Fagua Festival:
A Socio-Popular Festival of the Oraon Buddhist Community of Bangladesh

Shantu BARUA

1. Introduction

The Oraons\(^1\) celebrate many festivals and religious rituals every year. Among the most popular are Fagua, Sarhul, Soharai, and Karam. They observe these festivals very splendidly and with great passion and fervor. Fagua is the most popular and it has a special meaning for their social and religious life. The main objective of this paper is to describe the most important Oraon festival. Moreover, I will discuss the meaning of this festival and rituals and explain how these traditions help the Oraons to retain their identity as a distinct ethnic and religious community.

2. Fagua

Fagua is the New Year festival of the Oraons (Roy 1972: 140–142). It is called Fagua because it is observed during the month of Falgun (February–March) of Bengali calendar, which the Oraons follow. The Fagua festival starts on the full moon night of Falgun and continues for two days. On the first day or on the full moon night of Falgun month, a ritual is performed for giving farewell to the past year (Xalxo 2007: 56). On the second day, a worship is offered to remember and honor family ancestors and their hunting expeditions. In the past, hunting was considered the second occupation of the Oraons after farming. So, prayers for successful hunting expeditions are very important to them. After the festival, Oraons start cultivating new crops with a renewed vigor. So, the Fagua festival is considered as key to Oraon socio-economic life.

3. Objectives of Festival

The main objectives of this festival are: (i) To say farewell to the past year and to wish a peaceful, prosperous, and happy New Year; (ii) To pray for the end of any diseases, grief,
hardship and various sorts of sufferings; (iii) To pray for the abundance of crops and domestic property and to wish for the safety of the community in upcoming year; (iv) To express gratitude to their ancestors for the blessings they received during the past year and giving favor in the upcoming year; (v) To wish for success in hunting expeditions.

4. Celebration of Fagua

4.1. Worship at Full Moon Night

On the night of the full moon, the worship is performed in an open place. In the full moon night, Oraon boys of the village bring straw from their houses and heap it in the place of worship. Then they go to cut three branches of the Shimul tree while accompanied by beating drums, hand capping, cymbals, singing, and dancing. It is important that a man, who has been fasting to demonstrate body purity, cuts the branches of the tree. Then, the cut branches are carried to the place of worship along with singing and dancing. Then the ceremonial rites of worship begin. A lay priest or an experienced older person from the village called the Pähän conducts the ceremony. The lay priest digs three holes, each a little distant from each other, and places the branches inside the holes. Then, he puts on vermillion on the branches of the tree and pays homage to them by lighting candles, burning incenses. After this, the lay priest covers the three branches with the straw. Then, a live cock is tied with a branch and covered with straw. Then the lay priest walks three times clockwise around the branches, and after every round he sets some straw on fire. Next, everybody present there says the following verse in chorus: "Like previous year, let all inauspicious happenings, diseases, pains and sufferings of this year be burnt into ashes" (Khalkho 1985: 59). Next, all the persons collect the ashes from the fire and rub them on their navels and forehead. Then pray to their God to keep them free from all diseases, sufferings and lamentations throughout the coming year. A miniature hut, which is specially built for this festival, is set on fire to symbolize the end of the passing year and the dawning of the new one. It means as the fire gradually grasping the hut so passing the days of the year and dawning the New Year. A second meaning of this ritual may be, as they themselves say, "to destroy the evils of the past year, and that all may be well in the new" (Tirkey 1980: 32). As the fire blazes, young boys and girls burst into cheer for the festivities. At last,
everybody spends the rest of the full moon night with singing, dancing, and merry-making.

4.2. Ancestor Worship
Like other communities of the world, ancestor worship is a very popular practice to the Oraons of Bangladesh, who consider their ancestors as household deities. In the New Year Day, ancestor worship is observed with great dignity and solemnity as an important and integral part of Fagua Festival. On the eve of Fagua, a large variety of food, snacks, and delicacies is cooked in every house of the Oraon community. Before the villagers eat this food, they offer worship to their ancestors or household deities. This domestic worship is performed inside Oraon houses with the delicious holiday food and some special materials. No priest is required to perform the worship. Instead, householders play the role of the priest. As part of this ceremony, an alter is made for performing the rites of worship. First of all, a live hen with vermilion pasted on its forehead, is placed on the altar. Next, some candles and incenses are bunt. Finally, home-brewed wine is poured on the oil-baked cakes, and the cakes are scattered to the four directions of the altar in honor of the ancestors, while uttering the following prayers: “Oh our ancestors! All of you drink and enjoy it. Forgive the mistakes if we have done any willingly or unwillingly, do not hate us, do not anger with us.” After offering prayer, the householder slaughters the hen and smears the altar with the blood of the hen. Thus, the ceremony is completed. Next, they continue to celebrate with dancing, singing, and applying colored marks on the foreheads of one another, characterizing adherence to the Oraon community.

4.3. Ritual for Hunting
Ritual for hunting expedition is another important aspect of the Fagua festival. It is celebrated to commemorate the pioneering stage of their settlement, when Oraons lived in the vicinity of dense forests with an abundance of wild animals (Kujur 1989: 173–174). Before the hunters start their journey, they perform a ritual. The main purpose of this ritual is to seek favor from God Almighty for safety and success in hunting. This domestic ritual is performed by a selected elder of the village. On the eve of the hunting expedition, the hunters gather in a house yard. Then, the elder plays the role of a priest. The priest draws a design of three concentric circles in three colors: black, red, and white. The outermost circle is crowned with seven or nine identical semi
circles. As part of the rite, the priest puts a small heap of rice at the centre of the circle and an egg is placed on the heap of the rice. Then, he offers the devotion or puja to their supreme God, uttering the following verse: "Oh God! the creator of the heaven and earth, the protector of all the creatures, please forgive all our sins, please subdue the jungle God. Please protect us from the ferocious animals so that we can reach home safe and sound after hunting" (Khalkho 1985: 61). After the worship, the hunters travel to some distant jungles on their quest. Oraons firmly believe that if the hunting goes well, crops and domestic animals will be abundant and prosper in the upcoming year. The hunters return to the village just before the day of the Fagua festival with their bounty. After returning, according to the rules of the village, every hunter must give a portion of the killed animals and birds for the community. Oraons believe that the meat from the hunt was obtained due to the favor of God. So, this meat is infused with special powers. To share in the power of the Gods, every family collects a small piece of meat from the basket. This portion of the meat is then dried and preserved until the start of the next planting. Oraons believe that by the power of the God-infused meat will enable crops to be produced in plenty (Tirkey 1980: 33). So during the planting, they sow vegetable seeds with this dried meat.

5. Conclusion

From the analysis of different aspects of the Fagua festivals, it is clear that the Oraon celebrations reflect much more than observing a set of religious rites or having a good time. The festivals reveal the Oraon way of life and its complex systems of beliefs and practices, doctrines, and behaviors. The Oraon 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 Fagua 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.
Note
1) The Oraons are one of the oldest indigenous communities in Bangladesh. Anthropologically and linguistically Oraons belong to Dravidian group and constitute a patriarchal society. In Bangladesh they mainly live in Bogra, Dinajpur and Naogaon districts. Though previously the Oraons were the followers of animism, from 1994 many Oraons converted to Theravada Buddhism. They have started to observe the Theravada religious rituals along with their colorful popular rituals.

References

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(Assistant Professor, University of Dhaka, Doctor Candidate, Ryukoku University)