropriate methods of analysis. The first step in my research was to conduct an in-depth and comprehensive survey of the historical changes in the socio-religious life of Oraons of Bangladesh. This comprehensive survey is necessary in order to trace out the beginnings of Buddhist activities in the Oraon community, and the process by which they incorporated Buddhist beliefs and culture. Secondly, based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork I have examined the contemporary practices of the Oraons to explore their socio-religious and popular culture. This is necessary to trace their identity as a distinct community in a multi-cultural and multi-religious country. Besides, I conducted interviews with various erudite persons, religious leaders and general people of the Oraon community for further insights into how they express and understand their beliefs and culture.

## **7. Sources of the research**

I have depended on both literary sources and fieldwork. The literary sources include: Pāli literature, travel accounts, archaeological records and findings, and authoritative secondary sources, such as books, journals, periodicals published in Bangladesh and abroad. During fieldwork, I stayed in the homes of Oraons and observed their life style closely and was allowed to take part in many socio-religious and popular rituals, festivals and ceremonies. This firsthand observation of Oraon life is one of the strengths of this research, so it is given emphasis in the dissertation. Moreover, I held interviews with people of various social standing and considered their opinions and understandings as important data for the thesis.

## **8. Content of the Thesis**

Acknowledgement

Introduction

Chapter I: An Introduction to Oraons

Chapter II: Notions and Rituals Concerning Birth

Chapter III: Rites and Rituals Regarding Marriage

Chapter IV: Rites and Rituals Regarding Death

Chapter V: Social Rituals and Festivals

Chapter VI: Rājī Kārām Parav: A Popular Festival

Chapter VII: Buddhist Religious Rituals and Ceremonies

General Conclusion

Appendix

Bibliography

## **9. Rationale for the structure of the thesis**

The dissertation is divided into seven chapters along with an introduction and general conclusion. The introduction relates the objectives, scope, methodology and overview of the dissertation along with a brief history of Bangladesh and Buddhist communities. In the first chapter, I described the nomenclature, origin and meaning of the word ‘Oraon’ along with the anthropological identity, clan, language, social structure, livelihood and historical sketch of the Oraons. This introduction to Oraon culture is an essential basis for the following chapters on Oraon practices related to key life events. Birth, marriage and death are considered by the Oraons as important events of human life. Ethnic identity is maintained by rites and rituals related to these events. Moreover, these rites and rituals ensure the safety and prosperity of the community. Therefore, in the second, third and fourth chapters I discuss various rituals of the Oraons concerned with birth, marriage and death. Subsequently I focus on social identity, and consider social rites, rituals, festivals and ceremonies in the fifth chapter. I consider popular practices a source of ethnic identity and belonging that help a community maintain its distinctiveness. Hence, popular practices are the focus of the sixth chapter. For an ethnic community, along with cultural identity, religious identity is important. Therefore, Oraon religious rituals, festivals and ceremonies and religious-cultural identity are the focus of the seventh chapter. Finally, a conclusion synthesizes the findings of the research. Besides, an appendix is added with the information of Buddhist monasteries of Oraons in Bangladesh. At last, a bibliography is attached to indicate the sources of the research work.

## **10. Summary of the Thesis**

In chapter one, I have studied the history of Oraons of Bangladesh. My study shows that anthropologically and linguistically Oraons belong to the Dravidian group and constitute a patriarchal society. Though they claim that they are the original inhabitants of Bangladesh,

my study suggests that the original homeland of the Oraons was at Karush, the south-eastern bank of Ganges, presently known as district of *Sahabad*. They came to Bangladesh from various parts of India, especially from Orissa, Choto Nagpur, Ranchi, Bihar and the Rajmahal Hill Tracts. They started to come to Bangladesh during the period of Mughal (1526-1707 A.D.), but most of them came as workers in early British period (1757-1947 A.D.). In Bangladesh, they live in northern part of the country. They are identified in recent law *Khudra Nri-gosthi Sanskritik Pratisthan Ain 2010* (The Small Ethnic Groups Cultural Institution Act 2010) as *Khudra-Nrigosthi* (small ethnic groups). They were also classified using different terms, such as *Upajati* (tribal) and *Adibasi* (indigenous people).

The Oraons have their own language, folk belief or tradition, social norms and customs. However, nowadays, they belong to three religions. Some of them follow Hinduism and are considered lower caste Hindu. Some follow Christianity, and others follow Buddhism. In Bangladesh Population Census 1991, they are counted as lower caste Hindu. The census report also has shown that the number of Oraons of Bangladesh is approximately 11,296. But a survey report of the Oraon community published by the Oraon Youth Foundation Program in 1997 claims that the total number of them in Bangladesh is about 85,041. The report also mentioned that a sizeable population of the Oraon community about 1,133,000 live in the neighboring districts of India. Again, a member of the Oraon Student Union of Bangladesh informed me during an interview in 2014 that they are about 100,000 in number. *Banglapedia*, a national encyclopedia of Bangladesh mentions, their population is 102,000.

The information regarding the census of Oraon community of Bangladesh conducted by various authorities is given below in a chart:



| Sources  | Population |
|--|------------|
| Bangladesh Population Census 1991  | 11,296     |
| A survey report of the Oraon community published by the Oraon Youth Foundation Program in 1997 | 85,041     |
| <i>Banglapedia</i> , a national encyclopedia of Bangladesh                                     | 102,000    |

The study also reports that from 1994 Oraons have been converted to Buddhism, but they still have every faith in a creator God Dharmes. Through this faith they keep distinction from other Buddhist groups of Bangladesh.

The Oraon Buddhists consider birth, marriage and death important chapters of human life. They observe many social-religious and obligatory rites and rituals for those events for safety, prosperity and to reestablish purity.

In chapter two, after my historical survey I looked at the notions and rituals concerning birth. Though modern medical facilities are available especially in the cities and towns of Bangladesh, the Oraons prefer to give birth in their own homes in a traditional way. The study suggests that they do so owing to poverty rather than tradition. As child delivery is a complex matter, they follow various norms during the pregnancy period and child delivery. The health risks are definitely high. So, they observe the rituals for safe delivery, and reestablish the purity. Basically, these rites and rituals are observed for the safety and prosperity of the family, and through it awareness is created against dangers. Though the Oraons took refuge in Buddhism, they could not give up their traditional practices and popular beliefs concerning birth.

In chapter three, I have examined the various rites and rituals that they observe during marriage ceremony and focused their conception and consciousness regarding these practices. From my study it became clear that both popular and religious rituals play an important role in their marriage ceremony. Though marriage is considered by the Oraon Buddhists incomplete without participation of a Buddhist monk, popular rituals play the major role in the ceremony. Moreover, they consider marriage a sacrament and by the practice of endogamy the Oraons maintain community distinction.

In chapter four, I have analyzed the funeral rites and rituals of the Oraon Buddhists of Bangladesh. My study exposes that as the Bengali Buddhists propagate Buddhism in the Oraon society their practices have cast great influence over the Oraons. The Oraons observe the same religious rituals regarding death as the Barua community. However, differences are seen in the socio-popular rituals that are observed as death rituals. For example, the ritual for eliminating fear among children and ritual for shadow entrance are only observed by the Oraon Buddhists. So, even after embracing Buddhism they follow their traditional practices and beliefs, and through these practices they keep their social distinction from other Buddhist communities.

In chapter five, I have examined the Oraons' social rituals and festivals. From my study it becomes clear that over time, although the Oraons have been converted to different religions, they continue to celebrate their traditional social and religious festivals. The adoption of new religions seems to have had little influence on observance of these long-standing cultural customs. Oraons observe their festivals and rituals without strict adherence to the regulations and bindings of their new religion. Through the continued practice of their traditional festivals and rituals, they establish a harmonious relationship between elements of their world - God, spirits, nature and human. Their acts are predominantly community oriented. Most of

the traditional festivals are seasonal and closely related with agricultural operations. As they are farmers, they depend tremendously on nature for their livelihoods. So, they always have to do hard labor and struggle with adverse natural disasters and problems such as floods, drought, famine, diseases and epidemics. One way the Oraons try to mitigate against natural calamities is by performing the traditional rituals. After the arduous work of planting the paddy and before the rigorous work of the harvest, they indulge in merry-making festivals and celebrations to stimulate the growth of their crops in the fields. So, the Oraon socio-religious rituals can be considered as a 'fecundity festivals', and it can be concluded that these rituals have originated from fertility cults. Moreover, through the performance of the festivals, Oraons get a chance to revive their physical and mental energies. Furthermore, through these festivals and rituals, they keep their distinct identity as a separate community.

In chapter six, I have analyzed the different aspects of the Rājī Kārām festivals, a very popular festival of the Oraons. My study reports that the Oraon celebrations reflect much more than observing a set of religious rites or having a good time. The festivals reveal the Oraons way of life and its complex systems of beliefs and practices, doctrines and behaviors. The Oraons festivals today are different from those of other communities in that they help the Oraons to maintain their unique tribal ethnic identity. Moreover, the collective rituals and processions, accompanied by local food delicacies and home-brewed drinks, singing, dancing and music, provide numerous opportunities for relatives and friends to re-connect. In many cases, the festivals are closely related with seasonal agricultural operations of sowing, harvesting, threshing and storing, etc. So, it may be concluded that Rājī Kārām festivals have origins in pagan fertility cults that aimed at ensuring good weather and crops, the success of hunting, the well-being of domestic animals, the practice of social institutions like marriage and child bearing, and the general prosperity and procreation of the community.

In chapter seven, I have analyzed the different aspects of their religious practices. My study suggests that basically, as followers of Theravada Buddhism all Buddhists communities in Bangladesh observe the same religious rituals, festivals and ceremonies for the same purposes. Most of the religious rituals are intimately associated with the life of Buddha. As a result, they play a tremendous role to inspire lay devotees. Moreover, these practices help to establish a bridge of mutual understanding and amity between the *Saṅgha* and lay devotees. But my survey shows clearly that the vast majority of lay Oraon Buddhist respondents perform daily rituals in the hope of attaining both *nibbāṇa* and worldly gain. However the great majority of respondents of Oraon community emphasized gain in the present life and the life to come, rather than attaining of *nibbāṇa*. This is in contrast to the basic doctrine of Buddhism, which calls for attention only to the attainment of *nibbāṇa*. In this respect, the belief of all Buddhists communities of Bangladesh is similar.

In appendix, information regarding modes of existence of Oraons Buddhist monasteries in Bangladesh is presented. To collect the information I have conducted an extensive fieldwork from July 25, 2013 to August 3, 2013 in Oraon populated regions. It is noteworthy that the information is published in *Directory of Buddhist Monasteries in Bangladesh* (A Provisional Edition), published by Ryukoku University Research Center for Buddhist Culture in Asia, Japan, 14 February 2015, 163 pages with the collaboration of the Professors and researchers of Ryukoku University. Below the number of monasteries of Oraon populated regions are shown district-wise in a chart.

| District Name | Monastery number |
|---------------|------------------|
| Dinajpur      | 3                |
| Joypurhat     | 4                |
| Naogaon       | 3                |
| Rangpur       | 9                |

|            |    |
|------------|----|
| Thakurgaon | 1  |
| Total      | 20 |

## 11. Remarks

I have incorporated in this thesis most of the content of the papers which were published on various academic journals or presented at academic seminars and conferences in Japan.

Below is the list of such previous works of mine:

- a) The substantial portion of Chapter II was published in *Bulletin of Buddhist Studies*, Ryukoku University, No. 18, March 2014, pp.39-50, under the title “Notions and Ritual Concerning Birth among the Oraon Community in North Bangladesh: A Case Study”.
- b) The substantial portion of Chapter III was published in *The Bulletin of the Graduate School of Letters*, Ryukoku University, Vol. 36, December 2014, pp. 1-26, under the title “A Case Study of the Marriage Ritual in an Oraon Buddhist Community in Bangladesh”.
- c) The substantial portion of Chapter IV was presented at 29<sup>th</sup> annual Conference of Society for the Study of Pali and Buddhist Culture, Shitennoji University, Osaka, Japan on May 30, 2015, under the title “Funeral Rites of Oraon Buddhist Community in Bangladesh: A Case Study”. The paper is accepted to publish in up-coming volume of the *Journal of Pali and Buddhist Studies*, Vol.29.
- d) The substantial portion of Chapter V was presented at an academic research seminar organized by Buddhist Research Institute (Ryukoku Daigaku Bukkyo Gakkai), Ryukoku University, Kyoto, Japan on 28 January 2015, under the title “Fagua

Festival: A Socio-Popular Festival of the Oraon Buddhist community of Bangladesh”.

The paper is also presented in the 66th Annual Conference of the Japanese Association of Indian and Buddhist Studies, held on 19<sup>th</sup> September and 20<sup>th</sup> September, at Koyasan University, Wakayama, Japan.

- e) The substantial portion of Chapter VI was published in *Toho* (The East) Journal of the Nakamura Hajime Eastern Institute, No. 30, March 2015, pp. 159-176, under the title “ラージ・カーラーム・パラボーバングラデシュのオラオン部族仏教コミュニティの民間祭儀—” .

Finally, I hope my dissertation will contribute to a better understanding and knowledge of Buddhism and Buddhists in Bangladesh, especially as to the Oraons.