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NUAKHAI: FROM A FOLK RITUAL TO A CULTURAL IDENTITY OF WESTERN ODISHA

Abstract

Nuakhai is a harvest festival celebrated across western Odisha, India. It is a festival that gives sanction to 'eating of new rice' by first offering to deity. Practically it binds the members of the society together in the thread of unity. Celebration of Nuakhai is not a recent phenomenon. It has evolved historically from family level to regional level. Evidently, Nuakhai has emerged as the most important Gana Parva (public festival) in the western part of Odisha. Presently "Nuakhai Bhetghat" (meet), is done by the Odia people not only in Odisha but also in outside the State and country. It binds the Odia people together, links them with their cultural moorings, reinforce sense of solidarity and defines an identity. Present study explores its historical evolution, describes the celebration and inclusive nature. The study is based on both primary data collected from the field and available secondary sources.

Keywords: *Nuakhai, agriculture, rice, unity, deity, consumption, music and dance*

Introduction

Festivals and rituals are essential aspects of tribal religion and society and other communities as well. Anthropologists study the performative aspects of ritual and are interested in how participants “constitute through their actions” (Rosman and Rubel, 1981: 275). They establish a good relationship with unseen powers through various rites, rituals and festivals (Nath, 2004). The local tradition of ritual varies. Externally it seems to be different. But the ideas and values behind the ritual may be the same, i.e., the propitiation of deity for welfare and happiness. Traditions play an essential role in generating a kind of “we feeling” among the people. It brings in guests, enhances social solidarity, and provides the opportunity for strengthening the social network. It is also a time for merry-making and rejoicing. Ritual does not simply mirror society and culture, but helps to shape its defining features - both sacred and secular (Nath, 2008).

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Nuakhai is a famous festival of Western Odisha that possesses an extraordinary place in the life and culture of people of the region. The festival is celebrated with much pageantry and delight in all parts of Western Odisha, particularly in Sambalpur, Bolangir, Sundergarh, Bargarh, Jharsuguda, Sonepur, Boudh, Nuapada and Kalahandi districts. It has evolved from tribal tradition to a cross-cultural identity marker in the region. Almost all tribes of this region like Kutia Kondh, Dongria Knndh, Saura, Penga, Paraja traditionally offer their first crops to their respective deities before eating at family level. In fact offerings of new crops first to deity is a tradition of tribal and agricultural communities of India.

Nuakhai is the harvest festival that gives sanction to 'eating of new rice' by first offering to deities in the region. Apparently it has religious connotation at the core. This festival like similar agricultural festivals underlie trust of people in gods and goddesses as givers of food. Whatever is obtained from the nature, whether forest or land is attributed to the divinity. No doubt hunter-gatherers before going to hunt appease forest deity. Agriculturists, shifting or settled, perform rituals at different stages of agriculture. India being an agricultural nation, agricultural festivals have pan-India character, though they vary as per the topographical area and religion. Therefore, each state/local area observes agricultural festivals such as Bihu in Assam; Baishakhi in Punjab, Hariyana, Uttar Pradesh; Pongal in Tamilnadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telanhgana and Karnatak; Onam in Kerala, Karma and Hariyali in Jharkhand and so on.

Nuakhai, the harvest festival has religious connotation due to divine and agriculture connection in the belief system.. The religious philosophy behind the festival is to show gratitude to deity from whose grace crops are grown and harvested. Therefore, before eating these crops they are offered to the deity who has given the bounty; and at the same time to implore the blessings for next good harvest. In this sense *Nuakhai* is a form of thanks giving by 'offering first crops' and beseeching blessings for sanctification of land and good yields following year. Over the years, this regional agricultural festival has evolved as *Gana Parva* (mass festival) in the western part of Odisha having its root in tribe specific belief in *economy-divine connection*. Not only it has assumed the character of a regional festival across communities-tribes and non-tribes, it has incorporated secular dimensions in course of its evolution and thereby displaying a regional 'cultural whole'. The secular dimension is more crucial for it being the occasion of reinforcing social bonds, fostering a sense of across-community unity and solidarity, particularly in the region, and showcasing cultural richness by performative actions. Presently "*Nuakhai Bhetghat*" (meet), an important component of the festival, is celebrated by the Odia people, particularly organised by people of Western Odisha, outside the state. The celebration outside binds the Odia together and links, those who live outside, with their culture and tradition, reinforce sense of solidarity, and

defines a 'regional cultural identity' and thus 'cultural pluralism' in which each community performs independently and at the sametime collectively.

In view of the above. the current study is designed to explore its historicity, describe the celebration, and its inclusive nature as are reflected in the emerging 'regional cultural identity'.

Objectives

The objective of the paper is to explore and investigate the origin and historical background of *Nuakhai*; to unfold the contemporary trend of celebration of Nuakhai at the individual and village levels; to analyse the sacred dimensions, places and persons associated with the celebration of *Nuakhai*; to analyse the social inclusion and exclusion in *Nuakhai* festival.

Methodology

The current study is qualitative in nature. It adopts exploratory and descriptive methods of presentation and anlysis. The study has drawn data from both primary and secondary sources. Secondary information for the current paper was gathered from various books, newspapers, pamphlets, articles etc. For collection of primary data field study was conducted in different villages of Sambalpur district which is the heart of Western Odisha. The procedure of snowball sampling method of identifying respondents was followed for assortment of essential information. Participant observation, key informant interview (KII) and focused group discussion methods (FGD) were used to gather relevant information. FGD was conducted among the elderly persons of the villages (Kudamunda and Kantapali) to know the different steps of celebration of *Nuakhai*. KII of few priests of Samaleswari temple were taken. Both the authors belong to the region and have been participating/observing festival since childhood for more than 35 years. Since the reseearch is both exploratory and descriptive, information on various issues pertaining to *Nuakhai* have been discussed with reference to different components of the celebration. Qualitative data were analysed using the method of content analysis.

Western Odisha and People

Geographically western Odisha includes Sambalpur, Bolangir, Sundergarh, Bargarh, Jharsuguda, Sonapur, Boudh, Nuapada and Kalahandi districts. Western Odisha occupies a unique place in the map of Odisha because of its distinctive cultural identity. The region is famous for its handloom textiles, popularly known as Sambalpuri textiles which have earned international fame for unique pattern, design, and texture. Apart from textiles, Sambalpur has a rich and unique heritage of dance, music, ritual, and language. Different types of unique rituals and festivals are observed Sital Sasthi is observed in the month of June. This festival is the marriage ceremony of Lord Shiva and

Parvati. *Nuakhai* is the most important socio-religious festival observed in the month of *Bhudo* (September). *Bhai-jiuntia* festival is celebrated on the *Mahastami* – the 8th Day of Durga Puja in the month of *Aswin* (October). The *Pu-jiuntia* festival is observed in the month of *Aswin* (October) by mothers to invoke the grace of Lord *Duti-bahana* for the long life and prosperity of their sons. *Gundi Khai* ritual is observed during the first eating of mango in the month of *Faguna* (March). The present paper focuses on *Nuakhai* festivals of Western Odisha.

Tribal Origin of *Nuakhai*: Myth or Reality?

It is held in many quarters that *Nuakhai* has tribal origin. There are also efforts to trace its origin to Vedic period when the *rishis* (sages) had talked of *panchayajna*, the five essential activities in the annual calendar of an agrarian society. These five activities have been specified as *sitayajna* (the tilling of the land), *pravapanayajna* (the sowing of seeds), *pralambanayajna* (the initial cutting of crops), *khalayajna* (the harvesting of grains) and *prayayanayajna* (the preservation of the produce) (Pasayat, 2007: 43). Though from these five activities, *Nuakhai* is not explicit, it is an implied component the third activity, namely, *pralambanayajna*. In Vedic tradition *yajña* (sacrifice) is an important injunction on how to lead religious life even in worldly engagement. In sacrifice is ingrained recognition to divinity as giver and gratitude to them thorough offerings. It is quite clear in 13th verse of third Chapter in Bhagavat Gita. It reads:

*yajña-æhichmâúhina% santo muchyante sarva-kilbichai%
bhuñjate te tvaghaA pâpâ ye pachantyâtma-kâraGât.*

Its literal menaing is: The religious minded people eat food after it is first offered to God in a ritualistic sacrifice. These people are released from all kinds of sin. Others, who cook food for personal enjoyment, verily eat only sin.

A casual researcher particularly, in tribal studies, knows that food comes from two sources, namely hunting-gathering and agriculture, i.e. from production. In the above Vedic injunction, food obtained from both sources are meant for ritualistic sacrifice. Ritualistic sacrifice in hunting and gathering activities is often a before hand phenomenon in which guardian spitis of animals, forests, trees, rivers, hills are appeased or propitiated for safety and success. Even after completion of hunting, several tribes are known to perform rituals to pacify the guardian spirit and soul of the hunted animal before ritualitstic community sharing.

In agricultural tribes, it is observed that people perform rituals before and during various stages of agricultural operation like *Mati chhuan* (digging soil), *bihan buna* (showing seed) etc. Result of all the pre-harvest rituals reflects in good harvest. Even if harvest is not good, whatever has been resulted is

believed to be the desire of the divinity. Bad crop is viewed as punishment that requires appeasement for not experiencing such punishment following year. So the tradition continues and rituals performed. Eating of new crop is such a ritual aimed to show gratitude in case of good harvest and to seek forgiveness in case of bad crops resulting from human mistakes. So post-harvest rituals like offering of new crops to deity are crucial practices in agricultural festivals.

Earlier studies on tribes suggest the ritual of eating new crops existing among the tribes. Singh (1982), for instance, lists the presence of *Nuakhai* ritual in all the major tribes inhabiting central and eastern India. Each tribe has its own name for the ritual. It is evident, therefore, that the ritual was community specific though it existed across the communities with a minor difference in terminology. We can cite the examples of *Jeth Nawakhai* celebrated among the Dudh Kharia and Pahari Kharia, *Nawa khani* amongst the Oraon and Birjia, *Jom Nawa* among the Munda *Janther* or *Baihar-Horo Nawai* by the Santal, *Gondli Nawakhani* by the tribal people of Ranchi district, *Nawa-Jom* by the Birhor, *Dhan Nawakhani* by Korwa, and so on. Kandul parab is celebrated among the Kondhs of Rayagda district for eating cereal for the first time after harvest.

Russel and Hiralal (1975: 326) have also reported the *Nawakhani* festival of the Paraja, a small tribe found in the Bastar region and in undivided Korpaut district of Odisha. In present Nabarangpur district of Odisha tribes observe eating mango or Kendu (*Diospyros melanoxylon Roxb.*) after offering to the village or any other local deity.

Gautam (1977) observed a new corn offering and rice eating festival, *Jom Nawa*, of the Santals in Santal Pargana. Das Gupta (1978) has noted the *Nawa* ceremony of the Birjia, a section of the Asura tribe of the then Chhotanagpur. Bhaduri (1944: 149-50) presents a short note on the celebration of a festival of the Tripura known as *Mikatal* where *Mi* stands for rice and *Katal* means new. It is celebrated in the month of *Aaswina* (September–October).

Tribes of the Northeast India also celebrate the ritual of eating first fruit/crop. The Khamti tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, for example, celebrates *kin-khao-mao* (eating of new rice). Not only tribes, caste Hindus in rural areas, who are peasants, also celebrate eating of new rice. In the coastal districts of Odisha, the festival is called *Nabanna* by the caste-Hindus. In Bengal, even in Bangladesh, peasants in rural areas celebrate it. The Assamese also celebrate *Nau Kuwa* (*Nau* meaning new and *Khuwa* meaning eating).

In fact offering new crops to the divinity underlies the faith and belief that the supernatural power is the 'giver' and he should be 'reciprocated'. That is why tribes offer sacrifices to propitiate and appease deities for blessings, peace, health and progress. Similarly, Hindus take vow and on its fulfilment make offerings to the god. Moreover, *yajña* (sacrifice) is at the core of Hindu

religion.

From above discussion what is evident is that communities pursuing agriculture, whether shifting or settled, perform the ritual of eating new rice/fruit. Then the proposition that *Nuakhai* in Western Odisha has tribal origin is not logically sound. However, this statement has two implications. First, the region being tribal dominated even at present suggests that there were no non-tribal population in early times in the area. Non-tribal populace are later migrants. But these people and the people who came to establish state in the area had already the knowledge of agriculture. History informs that the kings came to expand agriculture in hill and forest areas inhabited by tribes. Obviously, being agricultural people they were not ignorant of eating of new rice. Arguably, they did not adopt the ritual of *Nuakhai* from the tribes; and moreover, the name *Nuakhai* suggests Sanskrit influence. It can not be argued that tribes adopted the ritual from the Hindu peasants. In fact the ritual was common to both groups. What transpires is that the ritual got institutionalised under state patronage and adoption and Hinduisation of tribal deity as titular deity of royal family (Samulai as state deity of Chouhans).

So, the point of argument is not who adopted the ritual of eating new rice from whom. What is crucial is that the ritual, with variations, is common to the communities in the region who depend on nature for foraging, hunting, and agriculture. This ritual performed by the communities of Western Odisha has grown in regional dimension after fixation of a date and declaration of the ritual as state holiday. At the backdrop of this growth underlies assertion of a greater cross-community identity and recognition to inter-community space created through state patronage during medieval period around this ritual. Arguably, the festival is an expression of cultural pluralism; it exists at the level of each community in one hand, and has transcended the communities to establish a regional space, and thus an identity coextensive with Western Odisha.

Tribal Ritual to Regional Identity

From Singh (1982) we learn that every tribe has a name for the ritual of eating new rice/crop. This alludes to community or culture specific nature of the ritual. But within the culture, the practice, even in our current time, shows family orientation of it also. Harvesting is done family wise and naturally eating of new rice has family context. Perhaps in olden days, if there were community harvesting, eating ritual would have been on the same day for all families individually or collectively; but we do not have evidence to substantiate.

What is evident is that the ritual is performed in every tribal-peasant family. Its community dimension reflects in its nature of community specificity and offerings made to deity of the community village or tribe. Political expediency and later identity question raised it from family, village, and tribe

levels to state level in medieval period and subsequently to regional level in our time. The nomenclature *Nuakhai*, a Sanskritised term, adopted across the communities in Western Odisha is a proof of its regional character. Its growth however, has a link with state patronage in mediaval period and later state governemnt's recognition.

According to oral tradition during the reign of the first Chauhan, king Ramai Dev of Patnagarh *Nuakhai* was introduced as a State festival in Odisha. Raja Ramai Dev had understood the role of peasants and tribals of Western Odisha to consolidate his newly created Chauhan Empire, its capital city being at Patnagarh. Therefore, to appease and satisfy the local populace Ramai Dev accepted their age-old tradition of *Nuakhai* and the tribal Goddess Samalei as the tutelary goddess of the Chauhan dynasty. Sambalpur has Samulai that played a significant role in the people's life and society, resulting in the State formation in Medieval Odisha (Deo, 2003).

In early medieval Odisha, *Nuakhai* was celebrated by the local tribals and peasants on specific dates and *tithi* (an astronomical unit of time roughly corresponding a day) of the year with many festivities and rituals when they would 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 of that region. For example, the *tithi* (day) and *lagna* (auspicious moment) for the celebration of the *navannah* 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 (Pasayat, 2007). So, there was not a single *tithi* for celebration of *Nuakhai* in different states of Western Odisha. The head priest of the titular deity of a state used to offer *Navanna* to the deity, and then only people in the locality took *navanna* (Singh, 2012). The festival transcended the community boundary during mediaval monarchy, but not had taken the regional character as it is today till 1991. Its celebration remained within the state boundary corresponding to mediaval states in the region and different dates.

However, during 1991 the then Chief Minister of Odisha Biju Patnaik passed a chronological order to celebrate this occasion on the day of Bhadrava *Sukla Paksha Panchami*, the day following Ganesh Puja and was declared as a state Holiday (*ibid.*). The celebration assumed a regional dimension having been celebrated in a single date.

The newly harvested paddy is sacred and treated with great respect. It is taboo to eat the new rice until ceremonial rituals are performed for the reigning deity. This is because they believe that the god is their lands' true master or mistress. As a token of reverence and adoration to the reigning god, the newly grown rice is first offered to the deity; then, the prasad (sacred

offerings) made out of it is accepted by the people before they eat the new rice. The common belief is that the ceremonial ritual acknowledges the deity's lordship over the land and the crop. In other words, it may be said that *Nuakhai* is a ritual after which the newly harvested rice gets the status of the consumable item for the general people (Pasayat, 2007).

Nuakhai – The Contemporary Celebration

Fixation of Date

There was no fixed day to commend the celebration in earlier days. It used to be held during any day of Bhadraba Sukla Pakhya Tula Lagna (the bright fortnight of fifth month of Odia/Hindu calendar named Bhadraba), determined by the village headman and priest. There are explanations behind the celebration in the long stretch of Bhadraba albeit the food grain isn't totally ready for reaping. The idea is to offer the grain to the deity sooner than any bird or animal eats it.

One of the respondents shared:

“The courses of action for *Nuakhai* begins roughly 15 days before the date of the festival, when the elderly individuals of the village sit together at a selected spot after the *dakua* (messenger) calls the inhabitants by blowing a trumpet. Then, people join and analyze with the priests the tithi and lagna (day and time) for *nuakhai*. Finally, the priest directs the *panjika* (astrologer) and pronounces the holy *muhurta* (a period identical to around 48 minutes) when *nua* is to be taken.

Nonetheless, a few sanskritised ritual components of non-tribals (fixation of a tithi for example) coexist along with those of tribals which manifest a cultural space beyond individual cultural space.

One of the key informant stated:

“There was an endeavor in the 1960s to set a typical *tithi* for the *nuakhai* celebration all around the western part of Odisha. It was concluded by stating that the festival was a non-functional thought and was dropped. In any case, the thought was once again introduced in 1991 to set the *Bhadraba Sukla Panchami tithi* for the *nuakhai* celebration. This became effective, and from that point forward, *nuakhai* has been celebrated on that day, and the Odisha State Government has proclaimed it as a holiday”.

Accordingly, since 1991, *nuakhai* has been celebrated on the day after Ganesh Chaturthi, which falls on the fifth day of the full-moon fortnight of the month of Bhadraba (fifth month of the Hindu/Odia year), which usually falls in the month of August and September according to the English calendar. In spite of the fact that, a single day is set for *nuakhai*, the sacredness of the ceremony has not lost its significance. Today, in any case, the process for

setting the *tithi* by calling the elderly people for an agreement doesn't occur. Priests sat collectively at the Brahmapura Jagannath temple in Sambalpur and decide the *lagna*. This indicates the presence of elements of both the original tribal festival and the Hindu religion.

Preparations before Nuakhai

The people in the Western Odisha area begin preparation for the occasion 15 days before the celebration. Then, at that point, nine type of arrangements are seen before the day of *parab* (festival), perceived as the nine stages. These nine stages comprise (i) *Beheren* (declaration of a gathering to mark the calendar), (ii) *Lagnadekha* (setting the real date for intake of new rice), (iii) *Dakahaka* (greeting), (iv) *Saphasutura and lipapuchha* (tidiness), (v) *Ghinabika* (buying), (vi) *Nuadhankhuja* (searching for the new yield), (vii) *Bali paka* (last ritual of *Nuakhai* by actually offering the new rice as offering to the deity to the divinity), (viii) *Nuakhai* (eating the new harvest as *prasad* followed by dancing and singing, and (ix) *Juharbhet* (regards to elders and gift giving).

The Rituals on the Day of Nuakhai

Nuakhai

Nuakhai is celebrated both at the community and family level. The customs are first found at the temple of the reigning deity of the area or village deity. In Sambalpur, at the specified *lagna*, the head priest of Samaleswari Temple offers the *nua-anna* or *nabanna* (new rice) to the goddess Maa Samaleswari, the presiding deity of the district Sambalpur.

Nuakhai at the Household Level

Nuakhai is observed at the family level with full pomp and ceremony. The members of the family clean the house much before the celebration, purchase of new clothes (as can be afforded) and items for *nuakhai puja*. It is customary for family members staying away from the home to arrive at home to celebrate this festival with the near and dear ones. Towards the beginning of the day of *nuakhai* the female members of the family put *jhuti* (designs made from the rice powder mixed with water) in the entrance of the house and the front yard. Soon after the *nabanna* is being presented to Maa Samaleswari as per the decided time schedule (muhurta/lagna) at the temple, *nua* (new) is provided to Maa Mahalaxmi at the family level. They perform customs like, *abhishek*, *dhupa*, *deepa*, *naibedya* and so forth. In *naibedya*, the *kheer* (rice pudding) ready with new paddy grains is being offered. Alongside the *kheer* numerous different things like *kaakara* (pan cake), *mandaa* (steamed rice made dumpling with inner fillings of coconut, jaggery, moon etc.), *puri* (deep fried bread made of wheat flour) additionally being given as *prasad*. It is

a custom to distribute *nua* by the eldest member of the family to other members. All the members of the household gather at a place to have *nabanna/nua*. In the first phase, every male members including the kids sit to consume *nua*. In the second phase female of family eat the *nua*. Before eating *nua*, it is a custom to bow down before the goddess at home followed by family *juhar*, younger ones offering respect to elder members.

At Village Level

In villages of Western Odisha, slight changes are noticed in *Nuakhai* celebration. Individuals clean their homes before the day of celebration. They do shopping before *nuakhai* which comprises new pieces of clothing for all the members of family (if the family has sufficient cash to spend), new pottery items, ingredients for puja and so forth. *Jhankar* (the village priest) distributes (bunch of new paddy panicles) new paddy bundles to every single household of the village day before the *nuakhai*. In the first part of the day, the *Jhankar* performs every ritual of *Nabanna puja* in front of the *Gramdevi*. Meanwhile, the farmers perform *khet puja* worshipping the mother earth at their respective agricultural fields. The various strides of the custom are *abhishek* (offering of water), offerings of *dhupa* (insecnce stick), *deepa* (lighting light) and *bhoga*; then, at that point, three *punji* (handful) of rice is offered to the mother earth. The farmer additionally offers (pours in the land) milk and asks the mother earth for grand harvest.

On returning from the agricultural field, they give the *nabranna* (new rice) to the goddess in their homes. After this part is over every one of the families comes out for the *juhar bhet* where all the youngers pay respect to the elders. They spend the rest of the day performing various kinds of group dances like *dalkhai*, *rasarkeli*, *mailajada*, *janhiphula*, and several others.

One of the respondents told that

The district of Bolangir observes the *Nuakhai* on the same date or *tithi*. In this area, on the eve of Ganesh Chaturthi, in the evening a procession goes to every temple having all the worshipping articles, including the bunches of *nabanna*; this is known as *Paahur Jatra*. In this jatra a newly made *Chhatar* (parasol) for the deity is being given. A myth behind this procession is that through this, the invitation for *nabanna* is being sent to the deities. In the morning of *nuakhai day* the ladies of the family fry the *nabanna* in a *paatli* (new earthen pot). After frying it, they grind it to make the *churaa* (beatedn rice). In this *churaa* they mix ghee and honey. This is known as *churaakuna*. First of all, this *churaakuna* is being offered to Maa Samleswari and Maa Pateneswari simultaneously. After that, each individual worships their *kuldevis* at their respective homes and offer the *nabanna*. After the puja, the head of the family distributes this *churaakuna* to all the family

members sitting together. The *nuakhai* festival concludes with the *juhar bhet*, where all the family members salute their elder.

Nuakhai Juhar

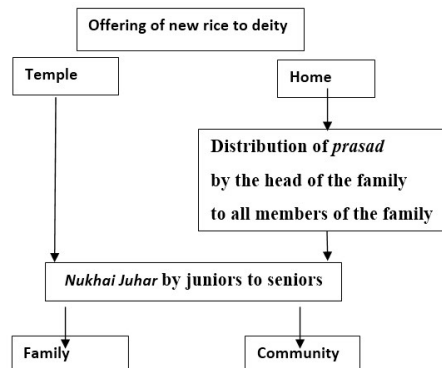
Certain individuals go to Maa Samaleswari temple to take her blessings. Others usually meet individuals around exchanging good tidings. The young people of the family make salute (*juhar*) to the elderly people. The elderly people bless the younger ones and wish them long life, satisfaction, and flourishing. *Nuakhia* is accompanied by the *nuakhai juhar* - the exchange of greetings with friends, well-wishers, and family members. The custom of “*nukhai juhar*” represents and builds up solidarity. This is an juncture for individuals to cast off their differences and renew relations.

Nuakhai Bhetghat – An emerging way of celebration in both in Village and Urban areas

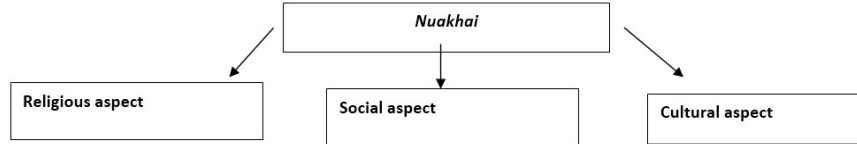
People play games like *kabaddi*, *du-du*, *gilli-danda*, playing cards, and so forth. The entire day is spent with great pump and show; cultural programmes are organized in the evening. Folk dances and melodies are organized under the banner of “*Nuakhai Bhetghat*”. Individuals dance to foot-tapping common Sambalpuri dance types like *rasarkeli*, *dalkhai*, *maelajada*, *nachnia*, and *bajnia* (Pradhan, 2011).

Nuakhai is a cohesive and unified force amongst people of the Western Odisha who are living outside the state. They join together and observe *Nuakhai* in urban areas for the past couple of years. Today, *Nuakhai*'s vibrance is much more prominent perceived and popular around the world. In this period of revenge, brutality, antagonism, *Nuakhai* gives the message of worldwide harmony and joy.

The day after, *Nuakhai* is broadly known as ‘*Nuakhai basi*’. A larger part of populace feast on non-veg and beverages. It's the day devoted to enjoyment and relaxation in the company of near and dear ones.



There is a type of interrelation of religious activity with social and cultural elements of life. This kind of interrelationship between the social, cultural and religious factors of life has existed in each and every non-industrial society since time immemorial. Ritual does not simply reflect society, culture and religion however help to shape its defining features.



The offering of rice, various dishes are a method of satisfying heavenly powers. Notwithstanding, since the connection between individuals and god/goddess emphasizes the subordination of humans; and humans can only hope for supernatural assistance in averting hardship, infection, and demise, and offering fertility. By and large, the space of the festival is a manifestation social, religious, and cultural aspects of life in combination.

Sacred Place and Person

Space is a “practised place”. No locale can be impartial, and regions can arise as invested with meaning and trigger positive or gloomy feelings: physical objects, human conduct and use of space affect the nature of space. Since the analysis of *Nuakhai* is carried out at the community level and individual level, the ceremonial spots of *Nuakhai* are the temple of the regional deity at the community level puja and puja room/place in one’s own personal home at the individual level.

Various types of individuals are engaged with the ceremonies/works of *nuakhai*. The priests in the temple, the head of the family, the women who prepare the *prasad*, and the different participants of the household who are involved in marketing and cleaning. The ritual people or the persons directly concerned with the ritual include the priest and head of the family, women who prepare *prashad* and are sacred specialists. The non-ritual people include all other people except the above persons.

At home, the head of the household (HoH) performs the *puja*. However, the married women prepare the *prasad* and make all prior puja arrangements. The cleanliness is the cup of tea of females, whereas the marketing is the duty of the male members.

Inclusion	Exclusion
<p>Within the family</p> <p>All the members of the joint family are included. They come together, and <i>prasad</i> (<i>kheer</i> or rice) is eaten together.</p> <p>However, the married daughters sit together with all other members while eating <i>nua</i>.</p>	<p>Within the family</p> <p>The married daughters are not given <i>prasad</i> (<i>kheer</i> or rice) as they are treated Laxmi of another family.</p> <p>-</p>
<p>Outside the community</p> <p>All members are included for merry making.</p> <p><i>Juhar bhet</i> (meeting and greeting) is done to all members irrespective of caste, religion.</p>	<p>Outside the community</p> <p><i>Prasad</i> is not given to members other than one's joint family.</p>

The above chart shows the nature of social dynamics in terms of solidarity and religious restrictions (non-participation of married daughters of a family for example). The implication is a greater social space above family, caste, community and religions.

Conceptualising Nuakhai as a Cultural Identity

Apparently *Nuakhai* reflects an inter-ritual regional space. This space does not corroborate to a culture in its conventional sense as the community-whole (Tylor, 1873 and Eades, 1987). A common ritual of offering first crop to the deity across communities in the region underlies its foundation. But in holistic understanding a culture reflects in its individual aspects and an individual aspect is the microcosm of the culture (Pertin, 2009). In this sense *Nuakhai* reflects an inter-cultural space and defines a regional cultural identity. Therefore, a conceptual understanding of emerging cultural identity need to be set in a perspective.

Before engaging in defining the perspective, two phrases, 'culture and identity' and 'cultural identity' need to be distinguished. The former studies *identity* in relation to *culture* across its elements, but the latter refers to *culture as identity* in terms of their interchangeability¹. To understand *nuakhai* as cultural identity a conceptual exercise is attempted.

There is no one-to-one linear correspondence in the understanding and conceptualisation of 'culture and identity'. The efforts in this direction involve understanding of their multifaceted nature, complexities, dynamics, and the approach. In general sense it refers to individual and collective sense of shaping the self, belonging, and distinction (Hall, 1990; Jenkins, 2008). The complexities and dynamics reflect through shared history and tradition (Hobsbawm, 1983), collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992), affiliation to common language (belief in common symbols – symbolism (Geertz, 1973 and Turner, 1966), power dynamics, i.e. social, economic, and political structures in a culture influencing identity (Bourdieu, 1991), syncretism (Behera, 2008 and

Das 2003) or hybridity (Bhabha, 1994).and several others (see Paleczny and Zieliński,2008).

Studies on culture and identity or cultural identity theorise its process of formation and structure. Social constructivism emphasise on identities construction through social interactions (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Social interaction and formation of identity reflecting traits of two or more cultures are theorised in terms of hybridity (Bhabha, 1994). Another theoretical postulate recognises multiple intersecting identities, terms as ‘intersectionality’ (Crenshaw, 1989). There are theoretical approaches like ‘orientalism’ (Said, 1978), but this involves postcolonial studies. Culture and identity in this study, however, has focus on processual dimension as the similar traits across the co-existing and interacting communities were brought under one administrative umbrella by ruling families and later in democratic set up was recognised as a regional identity. Mixed theoretical perspectives are therefore useful to understand culture and identity through *Nuakhai*.

As discussed in the paper, different independent peasant communities of the region-tribal and non-tribal- had the tradition of *nuakhai* which was legitimised by state power and formed into a regional identity across cultures/communities. There are individual identities in terms of the community, collective identity in terms of the territorial space called Western Odisha, and a psychosocial identity. The last one is a reflection of ‘protomental system’, Bino’s conception of cultural foundation of pshyctic structure (Bion, 1961; also see Rouchy, 2002), the *Nuakhai*, that shows a unified perception of belonging across differences (different communities) to a cultural tradition. The identity of Western Odisha through *Nuakhai* reflects both inter-cultural and transcultural experiences and recognises limits and differences. (Behera and Gautam 2025), the limits and differences reflect in the celebration with focus on local deities in the region.

The phenomenon of *Nuakhai* reflects a multi-dimensional identity – socio-cultural, political, psychological and territorial – across communities, beliefs in presiding deities, and traditional politico-regional divisions around the common beliefs in harvest-divine connection – the perspective and practice of offering new crops to deity before eating. It connects what is individual and community-based with what is common and related to a regional space of inter-cultural dimension in the context and reflects in a psychological consciousness in relation to the region – Western Odisha. The territorial identity so evolved is a permanent perception having political and territorial implications around *Nuakhai*, but a cultural fluidity as culture transcends the individual communities. *Nuakhai* identity in terms of culture refers to cultures of groups, different from the definition of culture equivalent with the community. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of *Nuakhai* reflects an evolution from community based folk rituals to a regional identity which can be understood with reference to socio-cultural meanings at the core, other dimensions namely,

connection with divinity and psychological, may exist peripherally². Identity in socio-cultural sense ‘means a synthesis of the relations between man and the world, which is determined by a social and cultural – meaning group – context. It is a state of oneness, a process of the conscious adaptation of man to the changing conditions that surround him...’ (Paleczny and Zieliński, 2008:354).

Identity around *Nuakhai* reflects to multi-dimensional phenomena – at the level of individual consciousness of belonging to the community, community consciousness as belonging to the region, and regional consciousness. The phenomena reflect an identity affirmation, not creation. (Hermanowicz and Morgan 1999). Distinct communities affirmed their individual identities in a group phenomenon blending the sense of sacredness, common values, customary practices (ibid) negotiated through political expediency. This nature of collective identity can be theorised drawing on Durkheim (1915: 420) who emphasises the integrative functions by revitalising shared sentiment and belief (see Shils and Young 1956). In Durkheim perspective ritual is directed by ‘the groups at themselves’ with a view of social control, but in *Nuakhai* context rituals were directed to combine the groups in view of political control. Political expediency used socio-cultural and psychological aspects at the core of identity formation around *Nuakhai*.

As has been argued, the regional identity penetrates the community-based notion of culture. It reflects a transcendental cultural space ‘by which people make meaning, with which they make the world meaningful to themselves and in turn themselves to the world’ (Cohen 1993: 196). *Nuakhai* as cultural identity of people of different cultures in a region agrees to Cohen’s argument (ibid.) that it refers to the claim of belonging to a set of characteristics and distances for others, those who celebrate the ritual of eating new crops outside the region.

Conclusion

Nuakhai, the celebration of new eating, revolves around the newly reaped rice, the head of the family, the family and the community in general and most essentially, the god to whom the newly harvested rice is offered. The aim of *Nuakhai* celebration is appeasement of divinity and hence getting blessings. *Nuakhai* occupies a unique place among all celebration of Western Odisha. It calls for social concordance from Western Odisha regardless of individuals’ position, financial status, custom, caste and so on. *Nuakhai* turned into the connecting bridge between the caste and tribal people. It indicates how a tradition existing in individual peasant (tribal and non-tribal) communities emerged into a regional cultural identity. *Nuakhai* has assumed the character of “*Gana Parva*” in the western part of Odisha.

Individuals all over turn their feet to their homes when drum rolls for *Nuakhai*. Presently *Nuakhai Bhetghat* (meet) is celebrated by Odia societies

in metros outside Odisha and India. It has turned into a string of joining the individuals of Western Odisha regardless of whether they are living outside Odisha. It fosters unity in diversity. It has both social and spiritual importance. The *Nuakhai* festival has truly given a new look of homogeneity and consistency to social relationship of Western Odisha. Some of the culture traits and rituals of *Nuakhai* are vanishing with time. However *Nuakhai* is still an event that endorses the nature of the culture and society of Western Odisha. It is an identity marker in terms of an emerging culture beyond community boundaries. A space has emerged that glorifies individual cultures and manifests commonality beyond individual cultures and defines the identity of Western Odisha.

Notes

- 1 For example, Santal identity means belonging to Santal culture. When one says I am a Santal, one means to his/her Santal identity and Santal culture.
- 2 See conceptualisation of identity with reference to three dimensions, namely
 - (i) identity connecting man with the cosmos, logos, and God; (ii) the psychological dimension connected with reason, rational cognition, intellect, senses, emotions and feelings; and
 - (iii) the social, cultural dimension of identity as the sphere of phenomena of groups formed into a group (Paleczny and Zieliński, 2008).

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