



Nuakhai : Festival of Social Harmony

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Festivals are the occasion that reinforce the presence of gods and goddesses in the life of individuals and bind them to the community. Those are also moments for the people and to be a part of age-old, yet still vibrant and living traditions¹. Festivals are also full of enjoyment, when they coincide with agricultural events such as Nuakhai or Navanna celebrated in West Odisha on the day of Bhadrava Suklapaksha Panchami every year. Webster's Dictionary defines the term festival as "a day or time of religious or other celebrations marked by feasting, ceremonies or the observance". Festival is celebrated by one religious or sub group, group, a tribe or a community with exceptions to few individuals. Foods, sweets, fruits, nuts etc. prepared during the festivals are specific. Such an agro-based religious festival is Nua Khai, which is celebrated in Western Odisha with much pomp and gaiety is quite unique and colourful is discussed in the present paper.

As we know majority of the population in India are agriculturalists. West Odisha where both tribals and non-tribals coexist side by side depend on agriculture, some are farmers and some are farm labourers. The staple food of West Odishan people is rice i.e., Anna, the central point of life circle of the Universe. Therefore the

following verse is told by Lord Krishna to Arjuna in Bhagvat Gita:

*Annat bhavanti bhutani parjyanat anna sambhava
Yajnat bhavanti prajanya jagnya karma sambhuvah
Karma brahmobhavam vidhi brahmakshara samudhavam
Tasmait sarvagatam brahma nityam jagnye pratisthitam².*

Nature poet Gangadhar Meher also depicted the importance of *anna* in the following verse:

*Anna eka atai visva muladhara
Ekavakye samasthe gayaho annara jayakaraho³*

Anna is the centre of the whole universe. Therefore this navanna or *nuakhai* festivals give much importance to *anna* with a special celebration. *Nuakhai* is not merely a tradition or festival but it mainly concentrate on the worship of food grain or rice which is the manifestation of life itself. Regarding the origin of Nuakhai there is no concrete evidence when exactly it was celebrated in Western Odisha. Historically and archaeologically it is proved that food grain or *anna* has a very important role in the agrarian culture of Vedic, Mesopotamia and Indus Valley Civilization. According to oral tradition during the reign of first Chauhan king Ramai Dev of Patna (1355-1380 A.D.) Nuakhai was introduced as a state festival. Raja Ramai Dev had understood the role of peasants and tribals of Western Odisha in order to consolidate his newly created Chauhan

Empire, its capital city being at Patnagarh. Therefore in order to appease and satisfy the local populace Ramai Dev accepted their age old tradition of Nua Khai and the tribal Goddess Samalei as the tutelary goddess of Chauhan dynasty. Nuakhai became a state festival which played a major role in the life and society of the people resulted in the state formation in medieval Odisha⁴.

In early medieval Odisha Nuakhai was celebrated by the local tribals and peasants on specific date and *tithi* of the year with lot of festivities and rituals when they start their life afresh with new crops. However with the formation of small principalities and kingdoms during the later period, Nuakhai was celebrated according to the *Tithi* and date assigned by the respective royal priests decided in the name of presiding gods and goddesses. For example the *Tithi* (day) and *Lagna* (auspicious moment) for the celebration of *navanna* is decided astrologically by the royal priest of Manikesvari temple at Bhawanipatna, in case of Bolangir and Patnagarh in the temple of Patnesvari and at Sundargarh and Sonepur in the temple of Sekharavasini and Suresvari respectively. The head priest in those temples offer *Navanna* to the presiding deities and then only people in the locality take *navanna*. Therefore, there was not a common day for the observance of this festival. However during 1991 the then Chief Minister of Odisha late Biju Patnaik passed a historic order to celebrate this occasion on the day of Bhadrava *Suklapaksha Panchami*, the day following Ganesh Puja has been declared as State Holiday.

Such a festive occasion which is basically agrarian in nature has a special significance in the social and cultural life of the people of Western Odisha. After hard work throughout the year the farmers become extremely happy when they see the golden crops in the paddy fields. They become beholden and prepared to rejoice this occasion

on a special event and that is the occasion of Nuakhai. All the family members wherever they stay assemble together in their respective homes. The surroundings of the houses are made neat and clean, members of the family wear new clothes. Preparations for this occasion start before fifteen days. People used to purchase different items like clay pots, bamboo baskets, *puja* items like banana, ghee, gud etc. and groceries. Just before one day of the *Navanna* the head of the family goes to the paddy field to collect the new crop in the paddy field. Before collecting the new crop the head of the family conducts special rituals and *puja* with milk, flower, ghee, unboiled rice facing towards east. Then he collects the crops and came to the house. At house also the senior most lady of the family receive the new crops in the same manner of rituals. In the night the lady members prepare different ingredients for the next day's food. For special *pitha* (cooked cakes) and *Manda* they grind the rice with the help of pestles. Leaves from the trees of Mahul, banana, kure, rengal etc. collected for the Nuakhia by different communities. For example the Kulta caste eat Nua on Mahul leaves, the Brahmins take Nua on sal and banana leaves and members of the other communities eat Nua on Kure leaves⁴. Ladies bring water from the well in the night for the next day's *puja* and for the preparation of food. On the day of Navanna senior lady members wake up early in the morning and take bath and remain busy for the preparation of the event. On this occasion cows and bullocks are also bathed and they are worshipped with special *puja* and rakhees are put on their horns and bodies. They are offered with green grass plentifully. Because the help of those domestic animals are quite noteworthy for agricultural operation. This is an exhibition of gratitude and respect to domestic animals. In the morning the head of the family goes to the paddy field and offer *puja* rituals to the earth mother and deities of the paddy field. The

family deities at home are offered with *nua* and other sweets like *Manda Pitha* and *Khiri*. Then only all the family members sit together to eat *nua* with the performance of special rituals. The youngsters paid respect to their elders and the elders bless to the young. This event is popularly known as *Nuakhai Juhar Bhet*. This includes exchange of greetings with relatives, family members and members of other communities as well. Then the group eating starts with different varieties of food items like rice, *dal*, *sabji*, and *hendua karadi khata*, *saga bhaja*, *khiri*, *pitha*, *manda* etc. In the afternoon the members of different communities go to the nearby temples to pay *darshan* to the local deities on this special occasion. Different type of games and sports, *kusti* etc. are organized in the locality which becomes quite interesting. In the evening Nuakhai Bhetghat meetings, folk cultural events like *dalkhai*, *rasarkeli*, *mailajada*, *ghumra*, *bazasal* etc. are organized which becomes quite enjoyable.

During this occasion the enemies become friends. People forget their differences and forgive to the persons who commit mistakes. This is an example of unity in the society. Nuakhai has a great contribution to social harmony and solidarity. It teaches unity in diversity and the whole world a family i.e., Vasudhaiva Kutumvakam. In true sense of the term it is a festival of the masses or *gana parva*.

Now a days Nuakhai Bhetghat are being observed and organized at different metropolis like Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Chennai, Kolkata etc. by the people of non-resident west Odishans who are unable to attend the Nuakhai festival in their respective villages. Even in abroad like United States, United Kingdom, Japan, people from Odisha celebrate Nuakhai Bhetghat. This occasion bind them together with social harmony, unity and friendship. The west Odishan culture and music like traditional Sambalpuri folk music,

dance and food are exhibited on this occasion. During the last forty years in the capital city of Bhubaneswar Nuakhai Bhet Ghat are being organized by the people residing in Bhubaneswar and nearby places. But this festival is observed much after the scheduled date of Nuakhai Bhetghat depending upon the suitable occasion. This is an noble endeavour for the preservation, documentation and exhibition of West Odishan folk music and culture which are fast vanishing.

Though the celebration of Nuakhai has changed in course of time but the main cause of this *navanna* continues to be a vital force i.e., the spirit is the spirit or the gratefulness that man have for the almighty for good harvest for the sustenance of life on the earth⁵. Therefore Nuakhai is a very unique festival in the whole country where both tribal and non-tribals participate and bind them in the force of unity, cohesion and brotherhood and the collective ritual offering to gods and goddesses for all their blessings.

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