The Marriage Ceremony of Chakma Buddhist in Bangladesh:
A Study on Popular Rituals*

Dilip Kumar BARUA

The Chakmas mainly live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. They are a people with their own culture, folklore, historical traditions and even their own national script. Anthropologically, they belong to the people of South-East Asia. I will focus in this paper on the marriage ceremony and popular rituals of Chakma Buddhists in Bangladesh in brief.

1. Social Rules of marriage ceremony

According to the social rules of Chakmas, marriage is prohibited between a man and his niece, (sister’s daughter), and a woman and her nephew (brother’s son). A man can in no circumstances marry the elder sister of his wife. Though polygamy is not prohibited, it is discouraged, and generally monogamy is prevalent. Child marriage is prohibited and highly condemned, and divorce is an extremely rare. Both social and court marriage occur, but social marriage is more popular than court marriage.

2. Popular Rituals

Nowadays, final selection depends upon the choice of the couple. However, consent of parents is the main principle of marriage. For selecting a bride, the groom’s father must visit the house of the bride’s father at least thrice. Each time must take with him cakes, coconuts and bottles of wine. On his last visit he must take other gifts as well. The groom’s father must hand the bottle(s) of wine over to the bride’s father saying: “There is a nice tree growing up besides your house. I want to transplant a plant under its shadow.” This ritual is called the “Madpilāṅg or Madplāṅg Tulāṇā”. If the bride’s father accepted the bottle of wine on the third visit of the groom’s father, the date is fixed up for the marriage. It is noteworthy that some incidents are seen as auspicious or inauspicious when the bride-groom’s party visits the bride’s house for marriage negotiations.

On the appointed day, the bridal party sets off for the bride’s house. Widows are never
included in the bridal party. The bridal party includes a Sadavā (a woman whose husband is alive) for sprucing up the bride in clothes and with ornaments. None is included in the bridal party on the way. When the bridegroom’s party reaches the bride’s house, a feast is arranged in honor of them. After this, the bride is dressed up. A man from the groom’s side is invited to help make her up. The Chakmas call this man the ‘Shāvālā’. On the verge of seeing off her, the bride’s people bless her. After the blessing, the bridal party starts back for the groom’s house with the bride. They are accompanied by ‘Shāyālā’ or ‘Shā yālī’ (companions), the two boy companions of the groom, and the two girls companions of the bride. It is prohibited for the marriage guests to halt at any household on their way back. Meanwhile, at the groom’s house, a Sadavā woman accompanied by six unmarried women goes to the river to fetch water. One of the young women carries flowers on two pieces of banana leaves. Another carries two burning lamps on two earthen pitcher-lids. The flowers are left adrift in the river. Before filling the pitchers with water, the Sadavā woman places betel leaves and betel nuts on the two banana leaves and sets them adrift in the river. If the two banana leaves are found floating side by side, it is interpreted as a sign that the couple will have a future of conjugal happiness, and man and wife, it is thought, will be to each other’s liking. This rite is called the “Āgpāṇi Kum Tulānā”. On coming back to the groom’s house, the two young women place the two pitchers full of water on both side of the main entry of the house. The two pitcher-lids with the lamps are placed on the mouths of the pitchers. The two pitchers are tied together with seven rounds of thread round their necks. The thread is called the “Sātnāli sūtā”. The new bride has to enter the house by tearing off this seven-fold thread. This symbolizes the bride’s tearing off of ties with her former lineage. The bride and the bridegroom are seated side by side in a room. The bride sits on left of the groom. By the side of the two, there sit the Shāyālā and Shāyālīs. One of the Shāyālā and Shāyālīs or companions stands up with a piece of white cloth in hand and enquires of everybody, “Jorā bāṇi dibār hugum āgeni nei?” (Is there permission to bind these two into a couple, or not?). In reply everyone present shouts, “Āge, Āge” (there is permission). Then, the white cloth is fastened round the waists of the couple. The objective of asking the above-mentioned question is to obtain attestation from everybody present to the fact that the marriage is solemnized in a valid way. This is a customary way of coupling. After this, the ‘Chungulaṅg’ worship is performed by a village ‘Ojā’ (lay priest). The materials of the

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worship are a sow, three chickens, an egg, some rice-paddy and some khai (rice puffed and husked by heating). The chickens and the sow are slaughtered in honor of the gods. Then the couple and all others pay homage to gods. When the marriage is performed, the new couple must pay homage to all superiors. The superiors, also, bless them. The above popular rituals compose a usual Chakma marriage ceremony.

3. Conclusion

There are various ethnic groups in the Buddhist society of Bangladesh. Their marriage ceremonies vary somewhat from one another, particularly in terms of the popular rituals practiced. Both religious and popular rituals play a vital role in all their marriage ceremonies, but the different ethnic groups lay different emphasis on these two types of rituals. In the case of Chakma Buddhist marriage ceremonies, popular rituals are relatively predominant. It is also noteworthy that the respective ethnic groups of Buddhist society in Bangladesh maintain community distinctions in many ways, such as by the practice of endogamy.

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7) ibid. p.100.
8) In the case of Barua Buddhists, the Suttas uttered by Bhikkhus in performing the coupling ceremony are found : MN II, pp. 97ff, Sn, pp. 46ff, Khp. p.157ff., J. II, p.35., AN. I., p. 24; or Saddhamma Ratnamala by Dharmapal Bhikkhu, Calcutta 1967.
9) The mantras uttered by the ‘Ojā’ is difficult to understand. I did not find any literary books on it.

(Key Words) Chakma, Barua, marma, marriage, Ojā

(Research Fellow, Aichi Gakuin University)