

Rice Rituals of Orissa*

By

BHABAGRAHI MISRA

Before we discuss the rice-rituals of Orissa, we may note that the name of Orissa (Oḍisā), a state on the eastern coast of India, is derived from its ancient name *Odra Desa*. The word *Odra Desa* means a land of cultivators. The cultivator class in Orissa was broadly divided into two castes, the *Odas* and the *Chasās*. "The former is the title of those who lived or came from hilly country...and the *Chasā* is the ordinary designation of the native *khandāits* in Orissa, where it would be no distinction to call a man *Uriya*¹". "The word *Chasā* has the generic meaning of a cultivator" and this caste is supposed to be of non-Aryan origin. The *khandāits* or swordsmen (Skt. *khandā*, a sword) an Oriya caste, also belong to the non-aryan *Bhuyān* tribe².

This shows that the early inhabitants of Orissa were non-Aryans and a cultivator class. Before the contact with the Aryans the concept of caste system was occupational and an individual's basic social position was not fixed at birth. Their "contact with the indigenous people of India was, to a larger extent, responsible for the growth of caste system, and the main racial divisions may perhaps even now be recognised, though their racial basis has, to a greater extent, vanished³".

It is difficult to trace the exact date of the Aryan immigration to Orissa. The first settlements of Brahmins are "conjectured

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1. Hunter, W. W., 1872, Orissa, Vol. II, Appendix II, p. 40.
2. Russell, Robert V., 1916, The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India, Vol. I, pp. 34-37.
3. *ibid.*, p. 16.

with some reason to have been about 500 A.D., when, according to the legend, a pious monarch of Orissa imported 10,000 Brahmins from Kanauj⁴". With the immigration of the Aryans, it is quite reasonable to assume, that an adjustment between the native inhabitants and the immigrant settlers would have been arrived at. The Aryans settled in villages and depended on land for their sustenance. In primitive agricultural society land was the dominant factor for social cohesion as well as strife. The non-Aryan tribes of Orissa, therefore would have been "admitted to Hinduism, and either constituted a fresh caste with the cultivating status, or, were absorbed into an existing one with a change of name⁵".

In present days Orissa land is possessed and cultivated by people of all castes. Rice being the staple food of the Orissan people, a number of rituals are connected with its cultivation. The present day rituals have preserved interesting features of primitive religion as well as elements of Brahmanism. In this paper, I wish to discuss only the rice-rituals prevalent among the people of Orissa living in plains, tracing the cross-cultural synthesis between the earliest inhabitants and the Aryan immigrants⁶. The age-old ritualistic practices continue to live today along with the syncretism of Brahmanical faith. For comprehending the religious significance of these rituals or religious practices, a preparatory explanation is needed. Because the ethical ideals of man, as expressed through these social institutions, however barbaric they may be, relate, to a certain degree, to the realities of ancient life, and the changes through the passage of time.

The method of rice-cultivation in Orissa is mainly two-fold. In some fields seeds are sown, and in others, seedlings prepared in nursery beds are transplanted. Usually sowing of seeds begins in the month of *Baisakha* (April-May), and transplanting is done in the month of *Asadha* (June-July). But before sowing or transplanting is done, the field is ploughed and prepared for cultivation. It may be noted here that all the rituals are performed according to the lunar-solar calendrical systems of the

4. Hunter, W. W., 1872, Orissa, Vol. II, Appendix II, p. 37.

5. Russell, Robert V., 1916, The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India, Vol. I, p. 43.

6. For agricultural rites amongst the tribal people in Orissa cf. (1) Elwin, Verrier, 1950, Bondo Highlanders, pp. 44-51. (2) Elwyn, Verrier, 1954, Tribal Myths of Orissa, Intro. xxiii-xxiv.

Hindus. So the rites and beliefs connected with the rice cultivation are linked up with the Hindu calendar, beginning with the rites of the plough and ending in harvest rituals.

The Plough and the First ploughing:

In the history of agricultural rites the plough is of special importance. The plough is supposed to have been invented by Balarama, the eighth incarnation of Visnu, and it was his chief weapon against the demons. In the tribal areas of Orissa, Bhima Mahaprabhu, Nirantali, Burra Pinnu are regarded as the inventors of the plough⁷. The plough worship in India is of great antiquity. In Vedic times ploughing rituals held an important place. Lord Buddha, in his youth attended a plough festival, where his father and the ministers were the plough men. In *Ramayan* we find King Janaka ploughing the field and Goddess Sita was found from the furrow. "With a solemn incantation at the first ploughing—it must be made holy before the opening of the soil. In most of these eastern cults the plough and the plough share were divine⁸". The first ploughing of the field in Orissa is usually done on an auspicious day. For this function the first or the fifth day (Sri Pancami) after the bright moon day of *Magha* (Jan.-Feb.) or the day after the bright moon day of *Phalgun*a (second half of March) is preferred⁹. On this day the plough is washed, vermilion and sandal paste marks are made on its handle. *Bhoga* or food made of *chena* or cheese and *guda* or molasses is offered to it¹⁰. Then the ploughman goes to the field and ploughs two and a half furrows, commencing at the northwest corner of the field. The plough is then driven

7. Special mention may be made to story no. 9 on p. 612, which states, "He showed Arjun Naik how to make a plough with *sal* wood and the yoke with *dhaman*. After that the Oriyas and the Paikas began to use ploughs". Verrier Elwin, *Tribal Myths of Orissa*.

(b) "The greatest of deities were named as its inventors and it has been traced in ritual scenes in rock drawings of France, Italy, Sweden, as on the walls of Egyptian tombs. Hesiod describes it as depicted on the shield of Achilles".—M. M. Banks, 1939, *Scottish Lore of Earth, Its Fruit and the Plough*, *Folklore*, Vol. I, p. 26.

8. Banks, M. M., 1939, *Folklore*, Vol. I, p. 27.

9. In Bavaria the first ploughing is done on the Easter morning.—Banks, M. M., 1939, *Folklore*, Vol. I, p. 28.

10. Similar rites in Scotland may be referred to: Banks, M. M., 1939, *Folklore*, Vol. I, p. 25.

southeast to the center of the field. A handful of soil, thus ploughed, is sprinkled on the bullocks. It is believed that by doing so, the bullocks will not be hurt by the plough during that agricultural year. This signifies how the earth itself and the implement connected with it have commanded the reverence of man. The ritual pattern concerning the plough in Orissa has become somewhat disintegrated. The ploughing rites in India "show that they originated in the Fertile Crescent. The only hypothesis which is adequate to explain the facts is that in this centre the traction plough and its ritual developed as a single complex which then travelled to the farthest limits of Europe and Asia¹¹". Some scholars try to interpret "the primitive pointed plough" as "representing the male organ penetrating and fertilising mother earth", and "as the ploughman was usurping the rights of the sky god his anger had to be appeased by means of sacrifices and appropriate ritual¹²". Though it seems too far-fetched an analogy, to interpret the plough and the earth as representing sex symbols, to some extent it holds true in case of Orissan agricultural rites, especially rites connected with worship of Mother Earth. It represents also the animistic belief of the primitive people. The plough and the land, being the source of prosperity, were conceived of as having miraculous power, and thus rituals were formulated.

Sowing of Seeds:

(i) Usually the sowing of seeds starts on the third¹³ day of the bright fortnight of the month of *Baisakha* (second half of April). This day is known as *Akshaya Trutiya*, i.e., unperishable third day. Preceding this day, the plough, the *Akshi Muthi Tokei* or the basket in which the seed is placed and worshipped (before taken to the field), the *Gauni* (small baskets like a measuring unit) are washed and painted with watered rice-powder. On the *Akshaya Trutiya* day the court-yard of the

11. Armstrong, E. A., 1943, *The Ritual of the Plough*, *Folklore*, Vol. LIV, p. 257.

12. *ibid.*, p. 255, (quoting E. Hahn, *Demeter und Banbo*, pp. 48 ff.)

13. It is interesting to note that in the East Visayan Islands, Philippines, sowing is done on an odd-number day. Cf. Richard, Arens, *The Rice Ritual in the East Visayan Islands, Philippines*, *Folklore Studies*, Vol. XVI (1957), p. 269.

house is washed and plastered with cow dung and mud. In the middle of the court-yard a decorative design of a lotus flower is made with watered rice-powder. Art motifs representing foot-steps of Goddess Lakshmi are made in the court-yard, showing the path from all sides to the central lotus flower. A *Pidha* or wooden seat is placed on the lotus flower. The *Akshi Muthi Tokei* and the *Gauni* (representing the Goddess Lakshmi) filled with paddy seeds is placed on the wooden chair. A *kalasa* or pitcher full of water decorated with vermilion marks and filled with mango leaves and a betel nut is placed on the left side of Lakshmi, and worshipped as a protector against all harmful events (*Bighnanasan*). Then the priest chants prayers to the deity and *bhoga* or food prepared of *makara chaula* or soaked dry-rice and molasses is offered. After the ceremony is over, the householder (*karta*) carries the *Akshi Muthi Tokei* and the *Gauni* filled with seeds, on his head and proceeds to the field blowing a conch shell on the way. The priest also follows him chanting *mantras* or prayers and the ploughman follows the master with the bullocks yoked to the plough. Vermilion and sandal paste marks are made on the stilt of the plough and on the fore-head of the bullocks. In the field, the plough is worshipped and the earth is turned over with the plough making seven furrows. The owner of the land sows seven handful of seeds. Then the ploughman sows the rest of the fields and ploughs.

(ii) In another account it is observed that the owner of the land, in the early morning of *Akshaya Trutiya*¹⁴, proceeds to the field with a basketful of manure (in *Akshi Muthi Tokei*) and a *Gauni* filled with seeds. He takes the *kalasa* with him. In the field he makes a heap of the manure and on the top of the manure he pours the paddy seeds, and on the paddy seeds he keeps a copper coin and a betel nut. The nut is decorated with vermilion and sandal paste. The Goddess Lakshmi is invited to appear in the betel nut. Food is offered to her and prayers are made for getting good crop. Then the owner spreads out the manure and the seeds in the field and goes back home. The ploughman comes to the field after a while and finishes the rest of the sowing of seeds.

14. Similar rites on the same day are also observed in Bihar, cf. G. A. Grierson, 1926, *Bihar Peasant Life*, p. 401.

From both these accounts it is found that goddess Lakshmi is worshipped as a deity of prosperity and as Mother Earth¹⁵. The name of the day supports the belief of the people in a particular day of astrological significance and sacred time for starting any type of work. According to the popular belief, this is the anniversary day of the *Satya Yuga* or the Age of Truth, one of the ages in the four cycle of ages according to the Hindus.

Worship of Mother Earth:

Sowing of seeds in the field is completed by the end of *Savitri*¹⁶ *amavasya*, or the new moon day in the month of Jyestha (May-June). On this day Mother Earth is offered Bhoga or food in the field. Prayers are offered for the reproductive capacity of Mother Earth. As the mother of all life, she holds in her womb the secrecy of reproduction, and as such is venerated by the people. Perhaps it is one of the most ancient faiths known to mankind. During this month of Jyestha, three days (one day prior to and one day after the *Raja Samkranti*) are observed as the menstrual period of Mother Earth. During these three days no work is done in the field. The women folk also do not work in the house.

Transplanting rites:

Seedlings prepared in a separate nursery bed are taken out and transplanted in the field during the month of *Asadha* (June-July). Usually the transplanting is started on an auspicious day, preferably on Tuesday or Thursday or Friday. On the first day of transplanting, the cultivator transplants *Saru gacha* or arum plant in the field. The rice seedlings are placed before the arum plant, and prayers are made to safeguard the new seedlings. According to the belief of Brahmin priests, the arum plant represents Goddess Lakshmi. But the popular belief is different. People say that if an arum plant is transplanted in

15. When Visnu was born as Parsurama, she was Dharani (Mother Earth). For details about different incarnations of Lakshmi see: W. J. Wilkins, 1913, *Hindu Mythology*, pp. 129-134.

16. A mythical woman in *Mahabharata* who fought against the decision of Yama, (the Lord of Death) to regain the life of her husband Satyavāna and succeeded in the pursuit, with further blessings of Yama to become mother of a hundred children.

the field, frogs will come and stay under it, will eat away the insects and protect the seedlings. Moreover the croaking of the frogs will bring about rain and the seedlings will grow better. This popular belief is corroborated by an Oriya folk song:

“*Megha barasila tupuru tupuru*
Kesura maila gaja
Saru gacha mule bengatie basi
Bajae telingi baja.”

i.e.,

“Drip drip rains the cloud
 Sprouts the seeds all around
 Sitting under the arum plant
 The frog is beating the Telingi drums”.

For rain making, the frog plays an important role in popular tradition. Such a superstition is found in the Bellary district of Andhra Pradesh. This practice may be said to be of a kind of magic, which combines the purposes of fertility and rain making¹⁷.

The worship of Bullocks:

Cattle worship is an age old practice in India. It is believed that different deities reside in the different parts of the body of the cow. So the people in India always propitiate cattle. After the different aspects of cultivation are completed¹⁸, the bullocks are shown respect in Orissa, on the full moon day of the month of *Sravana* (July-August). The bullock shed is washed and plastered with cow-dung and mud. The walls of the shed are decorated with watered rice-powder. During the night *manda pithā* or cakes made of rice flour are prepared. Seven cakes are offered to the pole, to which the bullocks are tied. These cakes are given to the bullocks and they are sumptuously fed. In some villages, an earthen bullock is made on the outskirts of the village. The villagers worship this earthen bullock. The he-calves are made to jump over this earthen bullock, so that they acquire the strength of the bullocks. This seems

17. Frazer, J. G., 1907 (comp. By)—Agricultural superstition in Bellary, *Folklore*, Vol. xviii, pp. 332-333.

18. It is interesting to note that bullocks are worshipped in Andhra Pradesh before the commencement of sowing and in Madras on the Pongal day.—Frazer, J. G., 1907, *Folklore*, xviii, p. 334.

to be another aspect of animistic worship, connected with rice-rituals. According to Brahmanical records, the full moon day of *Sravan* is the birthday of the deity *Baladeva*. It is surprising to note that, due to the analogy of the word *Balada* or bullock with *Baladeva*, the bullocks are paid respect on this day. This shows the blending of Brahmanical elements with popular practices.

Care of Corn Mother:

On the day of *Kanya samkranti* in the month of *Bhadra* (Sept.-October) a plant known as *kakaya* or a stem of the *sahada* tree is fixed in the field. This day is supposed to be the first day of fertilisation (or the first day of pregnancy). Placing the plant or stem protects the Corn Mother from the evil eye¹⁹. Similarly just after a month, i.e., on the day of *Tula samkranti* (popularly known as the *Garbhaṇā samkranti*), a branch of the *garbhana* tree (*Cordiamyxa* tree) is fixed in the rice field. It is supposed that by fixing this stem the Corn Mother will not have any trouble in delivering the corn sheaf safely. This day is believed to be the advanced stage of pregnancy. On the preceding day a branch of the *garbhana* tree is placed in the courtyard, watered rice-powder is sprinkled on it, *chakuli pitha* or a cake made of rice and black gram, vegetable curry is offered to it, prayer being made to protect the corn mother for the safe delivery of the corn sheaf. There is a saying: *Age bun pache bun garbhanaku tun tun*, i.e., whether you sow the seeds early or late, the corn sheaf comes out on the day of *garbhana samkranti*. The analogical relation of the pregnancy (*garbha*) of the Corn Mother and the name of the tree (*garbhaṇā*) might have suggested the selection of the tree. Perhaps "this belief does not imply any thought of an *animus* in the tree, but the whole idea is founded exclusively upon the fact that it is the only or the most remarkable tree near the house. It therefore becomes intimately associated with the houses and its inhabitants by a combined association of similarity, contact and emotion, that easily leads to ideas about luck or omen²⁰." Furthermore this may also be considered as some sort of fertility rites.

19. Erection of a chest-nut tree branch in the rice field is done in Japan.—Hirayama Toshijiro, *Seasonal Rituals Connected with Rice Culture*, p. 67, in: *Studies in Japanese Folklore*, 1953.

20. Von Sydow, C. W., 1934, *Folklore*, Vol. xxxv, p. 297.

Harvesting rituals:

When the paddy ripens, on an auspicious day (preferably Thursday) the cultivators start reaping the corn. Before reaping the corns the Corn Mother is propitiated with the offering of *kshiri* or porridge (made of rice, milk and sugar), in the field. This offering in the local dialect is known as *nija*. The first reaping ceremony is usually held in the month of *Kartika* or *Margasira* (Oct.-November), depending on the variety of the seed. In some places a kind of low land rice reaped in the month of *Bhadrav* (August-September). In western Orissa (district of Sambalpur and Bolangir) a festive day is observed known as *Nua khia* or *Navanna* (the day of taking new rice). On this day the house holder offers homage to the ancestors and deities. Guests and relatives are invited to the house and partake of the rice of the new year with the house holder. (In some places of Sambalpur another festive occasion known as *Bhai jauntia* or invitation of brothers is observed. The married girls of the house are invited on this day).

Whatever may be the season of reaping the corn, on the first day of reaping five handfuls of corn sheaves are venerated as Goddess Lakshmi and are kept separately in the barn till the reaping of the year is over.

The last sheaf:

Corn stalks amounting to seven cuts in the last field are left on the southwest corner of the land. On a particular day, the day being known as *ksheta badhā* or completion of harvest, the owner goes to the field, kneels before the corn stalks²¹, offers food and milk to the stalks and prays for good harvest. The sheaves are then plucked (not cut with the sickle) and bound together to form a *benti* (or corn baby). The members of the household present in the field ring bells, blow conch shells, and the *benti* is taken to the barn with much pomp and grandeur. This *benti* is tied to the threshing pole²², till the grains are collected. It is clear from these practices that the last sheaf "contains the vivifying power which the peasant wishes to preserve

21. For similar practices in Scotland see: Banks, M. M., op. cit. p. 24.

22. For description of the corn-baby, see: Kilbey, F., *Folklore*, Vol. xxxii (1921), p. 215.

for the crops of the following year; necessarily this small portion embodies the totality, the fertilising force is here present in a condensed form; we may express it also in this way: the last remnant is loaded with a high potency of growing power²³. The straw is left in the field as an offering for the cattle. Moreover it is believed that if a few stalks are not left in the field, bad luck may befall the owner of the land. The last sheaf is perhaps so much venerated because of "the happy end of heavy and highly important work, and this fact gives rise to both unbridled frolic and serious thought²⁴". To my mind, it is more a festival than any religious occasion, or it may be said that the seriousness of this practice, i.e., worship of the Vegetation spirit, has completely disappeared, leaving behind an age-old custom.

Separation of Grains:

Two methods of threshing are followed in Orissa. In one method the bundle of rice is beaten on a raised bamboo frame, and in the other the rice sheaves are threshed by the bullocks treading over them. In this second method certain interesting practices are observed. Either on the first Thursday of the month of *Margasira* (Nov.-Dec.), or on the *Dhanu samkranti* day of the month of *Pousa* (Dec.-Jan.), the barn is cleaned, washed and plastered with cow dung. In the middle of the barn a pole made of either a branch of *bara koli*, *sahada*, *baruna* or *bara (banyan)* is fixed. The pole (*meri*) is about seven and a half feet long. The pole is washed, the *benti* (or the corn baby) is tied to its head, vermilion and sandal paste marks are made, and the pole is fixed facing east. Before it is fixed to the ground an armful of white paddy, a shell (*kaudi*), one betel nut are placed inside the hole. This is supposed to be the food supply to the pole. Around the *meri* or pole, women decorate the place with watered rice powder comprising different art motifs like lotus flower and footsteps of Lakshmi. Corn sheaves are placed around the pole, the bullocks are tied and tread the corn sheaves separating the corn from the stalks. The worship of this pole signifies the primitive tree-worship spirit and the worship of Lakshmi has been blended with it at a subsequent date.

23. Vries, Jan De, 1931, *FF Communications*, No. 94, p. 12.

24. Von Sydow, C. W., 1934, *The Manhardtian Theory, etc., Folklore*, Vol. xxxv, p. 300.

On the last day of collection of grains, the members of the household cook and eat together in the barn, uproot the pole and keep it well preserved for the next year. The wife of the householder brings the *akhi muthi tokei*, fills it with winnowed grain, keeps a copper coin on it, flower, vermilion, and sandal paste marks are made on it, carries the grain to the granary, pours it inside. Only after that the labourers fill the granary with the winnowed grain. It is interesting to note here that "in India the corn sheaf or winnowing basket, the plough and the rice-pounder, even the broom used to sweep up the grain on the threshing floor, were all marked with distinct power²⁵".

In concluding this paper, I may say that a logical analysis of the different rites has not been made so far. Instead of arriving at any hypothesis, I have tried to present a picture of the living reality of customs. As the rice-rituals in Orissa present incoherent lines of thought, it is rather difficult to bring together the various forms of customs, beliefs, superstitions and practices to a single hypothetical frame. The different observances have been mixed up to form rice-rituals, the real meaning of which is lost today. Moreover the ritual practices are constantly changing their form and character. The customs which are considered to have connection with rice cultivation, might have originated in some other religious rites. As regards the conception of different auspicious days of the Hindu calendar selected for different rites, it can be said that the "divine governance of the world is expressed in terms of sacred times or divine periods (of time). All periods and epochs "must surely be sacred", as such, because within them continually different particular expressions of divine will are recognisable, and this proves to be true, not only in theory, but also in fact²⁶". In constructing this "phenomenological" study in its historic development, it is evident that the worship of the arum plant, *Cordimyxa* branch or observance of the menstrual periods of Earth may be accounted for by primitive practices, and the worship of Lakshmi, in the shape of seeds, corn mother, last sheaf, etc., may be construed as elements of Brahmanism. The cult of Mother Earth is also of pre-Aryan origin. The rice-rituals of

25. Keith, A. B., Indian, in *Mythology of All Races*, Vol. vi (1917), p. 129.

26. Kristenson, W. B., 1960, Sacred Times, in: *The Meaning of Religion*, p. 380.

Orissa present a bewildering complexity of popular beliefs and Brahmanical elements. Even today there is hardly any slackening in performing these customary rites. To quote Van Gennep: "All these ceremonies include both rites of passage and sympathetic rites—direct or indirect, positive or negative—for fertility, multiplication and growth²⁷".

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27. Gennep, A. V., 1960, Tr. by Monica B. Vizedom & G. Ecaffee, *The Rites of Passage*, p. 179.