

A CASE STUDY ON THE POPULAR RITUALS OF MARMA BUDDHISTS IN BANGLADESH

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Abstract

Marma is a microscopic Buddhist ethnic community in Bangladesh, who mainly live in Chittagong Hill Tracts and follow Theravada Buddhism. Though they have every regard for the Bangladeshi National Jurisdictions, they have their own administrative body of jurisdiction. They have their own language, traditional dress and observe colorful popular rituals, through which they keep their identity as a distinct community. In this article, it has explored some popular rituals of Marma Buddhists and to uncover the meaning and understand them regarding these rituals.

Keywords : Marma, Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bomang Circle, Mong Circles, Arakan, God Shani.

1. Introduction

The Buddhist community of Bangladesh consists of various ethnic minority groups and Marma is one of them. The Marmas mainly live in Rangamati, Khagrachhari, and Bandarban Districts of Chittagong Hill Tracts (here after CHT). However, some Marmas are also found in Cox's Bazar and Patuakhali. According to 1991 Census, the Marma is the second largest group contained 1,42,339 people within the tribal or indigenous groups. But Alex Dodson predicts that the number is high, at least 50,000. (Dodson, 2011:97) They speak a language that has great similarity and mutually intelligible with that of neighboring state of Myanmar called Arakan. Linguists consider it as a dialect of Myanmar (Burmese). The typical village houses of Marma's generally are built on wood or bamboo, and raised above the ground, with a ladder for entry. But those who live in the town area their houses are very similar to that of Bengali people. It is said that Mamas are migrated to Chittagong (here after CTG) and CHT from Arakan. The history says that the first wave of

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Marma people came to settle in CTG and CHT in the 15th century when Ali Khan (1434-1459) of Arakan occupied the southern part of CTG. But a large number of Arakanese fled to CTG and CHT in the last quarter of the 18th century during the war between Arakan and Burma being oppressed by tyranny and inhuman torture of the Burmese. In 1784, Burmese king completely conquered Arakan and the immigration of Marmas to CTG and CHT increased. (Barua and Ando, 2002: 67-68) It can be confirmed by a letter sent to Warren Hasting; the Governor General of Fort William¹ and from a report of East Bengal District Gazetteer.² In this regard, Alex Dodson holds that, “The Mughal Empire of the 17th century was no more indigenous to the Chittagong Hill Tracts than the Arakanese Empire. Further, historically, up until the mid to late-20th-century, there has never been significant Bengali settlement in the Hill Tracts. This means that during the period in question (when it is assumed that the Marma moved to the Hill Tracts in the 16th and 17th centuries), the Tracts were not only no part of Bangladesh (still centuries away), but were part of a non-Bengali empire, and had never been inhabited by Bengalis.” (Dodson, 2011:97)

Nowadays, the Marmas are inhabitant of Bangladesh, but they do not like to introduce themselves as Bengali. Though they have every regards for the Bangladeshi National Jurisdictions, they have their own administrative body of jurisdiction. (Marma, 2009: 43f) The Marmas are divided into two circles and controlled by two administrative bodies. They are: Bomang Circle and Mong Circles. The Marmas who live in the Bandarban region follow the Bomang administration and who live in the Khagrachari follow the Mong Administration. (Majid, 2004: 35-36) Every circle has a king. King is the chief of the circle. (Majid, 2000: 179) After king, there is a Headman who controls the Mauza and after headman, a village chief called Karbari controls the village. (Marma, 2000:19) Raja Devashis Roy described the administration of CHT elaborately. (Roy, 2000: 43-51)

The Marma Community consists of many small groups or clans. (Khan, 1999: 115) They are: Rigre-cha, Pelain-cha, Pelaingri-cha, Kekdain-cha, Wein-cha, Sorung-cha, Phrangroya-cha, Kyakpia-cha, Cereyan-cha, Maro-cha, Savok-cha, Chrokkhya-cha, Teingtachiyat-cha, Kyakma-cha, Langudu-cha, Melhuin-cha, Rakhain-cha or Rakhain etc., though these division are no longer as apparent. The Marmas follow Theravada Buddhism and observe various colorful popular rituals, which can be broadly associated with Southeast Asia. (Dodson, 2011:95) Through language, dress and popular rituals the Marmas represent their identity as a distinct community.

2. Objective of the Research

The following are the purposes of this research:

1. To explore some popular rituals of Marma Buddhists.
2. To uncover the meaning and understand them regarding these rituals.
3. To contribute to knowledge of religious culture.
4. To contribute to knowledge of the contemporary culture of Buddhist communities of Bangladesh.

3. Significance of the Research

The Buddhism of Bangladesh is of particular interest because it represents a minority religion that has been surviving for many centuries in a multi-cultural and multi-religious but Muslim-dominated country. Thus, this study offers lessons to other religious traditions in different places where fundamentalism and intolerance are threatening peace. Moreover, the research tries to elucidate ways, in which religious culture may help minority religious communities to maintain their distinctive identities in multi-cultural and multi-religious contexts.

4. Scope of the Research

Despite its importance, there is no prior systematic academic research on the subject. There are several reasons. Firstly, the Marma 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, most of the Marma Buddhists live in the remote and undeveloped regions of Bangladesh, and this affects research. This research, therefore, aimed to fill the gap in knowledge on this potentially significant theme.

5. Methodology of the Research

In this article, through a case study, the researcher focuses on the popular rituals observed by the Marma community who mainly live in the village area. It was also considered that their way of thinking as to these popular practices. (Marma, 2009: 19-20) It is noteworthy here that major information of this article was collected through fieldworks and interviews.

6. Popular Rituals Observed by the Marmas

6.1. Kheyang Pujā or the Worship of River

6.1.1 Objectives of the Worship

Tribal Buddhists of Bangladesh in general and Marmas particular perform this puja. Generally, this worship is done in the Marma society with collective and co-operative efforts of the villagers once a year in order to protect the village from flood, boat accident, typhoon, thunder and for the security of the village. (Tripura, 1994: 60) The worship is performed on the bank of a river that flows one way. Kheyang is a Marma word, which means river. As the puja or worship is offered in honour of the gods and goddess of the river, it is called Kheyang Pujā. In this ritual fourteen gods and goddesses are worshipped collectively. They are: 1) Kheyang Sangma, who is chief goddess of this worship and Kheyang is regarded as the Goddess of river; 2) Biyatri, who is the husband of the Kheyang Sangma; 3) Bhuta or ghost, army general of Kheyang Sangma; and other attendants namely: 4) Ahatya; 5) Motya; 6) Barshial, 7) Magini 8) Sitala Devi 9) Ola Devi 10) Shiva Kungari, 11) Bini Kungari 12) Olu Kungari 13) Phul Kungari and 14) Ka Kungari. According to the belief of the Marmas these gods and goddess causes serious disease.³

This worship is done according to the advice of Vaidya. Vaidya is one kind of physician who does treatments of the village people by astrology, horoscope counting, spells and charms. This ritual is mainly performed in rainy season. It is a costly ritual, so it is done collectively.

6.1.2 Materials of the Worship

The Vaidya advises the materials of worship according to the severity of the rainy season. At the advice of the Vaidya the chief of the village buy the materials. At least 8-12 kind of materials are needed in which parched corn and banana are must. Other common materials are: vegetables, flowers, eggs, molasses, candles, iron rot and banana leaf etc.

6.1.3 Procedures of the Worship

A bamboo hut is made on the bank of river. Then the articles are arranged artistically on a banana leaf. After it, it is placed in the hut. A consecrated pot fill with water, thread and mango-sprouts is also placed in the hut. All the villagers attend the function in the river side. First, the Vaidya offers prayer to the Buddha. Then, he spells various verses meaning of which inconceivable. Then, the villagers offer homage to the Kheyang Sangma, the goddess of river. After the worship a portion of the puja is floated in the river. Then the villager along with Vaidya

returns to the villages. The Vaidya then sprinkle water throughout the village from the consecrated pot. The thread is fastened on the boundary wall of the villager. The villagers also fasten a small thread in their hand as long as possible in order to get protection from boat accident. After finished the puja, a feast is arranged. The Vaidya is entertained with dainty food and villagers also enjoy the feasts.

The Marmas believe that if the worship is accepted by the gods and goddesses, the flood cannot affect the village and journey by boat is safe. The Vaidya can determine after the worship whether the worship is accepted or not. I hold interview with general people of village areas and found that they have strong faith on this worship. They showed many instances as prove. For example, once typhoons and thunder highly devastated the Gamaridala village and many people died. At last, by the performance of the worship, they were able to get rid of it.

6.2 Worship of Tree

6.2.1 Objectives of the Worship

The worship of a big tree and a river is community worship and performed on a Saturday or Tuesday immediately after the “Sangrai” ceremony which is held on the Bengali New Year day. The main objective of this community worship of an old big tree is to get rid of the natural calamities, epidemic, diseases caused by unhappy gods and goddesses.

It was told by the villagers in this worship that long before there was an outbreak of cholera in that area. Many people died due to this epidemic. At that time people were totally dependent on nature. To reduce the extant of death, the leader of the area sought help of the medicine man or Viddya. The Vaidya suggested to arrange a tree worship in the village.

From that time the convention of worshipping trees and rivers had started and is continuing till now. They consider the oldest tree and water bodies of the settlement as the custodians of the village or locality.

6.2.2 Materials of the Worship

The following items are taken to a specific place from all the houses of the village: Banana, Molasses, Milk (not boiled), coconut, cigar, a piece of sugarcane, binni rice (special rice produced by them), a packet of candles, various kinds of wildflower, small flags made of coloured papers. All these items together are termed in the Marma language as “Suiang”.

6.2.3 Procedures of the Worship

The villagers take all the accumulated items in a bamboo made basket and proceed towards the selected tree in a procession. At that time they play different musical instruments. Upon arrival at the spot they keep the items carried in the basket and utter different religious jargons or hymns. The worship of the river starts with the firing the guns or a big sound. The people then go towards the tree for worship and keep some items carried with them under the tree. During worship they utter some words meaning. “Today we, all the people of this settlement, are worshipping (in honour of) you (river and tree) so that for the whole year you will please save us from the different diseases, miseries and sorrows. Also please allow us to grow more crops”. In the Marma language this will be as follows: *‘Bani kaidoro raisu roasa akungsu akhorasa, kraing saganah. Phuliopadeh akomaka noile pailoong akung sudo, mokong roga. Aingndra maga kang luoi paje, leyakoinga chihbua majoa rabaje ruknaing! Raing sumah nang moklong fakmagah ro wai lo baje.’*

In the early days there was a taboo that no outsider would be allowed to enter the village for the remaining part of the day after the worship was over. If anyone enters the village during the forbidden time, he would have to pay all the cost incurred for the worship. But nowadays this restriction is not enforced. It is noted here that no female can participate in this worship.

6.3 Chhini –Proti or Shani Pujā (the worship of God Shani)

6.3.1 Objectives of the Worship

This is a very popular and common worship in Bangladesh practice by all religious communities. According to Hindu Mythology, Shani is a god of planet, and all mischief is done by him. (Wilkins, 1974: 435.) Many stories are told his evil influence, and consequently the Hindus fear evil from this planet. It was Shani who was said to have burnt off Ganesha’s head. Hindu householders offer worship to him every Saturday evening. “If a person is born under the planet Shani, he will be slandered and his riches will be dissipated, his son, wife, friends will be destroyed; he will live at variance with others and endure many sufferings.” This is a common belief shared by all communities as to the god Shani. The Marmas also worship the god Shani to get rid of all misfortunes and misshapeness. If any family suffers repeated misfortune in the form of disease, premature death or loss of property, the family thinks that it is the influence of evil spirit of Shani. Then, this worship is performed in order to get rid of above mentioned misfortunes and misshapeness. (Barua and Ando 2002: 134)

Hindus perform this worship gorgeously, but in the case of Marma, the warship is very simple. The Method is also different from that of Hindu. In the case of Hindu, the Brahmin performs it, but in the case of Marma two expert male persons perform it.

This worship can be performed only Saturday evening because Saturday is considered as the day of God Shani. So, this day is also called Shanibar in Bengali language.

6.3.2 Materials of the Worship

The most important ingredients of this worship are *Mangala Ghat* and *Sinni*. Moreover, betel and betel nuts, candle, incenses, flowers are also needed. *Mangala Ghat* means a consecrated pot, which is filled with water, mango sprouts, and fastened with white thread. On the other hand, *Sinni* is a delicious liquid which is prepared with rice and wheat powder, banana, molasses or sugar, milk, curd, coconut, juice of jackfruits, camphor and water.

6.3.3 Procedures of the Worship

This worship is performed in the yard of the house of the worshipper. It cannot be performed in the house and in the monastery. First, a place in the house yard is cleaned and a mat is stretched in the yard. Then, the selected two male persons start to worship. First, taking a portion from all the materials they arrange it in a decorative way and made five heaps or puja (heap of the materials) and placed the five heaps on a banana leaf. Then, the banana leaf is placed on the mat. The materials for puja cannot touch by the women in a belief to impurity. They believe that the women remain impure, so, if they touch it the worship will be spoiled by the impurity. As result, the god Shani, will not accept it. After that the two male persons offer prayer to the Buddha and god Shani. Then, the house holder along with his family members offers prayers to the Buddha and pay homage to the god Shani saying the following word: *'Oh god! I am suffering from various misfortunes. Oh god! Please accept my puja (worship) and I hope you will be satisfied by accepting this puja and rescue me from all misfortunes.'* All the villagers also attend the function.

No invitation is required to attend the worship. Hearing the news they attend the function. The reason is that every person wishes to get rid of sufferings. They attend the function for own interest and welfare. So, no invitation is offered. After the worshipping of the family, the villagers also pay homage in the same manner.

The materials used in the worship are thrown on the roof of the house. The reason is that the God Shani lives in the sky. He is the god who is not welcomed in the house. The monks discourage it as contrary to the Buddhist tenet. The monks regard it as superstitions. So, it cannot perform in the monastery.

Then after, a kind of liquid is prepared by mixing the rice powder, molasses, milk, banana and water. This is a delicious liquid, which is popularly known as Sinni. This Sinni is offered to all presents and among the neighbours also. But the peculiar aspect of this worship is that the Sinni (liquid) cannot be drunk under the roof of the house but must be drunk in the open air as the Shani is not a welcomed god. In case of other god and goddess, they are welcome and embraced, but Shani is not invited to come. They worship Shani to get rid of him. They believe that the Sinni is empowered by god Shani. By drinking it, all sort of diseases and misfortunes drive away. This is very popular as male and female member do it with enthusiasms and zeal.

This worship is very popular in the Marma society. They perform it in order to protect the village from evil spirits that causes disease and misfortunes. (Dewan, 1989: 39) It is done when disease breaks out in epidemic form in the village they think that it the influence of evil spirits. So, they perform this worship to get rid of it. But it cannot be performed in the monastery. Before the worship three or seven days has to pass eating only vegetables. All sort of fish and meats are prohibited in those days. After this, the ritual is performed.

Iron rot, white thread, rice, banana, parched corn and consecrated pot filled with water and mango sprouts. The iron rot symbolizes the shield against the evil spirit. The Marmas believe that the evil spirits fears the iron rot.

Vaidya performs this worship. It is done in secluded place far from village. The Vaidya uttering various charms and counting astrology determine the place where the evil spirits live on. Then, along with some elder villagers the Vaidya goes to the place. First, the Vaidya make a heap artistically by the materials. Then, the heap is placed in a basket made of bamboo on a banana leaf and offers it to evil spirit. Then the Vaidya offer prayers to the Buddha and then utters various spells. At that time the attendants should be silent. After that the Vaidya scattered the materials of worship on the spot of worship. The iron rots is put on the ground of the spot and thread is fastened around the spot by bamboo pole. By the uttering of spell bound and counting astrology the Vaidya determine whether the worship is accepted or not by the evil spirits and he inform the matter to the villagers. If the evil spirits is

satisfied then Vaidya returns to village and scattered the rice and sprinkle water in the abodes of men and domestic animals and all over the village uttering spells and charms. He also fastens white thread around the village and put iron rot various places of the village uttering spells and charms. Thus, the village is protected from influence of the evil spirits. After finished the worship the Vaidya is entertained with dainty food and some money is given as his fees. The Marmas deeply believe that by this worship evil spirits cannot harm them.

6.4 Abong Ma or the Worship of Paddy Goddess

6.4.1 Objectives of the Worship

The aim of this worship is to express gratitude and thanks to the paddy goddess for the abundance of paddy in their field. This is done before harvesting in the full moon day of Agrahayana, the eight month of Bengali calendar. It is very popular in the Marma and Chakma communities. (Dewan, 1989: 25)

6.4.2 Materials of the Worship

Rice, banana, candle, incenses, cakes, hen, a chopper and a consecrated pot like other worships are needed to perform this worship.

6.4.3 Procedures of the Worship

The farmers go with a Vaidya to the paddy field prior to harvesting on a full moon day. All the materials are mentioned above are carried with them. First, a platform of bamboo is built in a corner of the field. Then, the Vaidya arrange the edibles of worship in a decorative way on a banana leaf and placed it on the platform. A hen is sacrificed and cooked it there. Then, the cooked meat of the hen is offered to the paddy goddess. Rice is also cooked there. Then, they offer prayers to the Buddha. Then, the Vaidya utters various spells and charms and pay homage to the paddy goddess. The farmers also pay homage saying: *'Oh paddy goddess, please accept the worship and satisfy with worship give abundance of paddy in our field.'* Then, the Vaidya scattered the worship's materials over the field saying 'Oh Goddess! Accept it and returns us in abundance. After it, the Vaidya sprinkles water from the consecrated pot uttering spells and charms.

After finishing the worship, the Vaidya along with the farmers enjoy a feast. After feast, the farmers go back home cutting some paddy plants and hanging them in the middle pole of the house. After cutting the paddy, having cooking first it is offered to Buddha before their eating. A feast is also arranged for the villagers. The

Marma firmly believe that if the goddess is pleased by the worship there must be abundance of paddy. One elder farmer of Marma community informed me that he became rich by the worship of paddy goddess. By the grace of goddess their fields give bumper production. This is only the worship in which animal is sacrificed.

6.5 Kaingfa Mring or the Worship of Earth Goddess

6.5.1 Objectives of the Worship

The worship is offered to the earth goddess for abundance of crops. This is performed in the rainy season, in the month of Asara, the third month of Bengali calendar. Generally it is done before plugging the paddy field. It is very popular to the women so it can be considered as fertility cult. After the first day of plugging the paddy field, the plugging is stopped for three consecutive days. They think that in those three days the earth goddess undergoes menstruations and it would be unwise to do anything that can harm her as she menstruated. So, tilling is suspended for three days. [Roy, 1400 (Bengali Year): 488].

6.5.2 Materials of the Worship

Like other worships, cakes and various fruits such as jackfruit, banana etc. are needed to perform this worship.

6.5.3 Procedures of the Worship

The materials of worship are arranged artistically dividing into many heaps. Then, put on a banana leaf, it is places placed in the south corner of the abodes of men and domestic animals and in the field of crops. They offer it saying: *'Oh Earth Goddess! Please satisfy with this worship and give wealth in many forms.'*

Many housewives informed that they have strong faith on this goddess and attribute their prosperity to her blessings. Besides, these worships the Marmas also believe in the efficacy of amulets, stones, astrology and charms.

7. Conclusion

Though the Marmas follow the Theravda Buddhism, they worship various gods and goddess. Though it is contrary to the Theravda Buddhism, it occupied a predominant position in their mind. Even today they approach to local physician who does treatment by astrology, spells and charms. They do it with a hope in worldly gains. The important aspects of these rituals are that they have no

connection with monastery and with society of monks. Moreover, with the spread of education and propagation of Theravada Buddhism this sorts of tendencies are going to decline for these rituals day by day. So, these sorts of worships are not found in the educated Marma society. But there are many sources of mythology are lying in this sort of culture. Many ingredient of ancient culture can be discovered through the research of these worships.

Notes

¹The following is mentioned in the letter: I have the pleasure to acquaint you of two thousand people of Arakan having deserted their Country and come to settle in this Province. I have therefore allotted them some ground on terms agreeable to the enclosed Potta, which with good treatment. I hope will induce them to stay and cause more to come as this Province wants many people of the cultivation of the waste land. (Islam, 1978: 73f).

²The report: "Great efforts were made by the East India Company to induce these immigrants to settle down peaceably, and lands were allotted to them in Cox's Bazar." (O'Malley, 1908: 58).

³The Marma people also believe in the existence of another three types of gods. These are called "agachu," "rokoju" and "bonguju." Besides, they offer worship to the gods of four directions. They are: Datharatha (God of the west), Weerulaka (God of the east), Goera (God of the north) and Weerupaka (God of the south).

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