

Baha P̄r̄ṓb | Celebrating Man's Communion with Nature

- By Dr. Boro Baski



BAHA means 'flower' in Santali. It is the second biggest festival of the Santals after 'Sohrae', the harvest festival. It is also considered the holiest festival of all and celebrated in the first month of Santal calendar Fagun/Falgun (Feb-March) every year. This is the time when most common trees, like Mohua, Peepal, Mango, Polash, Neem, Sal, Moringa bear new leaves, flowers or fruits. This is the time, Santals believe, when the trees become reproductive and one should not disturb their body and soul by plucking or cutting off their buds, flowers, leaves and branches. Therefore, Santals never pluck or eat the flowers or fruits of Mango trees, never tear off the leaves of Peepal and Neem trees before celebrating Baha. Women do not use Sal flowers in their hair for decoration and trees are not cut for firewood at this time. If it does happen, then the firewood is not brought to the village but is kept outside. Any family who breaks such rules will not be visited by the village priest who normally enters every family's house during the Baha rituals.

The Baha P̄r̄ṓb is celebrated for two days. First day is called 'Um hiloḳ', the cleanings day. The 'Naeke' or village priest who is the main celebrant of the festival takes bath and with the village community leaders such as Jog mañjhi, paranik, prepares himself physically and spiritually on the first day by taking a bath, by wearing new clothes and by fasting. He also sleeps alone at home that night, away from his wife. The main puja of the Baha is held at the 'Jaher Than', the sacred grove outside the village. The Naeke along with the village elders like the Mañjhi haṛam (headman), the Jog Mañjhi (assistant headman), the Goḍet (convener), the Kuḍam naeke (assistant priest) and other villagers go to the Jaher Than, clean it and make a small symbolic hut with thatch for the offering on the next day.

After celebrating the Magh/Magh-mura festival in the previous month of Magh, the mura, the paddy stubble also called Landha are carried into the village which symbolizes the end of the year in the

Santal calendar. Santals normally begin to repair their thatch roofs from the month of Fagun/Falgun, because thereafter the seasons of Bapla- Bhandan (marriage and death rites) start. However for Naeke, the repair of his thatch roof begins only after celebrating Baha and making a hut for Jaher Era, at Jaher Than, the principal spirit of the sacred grove and the protector of the village.

In the morning of the second day, the headman sends the young men of the village to the forest to collect Sal flowers. After that the Naeke, along with the villagers, goes to the Jaher Than with sixteen chicks, collected from the families. At the Jaher Than, under the temporary thatch roof Pind̄s (altar) are made and smeared with cow dung. The Pind̄s are made in the name of Jaher era; Mōrēko-turuiko, the spirits of ancestors; Marañ buru, the supreme spirit of Santal and Gōsāe era, one of the sister spirits of Marañ buru. In our village Bishnubati a total of sixteen spirits including the principal spirits mentioned above are worshiped and equal numbers of chicks are offered in their name. The number of spirits differs from village to village. During the offering, water instead of rice beer is used.

These spirits are benevolent Boṅgas (spirits) who reside in different places of the village. The Boṅgas were discovered by our ancestors who founded this village. When they chose the place to build a new village a boundary was identified. Within this boundary, different spirits bearing different names are worshiped. These spots were identified according to their usage, such as, bush or barren land where the villagers tend their domestic animals; a forest where the villagers go to collect firewood, vegetables or to hunt; any water body where they go for fishing or taking bath; roadside where they commute and so on.

A little away from the Naeke's Pind̄s, the Kuḍam Naeke, the assistant priest, makes his own thatch roof and Pind̄ separately to appease the malevolent spirits with the leftover of the offerings used by the Naeke such as parboiled rice, vermilion and sacrificed chick. Kuḍam naeke, performs the duties of death rites during funerals and deals with the evil spirits like ḍan, ḍakin, churin, jugin. To appease them he also uses Bul mayam (offering of one's own blood) spikes out from three places in his body and offers it far away from the Jaher Than.

Later the Naeke and the villagers prepare Khichuri and eat it. Some Khichuri is taken to the village in leaf plates for the old and sick people who could not go to Jaher Than. In the afternoon, the Naeke, along with his companions, visits all the families and distributes Sal flowers. The woman of the house receives the flower from the priest in the folds of her sari after she has ceremonially applied oil on his feet and washed them. An unmarried man carries the water on his shoulder and after exchanging greetings with her, sprinkles it on the shoulder of the woman. After receiving the flower the women put it in their hair and the men behind their ears. The rest of the flowers are kept in the ceiling of their thatched or tiled roof. This is the sign that the village has celebrated Baha and men and women can now sing, dance, drink rice beer and enjoy themselves. During Baha festival only Baha dance and songs are sung in the village.
