

CHAPTER III

THE RITES OF PASSAGE

3.1 Introduction

Human communities all over the world adhere to a number of initiation rites which are fundamental to human growth and development. These rites were originally established in order to link the individual to the community and the community to the broader and more potent spiritual world. Initiation rites are a natural and necessary part of a community, as are arms and legs natural and necessary extension of the human body. These rites are critical to individual and community development, and it should not be taken for granted that people automatically grow and develop into responsible, socially minded or community oriented adults.

The process of initiation concerns undergoing a fundamental set of rites to start a new phase or beginning in life. It marks the passing from one phase in life to the next more mature phase. Initiation fundamentally has to do with transformation, and has been a central component of traditional cultures since time immemorial. The details of the rites vary among the different societies, but these rites are nevertheless basic components of the society as they help guide the person from one stage in life into the next stage of one's life and development, that is, from birth to death and beyond.

(www.manuampim.com/AfricanInitiationRites.htm).

After having made these introductory remarks to the rites of passage we shall look at some detail into three major ceremonies of initiation namely pregnancy/conception/child birth, marriage, and mortuary rites which we address this chapter as rites of passage.

3.2 *Rites de Passage*

A famous French anthropologist and folklorist, Arnold Van Gennep was the first person to distinguish rites of passage as a distinct category of ritual in his book *Les Rites de Passage* (1909). He pointed out that many of the rituals organized in a community on a number of occasions demarcate a 'passage' in location or in time, and he showed conclusively that the rituals could be broken into three phases: 'Pre-liminal' phase in which the persons or groups who were the subjects of the ritual were separated from their previous social condition; secondly, a 'liminal' phase in which they were in a marginal situation; and finally a third 'post-liminal' phase in which they were re-aggregated to their previous social condition or aggregated to a new social condition. In short, he spoke about separation, transition and incorporation.

Life cycle ceremonies or *rites de passage* are ceremonial events, existing in all historically known societies that mark the passage from one social or religious status to another. Many of the most important and common rites of passage are connected with the biological crises of life - birth, maturity/reproduction, and death - all of which bring changes in social status and, therefore, in the social relations of the people concerned. Other rites of passage celebrate changes

that are wholly cultural, such as initiation into societies composed of people with special interests - for example, fraternities. Rites of passage are universal, and presumptive evidence from archaeology in the form of burial findings strongly suggests that they go back to very early times.

Life-cycle ceremonies and crisis rites are usually synonymous terms referring to rites connected with the biological crises of life, but some modern scholars have included among crisis rites ritual observances aimed at curing serious illnesses. Ceremonies of social transformation and of religious transformation overlap crisis rites. Religious transformations, such as baptism and rites of ordination, always involve social transformations; social transformations such as at coming-of-age and induction into office may also bring new religious statuses, and life-cycle ceremonies similarly may or may not involve changes in religious statuses.

Life-cycle ceremonies are found in all societies, although their relative importance varies. The ritual counterparts of the biological crises of the life cycle include numerous kinds of rites celebrating childbirth, ranging from pregnancy rites to rites observed at the actual time of childbirth and, a ceremony of thanksgiving for mothers soon after childbirth. In all societies some ritual observances surround childbirth, marriage, and death, although the degree of elaboration of the rites varies greatly even among societies of comparable levels of cultural development.

People all over the world adhere to one or the other sort of ceremonies and observances to signify important moments of life in the life of an individual. These rituals and ceremonies have evolved over the years and have helped them to cope with various challenges of life. The root of these rituals are the acceptance of the fact that human beings are not in complete control of their life and certain customary practices which invokes the intervention of heavenly or supernatural bodies contributes to the smooth journey of people in this turbulent earthly pilgrimage (Kanjirathinkal 2007: 24).

Perhaps the most influential study of the ritual process was provided by Arnold Van Gennep in *Les Rites de Passage* (1909), where he argues for the significance of rites of transition, which he categorized as an immutable tripartite sequence: separation, liminality, and re-aggregation. Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process* (1969) advanced Van Gennep's concept of

'liminality' by advocating its applicability for the study of ritual in both tribal and modern European societies. Roy A. Rappaport's *Pigs for the Ancestors* (1968) skillfully demonstrated how rituals regulate environmental relations. Rappaport's is the best known study linking religious ritual and ecology (Reynolds and Tanner 1995).

Traditionally shamans are the equivalent of priests in tribal communities. As such they officiate over the various ceremonies in their tribe, from births to death. As a trained shaman, one is available to the community to perform fire ceremonies, birth ceremonies, weddings and mortuary rites. All the ceremonies are about marking a transition. The priest or officiator of the ceremony can design with the one who approaches him a ceremony to suit whatever your wants or dreams are. There are many periods in our lives where transition takes place from one phase to another. Many cultures observe a rite of passage as a boy becomes a man and a girl becomes a woman. They also observe the rite of the middle aged adult into an elder or wisdom keeper. These rites are performed within a person's community to welcome them to the next stage of their development.

Rites of passage are special rituals societies employ to assist their members at key times of biographical change. These life transitions follow a recognizable pattern of behavior in many cultures; for example, babies are given a name and social identity, youths enter adulthood or marry, others retire, gain particular qualifications such as degrees or enter particular professions, or pass from the world of the living to the world of the dead. Changes of status can be related to changes in identity because the term *identity* embraces social and psychological aspects of life. The term *status* tends to refer to sociological values without reference to the personal feelings and self-evaluation of individuals. In this entry, the term *status* emphasizes the social dimension and identity of the psychological aspects of an individual's life.

In this chapter some of the major life cycle ceremonies observed by the Rangdani Rabha will be studied and in each of the individual life cycle one can find an amalgamation of folkloristic elements as well. For example at the pre natal stage, when a Rabha woman realizes that she is pregnant she observes many taboos related to her health, health of the child, welfare of her husband, her relatives and so on. In a marriage, it is not only the bride and groom that pass

from being single to being married but their parents also become parents-in-law. Parents, siblings, and friends may all enter in to new relationships. Thus, definitely, new patterns of behavior with appropriate layers of duties and responsibilities are knit together in every society. This is equally true in the case of the funerary ritual, a rite of passage observed in a great majority of human societies. Numerous changes of identity are associated with funeral rites, affecting the statuses of the dead, surviving relatives, and members of the broader community.

At the very outset the themes of pregnancy and child birth, the first stages of rites of passage in Rabha society will be discussed at some length.

3.2.1 Pregnancy and Child Birth (*Jytyk Changkai*)

The two great imperatives in the ancient world were to get married and to have children. There were two reasons why having a family was considered so necessary. With no medicare, old age home, or pension plan, people throughout the ancient world relied on their adult children to look after them in old age. However; pregnancy, childbirth, and infancy were the three most important times in ancient life. With very little understanding of the biological processes and none of the modern tools for dealing with birth injuries and infection, it was natural that in early days people would turn to magic and religion for assistance. The gods could be beseeched, assimilated or controlled. This is the same approach that is common in many religions today, when a believer prays to God for assistance.

Pregnancy is a turning point in a couple's life. So a number of observations are undertaken to carry forward a baby with wellbeing in every way. A rite or celebration of this landmark event was a part of most of the cultures. This is true of tribal societies that exist today. A pregnant woman (so also the husband) has to follow certain restrictions in this decisive period of time. While she is advised to take nutritious food and enough rest, she is forbidden to carry heavy objects, keep away from spicy food, and avoid attending mortuary rites. In the case of husband he too has to follow certain restrictions like not attending funeral rites, abstaining from killing animals and birds etc.

Observances during Pregnancy (*Kan Khysamkai*)

Knowledge of pregnancy and delivery complications and actions to be taken by the health institutions need to be known. Especially about the complications women may experience during pregnancy for early identification and timely referral. Regarding complications during pregnancy, a number of them mentioned swelling of hands and feet, vomiting, paleness, and excessive bleeding. Some of them mentioned about convulsions, while one-third mentioned about abdomen or body pain, and high fever. Less than five per cent mentioned about weak movement or abnormal position of fetus. The knowledge regarding complications during pregnancy and delivery was low.

The Rabha believe that it is due to the sexual union between two opposite sexes pregnancy take place. Moreover, they strongly feel that without God's mercy, no woman can become pregnant or no man can impregnate a woman even if they had sexual contact. As such, a couple without child often visits a prayer place or a temple and worships the deity for offspring. When a Rabha girl notices a prolonged stoppage of cycle of menstruation and physical change in her body, she understands that she is pregnant. As soon as she notices this fact she first informs her husband and then husband's elder married sister. When the husband comes to know this he observes a couple of taboos related to sex life and food.

Generally, the Rabha do not perform any particular ceremony on account of the first or successive pregnancies. It is found that the Rangdani and Maitari groups of the Rabha offer a sacrifice by offering a duck or a goat to *Bay-ma-ba* (a benevolent deity who presides over birth) for safe delivery. It is found that among all the Rabha groups the *ojha* (village medicine man) gives a *kas* (a kind of sanctified thread) which the pregnant woman ties on her waist for the protection of herself and the child in her womb.

During pregnancy some restrictions were imposed on the expectant mother as regards her food, movement and activities. She is not allowed to accompany any funeral procession and is not given any heavy work. No separate room was constructed for parturition. One portion of the bedroom was used for delivery where men are not permitted to enter whereas some older and

experienced women of the tribe were called upon to perform the job of a midwife (*dhai*) (Raychaudhuri 2007: 49-50).

After the birth of a child the umbilical cord was cut with a sharp bamboo strip. Normally about two inches length was kept from the body of the child, and after the cutting it was tied with thread. Breast feeding is done immediately by the mother. Then the placenta and other items were kept in an earthen pot and buried on the same day at the back of the room just under the roof (*chhanchha*), by the father of the new born child. In case of absence of the father any woman could do it. But in case of repeated death of child, the placenta was to be buried at the crossing of four roads. Special care was taken to bury the placenta lest it was eaten by any wild animal or taken by witches thereby causing harm to the new born baby.

The birth of a child is the most important thing in the woman's life after marriage. Her health and the health of the child are carefully looked after by elderly women. The child is given bath in the tepid water. After the bath child is used to be kept in a winnowing fan (*kula*) and for a short while shown to the Sun light. This was done by the mid-wife (*dhai*). Every member of the family tries to keep her in good spirits and so elderly women try to surround her with an atmosphere of piety: religious books are read; rites of *pungsavan* are observed and she is given *panchamrita*. For a month from the birth of a child, the mother is held impure. She is not allowed to touch anything in the house. A fire is kept constantly burning with paddy husks or dried cow dung near her to drive off evil spirits.

After the first month is over, the *suddhi*, ceremony is held when mother and child are purified and allowed to mix with others. The baby's hair is shaved off. The Lalungs have another wonderful custom; the mother brings the baby washed clean, out of the house in the morning and let him face the east, a women-priest brings a specially-made bow and arrows to be touched by the baby and shoots four arrows in the four corners, feigning that the baby itself is shooting and praying to *Narayana*, *Ananta*, *Mahadeva* and *Yama* to protect it from calamity. If it is a girl, she is touched with a piece of cotton and a sickle instead of with bow and arrows and: 'your struggle is outside the house', is whispered to the boy and 'your struggle is inside the house', to the girl.

In the Rangdani Rabha society as soon as the umbilical cord dries up, i.e., about 3 months after the birth of the child, complete *lipai* of the floor of the house is done with a mixture of cow dung and mud. This is a part of the purifying ceremony related to the child birth in a house. After three months a ritual for name giving ceremony and first feeding (*Tasigyngay*) is conducted. For this there is a need to prepare 3 pots of *chocko* (2 pots will be larger ones with about 6-7 each kilos, and one small pot with about 3-4 kilos). On this name giving day relatives and neighbouring families are invited. In the past it was a custom to give any famous name which comes to their mind. As for instance a child born on the days when a famous film like *Sholay* was running in the theatre, it was normal to name that child as *Sholay*. Now-a-days names are selected from the various suggestions from the village elders. Some of the invitees also bring a small amount of money as a gift for the new born child. About 30 to 40 years ago a couple of drops of *chocko* were also given to the child as a part of the birth ceremonies. The naming of a child after any popular or famous thing is a matter of impact from the outside world.

Some Buddhists of Assam observe a kind of purification rites for both mother and child. The *Dowanias* do it with the help of *Fungi* (priest) who perform religious functions. The Buddhist *Fakials* bring the baby outside to the elevated verandah of the houses built on poles only after seven days and they bring down the baby to the ground only after a month, when old women tie black thread to its hands and legs to wish it well in life. Some Hinduised Rabhas also tie a black thread around the baby's waist to ward off effects of evil eyes (www.webindia.123.com/assam/people/customs3.htm).

If a child is seen sickly, due to the ill effects of the influence of witches (*ticker*) *bai-ma-ba* ceremony is conducted with the help of *Deuri*. In this ceremony a female duck (in its absence a chicken is also used) is sacrificed by the *Deuri* uttering a couple of *mantras*. Some however, do not call for the assistance of *Deuri*. In this case some of the elderly persons of the family or village can also undertake this officiating role. This ceremony also introduces the new born child to the society at large (in most of the places or in practical sense the village community is given the news that a new member is arrived amidst them). Among the post birth ceremonies *Bokthai Phakakai* (1st purification ceremony) and *Tasi-Gunkai* (name keeping ceremony and in some cases feasting ceremony) deserve special mention (Field, April 2013).

3.2.2 Marriage Rituals (*Jorisini Rynchay*)

Marriage is one of the most important social institutions covering the life cycle and a number of customs and rites are built around it. In fact, most of these customs and rituals have an important significance both in anthropological and cultural points of view. As it is one of the most universal social institutions and a good number of anthropological experts have tried to define it; for example according to Zonabend (1996: 350) marriage is ‘the union of man and woman such that the children born from the woman are recognized as legitimate’. Whereas Oppong (1989: 488) says marriage is,

‘... a culturally approved relationship of one man and one woman (monogamy); or of one man and two or more women (polygyny/polygamy), in which sexual intercourse is usually endorsed between the opposite sex partners, and there is generally an expectation that children will be born of the union and enjoy the full birth status rights of their society’.

Marriage is a cultural universal phenomenon and it is defined by different scholars in different ways. According to Gough (1959),

‘... marriage is a socially recognized and normatively prescribed relationship between at least two persons that defines economic and sexual rights and other duties, each owes the other or others and provides the primary mechanism in a society by which offspring are recognized as legitimate and accorded full birth-status rights common to normal members of their society or social stratum’.

But in recent years the institution of marriage is undergoing tremendous transition. There are studies around the world which highlight the transformative process of marriage in today’s scenario (Fincham *et al.* 2007; Srinivasan and Lee 2004; Hortacsu *et al.* 2001; Malhotra and Tsui

1996; Santow and Bracher 1994) and also show variation of marriage system with regard to different religion and location of the same population group (Rongmei and Kapoor 2005).

However, such definitions will hardly be sufficient, since several types of marriages, as practiced now-a-days, remain beyond their scope, such as lesbian or gay marriages in several Western countries, or little known ghost marriage, as is contracted by the widow of a *Nuer* man without heir or by a sister on behalf of her deceased brother if he has no progeny (Pritchard quoted in Zonabend 1996: 31).

In the preliminary negotiation conducted by go-between (*gahtak aisa*) careful observation of the omens (*mangala chawa*) is made. Certain signs like birth in the family, acquisition of new property, it is considered to be auspicious. On the other hand if there is death or theft in the family it will be inauspicious. After this period of time if everything seems to be alright a priest is consulted. After obtaining priests consent a day is fixed for both the parties to meet, settle the bride-price and also to agree on the date and the mode of the marriage (*saja biya or tola biya*).

Marriage is an important institution from the socio-cultural point of view. It creates new social relationships and reciprocal rights between the spouses and their families. Through marriage a man and woman are legitimately given sanction to bring forth offspring to the larger society. Marriage creates new social relationships and reciprocal rights between the spouses, between each and the kin of the other, and establishes what will be the rights and status of the children when they are born. Every society has recognized procedures for creating such relationships and rights (Brahma 1992: 75).

Like every other society in the world, marriage is one of the most important social institutions of the Rabha. After marriage a person enters into a circle of great responsibility. With the marriage ceremony the Rabha give the newly married couple a new lesson on life which is full of duties and responsibilities. As a rule the young people of the Rabha society especially in the villages, lead chaste lives before marriage. Pre-pubertal marriages are not common among the Rabha. The marriageable age is after attainment of puberty and adulthood. Monogamy is the

socially accepted norm practiced by the Rabha. Polygamy is permissible, but it is not favored (Rabha 2000: 81).

As someone has rightly defined marriage as a union between a man and a woman and such that children born to the woman are recognized legitimate offspring of both parents. Marriage creates new social relationships and reciprocal rights between the spouses, between each and every kin of the other, and establishes what will be the rights and status of the children when they are born. Every society has recognized procedures for creating such relationships and rights, and for making it known that they have been created (Brahma 1992: 75).

An important aspect of a marriage is that it requires passing through several preliminary stages before the actual marriage rites are performed. When the boy attains the marriageable age the parents have consultations with trusted relatives and friends and start preparations. The most important part of the pre-marriage preparation is selection of the bride. The Rabha parents are very particular about making the right choice. After making preliminary inquiries about the prospective bride a party consisting of a few elderly women of the village including the boy's mother sets out to the house of the girl with the intention of conveying the choice of the girl. This visit is locally referred to as *Pan-Tamul Kata*. This is an important pre-marriage ceremony according to the traditional customs of the Rabha.

Then on an appointed day the groom's party comes with a bag of *chira* (pounded rice) and if this is accepted by the bride's party a ceremony known as *Gota-Tamul Khuoya* which is the most significant part of the entire procedure is arranged. Here the groom party is to offer betel-nuts and leaves with utmost care and according to the norms observable in such an important assembly. This is also a proof of the acceptance of the village elders (Rabha 2000: 86).

Among the tribal endogamous cases clan exogamy is strictly followed. Adherence to the clan exogamy is due to the fact that the people still regard the members of the same clan (*barai*) and sub clan as their own brothers and sisters and they also believe that marriage within the same clan and sub-clan is a sin. On the other hand the people think that tribal exogamy has occurred mainly due to the open-minded nature relating marriage in today's scenario.

The actual marriage takes place on an auspicious day ascertained on the verdict of the village priest or as per dictum of the Assamese calendar. The usual practice on this day is to fetch the bride to the groom's house for holding the marriage rites. A mirthful situation is created by the female singers who take out a procession and the drummers that accompany them. On arrival at the bride's house after having adorned the bride with the bridal clothes the return journey begins with members of the bride's side – more appropriately known as *Nok-Swamis*. This journey is on foot if the distance is short and by conveyance if the distance is too much.

After the arrival at the entrance of the groom's house the first ritual is known as *Chalani-bati Sarakoya* is performed with great jubilation. She is then led to the main house (*borghar*) with the female members while the male members are accommodated in the temporary *pandal* (structure) erected for this purpose where a clay lamp is kept lighted with mustard oil. This follows the ceremonies such as customary bath of bride and groom, adorning with wedding dresses, both of them tied in a knot (*lagna-ganthi*), combing the hair of groom and bride (*dhup-chaul-chatioya*), presentation giving (*usarga*), blessing given by entire assembly (*hariddhani* – loud expression of good wishes), reverence to the elders of the house (*ghor-gosani*), big feast with rice, vegetables, pork or chicken, fish, plenty of rice beer, etc. ... This celebration may go for two days. Of late, some changes have taken place most specifically some Hindu customs are incorporated, Brahmin priest is called to officiate, custom of *Hom-Yajna* before sacred fire also is observed in some places.

In the Rangdani Rabha society there are three important types of marriages namely, (i) *Krangsi Buri*, (ii) *Buri Sinkay*, and (iii) *Bonkau Bakay*. In the first type of marriage the groom's party prepares a bamboo basket and arranges a pot of *chocko*, a container of mustard oil and a piece of cloth (*ryphan*) for the lady. Generally five people both men and women go to the house of the girl's parents and keep the bamboo basket and its contents in that house and come back to their original house. If the bride's party does not like this proposal they will bring back the basket to the boy's house on the following day. However, in most cases the basket is taken back to the girl's house once again by the boy's party. This makes the girl's party recognize that they are serious about this matter and the marriage needs to be settled by any means.

Having made up their mind they get ready with *chunni* (*kambang*), turban (*kodabang*), etc., for the bride. It is observed that marriage ceremony is officiated by *Deuri* who will call for a red coloured cock (*to*). Sometimes two cocks are used for this ceremony. Red coloured cock symbolizes auspicious occasion and good luck for the newly marrying couple. They are killed by twisting their necks simultaneously and it is done in the name of *Sirgini Risi* (Supreme God). Often he is assisted by 2 two 3 other persons. They help the *Deuri* to cut the chicken (*to thakay*) and sprinkles the some blood n the banana leaves spread on the courtyard. Some *chocko* is poured from the kettle (*chujuk*) on the ground and *Deuri* prepares the chicken after having mixed it in soda and then distribute among the participants. It is done in the name of *Rishi* who is the provider of good fortune for the newly marrying couple. One of the important *mantra* recited by the *Deuri* is *choto matia, boro matia* (prayer for the village Matia!); The *Deuri* also utters *baba nangi kolai bomai, baling baling tonga lagiyo* = in the name of *Iswar* both of these newly married couples live in peace and may they experience blessings of *Rishi*. On the ground two banana posts are erected with some decorations together with some flowers. Bamboo is cut and filled with kerosene oil which is lighted. Local rice beer (*chocko*), about 12 grains of uncooked rice (*mai*), incense (*dupi*), betel nut and tamul leaves (*kui pana*), cutting of the cock in the name of the boy and girl, praying for their long and happy life etc., are constituent parts of the ritual. All the *Deuris* are offered *chocko* in earthen pot or kettle (*chujuk*). All the members gathered will be also provided with *chocko*, vegetables, pork, and *bamchakali* (rice powdered curry). For them dog, fox and cow are taboo. The newly married couple touches the feet of the parents and then elders of the village as a mark of respect. They in turn give their blessings to the boy and girl (Field, April 2013).

3.2.3 Mortuary Rites

Mortuary practices are one of the most visibly cultural features observed by archaeologists. English anthropologist, Edward Burnet Tylor developed the argument that animism has had its origin in the dream and death experience. The body-soul division was perceived by ancient people in dream that persuaded them to believe that the ghost-soul survives

the destruction of the body. James G. Frazer expanded this idea and argued that all mortuary rituals were motivated by fear of the ghost-soul of the deceased.

Anthropological evidences on tribal death customs all over the world show that they are more or less similar. As Pohil says, human approach to death and funeral rites is universal. Viewing death as a separation of the soul from the body is universal and it runs through all the mainstream religions. Some of the features of organized religion, observes American author Daniel Dennett in his book *Breaking the Spell*, will turn out to be vestigial traces of the folk religions from which they are descended.

In a recent study conducted by Bera (2010) among the Riang of Tripura, one can find the existence of both normative patterns of beliefs in the society as well as the actual performances practised as mortuary rites. Despite deviations the community at large has not forgotten the age old practices. On the contrary they succumb to available conditions making it a community practice.

The death and disposal of dead is always associated with elaborate performance of ritual in all human societies. The basic function of mortuary preparation is to free the living from the defilement of death and to ensure a safe and successful passage into the here after. Indeed, the proper performance of funerary rites is needed to enable the dead to depart to the place and condition to which they properly belong. Failure to expedite their departure can have dangerous consequences. Mortuary customs impose on the survivors not only certain modes of behaviour but also the simulation of certain emotions which may or may not be felt. Thus the statements of Wallis and Malinowski may describe the emotional satisfaction derived on occasion from a funeral but they do not advance a sociological understanding of all mortuary customs and beliefs.

Death forcefully separates the deceased from the friendship and company of their living parent, spouse, or coworker. The period of preparing the dead for burial or cremation moves them into a transitional phase when they are neither what they have been nor yet what they will become. Such moments of transition often involve uncertainty and potential danger, and therefore grief. The ritual impurity of the corpse derives from its inability to respond to others, is

greatly felt. Accordingly, people pay their respects to the dead, marking their former identity with them, express sorrow for the bereaved and, by so doing, reaffirm their continuing relationship with them. Stories recounting the achievement or character of the dead and supernatural powers may be invoked to forgive any evil the deceased may have perpetrated and to guide them into the afterlife. Gifts and goods may be provided to assist the individual to depart from this world to the next (<http://www.deathreference.com/Py-Se/Rites-of-Passage>).

The burying of the dead appears to have been a common custom amongst all the non Aryan people of Assam. The Ahom, before embracing Hinduism, used to bury their dead. The Mikir and the *Deori* also cremate their dead. But among the Bodo all the three customs are prevalent. Some of them cremate their dead; some bury them, a third section simply takes the dead to the burial ground and leaves them there. The *Deori* will not cremate a man who has died of an epidemic but first bury him and then exhume the skeleton. The Khasi and the Rabha follow both the custom of burying and cremating as a practice of secondary burial system. In the case of newly born children they often bury them.

Most of the tribes believe in life after death. Some of them also believe in the rebirth of the spirit in another form. Rangadani Rabhas believe death is not the end; in turn one will be reborn again each according to one's deeds, good or bad. The *Deuri* offers a hen or a cock near the head of the dead person. All those who come to attend the funeral ceremony will bring along uncooked rice which will be thrown all over the dead body and on the ground nearby. This is to make any possible evil spirit to divert their attention. Some bring along cash as well. This is a mark of their solidarity with the kith and kin. *Deuri* will make the dead person's hand open and a chicken will be killed by pressing with the help of both *Deuri* and the dead person's hands. This symbolizes the participation of the dead also in the *puja* offered in his/her favour. All invariably can go in procession to the burial ground (*mangkhardam*) except the pregnant women who may need to take great care to be protected from the tycker/botakay who are witches watching out to harm such people at any given chance (Field, April 2013).

In other tribal societies in North East India we have similar experiences too. If a Lalung baby cries too much, they suppose that some dead member of the family must have been reborn.

When a Mikir baby is named after its grandfather, it is supposed that the dead old man is reborn as his grandson. To the Nyishi the colourful butterflies are the spirits of the dead. When an unmarried Bodo young man dies, a banana tree is planted near his grave so that his life after death becomes more fruitful. When a Bodo woman dies, a pipal branch is planted near her grave in the hope that in her rebirth she will be blessed with a luxuriant growth of hair. Before burial or cremation, water is poured and red threads placed between the lips of the dead, that will make in rebirth, the lips thin and red, a sign of beauty.

In this chapter we shall study the perception of religion among the Rangdani Rabha. However, to make tangible observation of the religion we need to closely understand some of the major life cycle ceremonies observed by Rangdani Rabhas and in each of the individual life cycle we find an amalgamation of religious elements intertwined to it. For example when pregnancy is observed among any Rangdani Rabha woman, she observes many taboos related to her health, health of the child, welfare of her husband, her relatives and so on. These aspects are observed through their ceremonies in which they sing songs, undertake rituals to the deities. Here below we shall study some of these life cycle events with an element of religious motifs attached to it.

Every human society has rules and regulation for the treatment of their dead – the ceremonies and rituals that must accompany the dead, whether to bury or cremate the dead. The Rangdani Rabha observe a yearly festival for the dead kins of the clan, which is known as *Farkanthi*. This is apparently not a ceremony of mourning but rejoicing. They glorify the death with a requiem accompanied with dance and merry making. The Pati, Totla, Dahori and other sanskritized groups have largely adopted the Assamese Hindu ways of performing rites and rituals connected with death (Rabha 2000: 92).

Cremation is the usual pattern of disposal of the dead in Rangdani Rabha society, though in the case of small children, burial is the normal practice. In a normal death, the dead body is washed with *santi jal* (sanctified water) and after that the body is dressed with new garments and kept in an outer house for a night for enabling the distant relatives to arrive for the last rites. While in the case of Rangdani and Maituri Rabhas the body of the deceased is bathed and kept in

the outer room of the house with the head pointing northwards. The corpse is then covered with a piece of red cloth. A community priest (*Deuri*) utters incantations imploring the spirits to clear a passage for the dead person's soul. A fowl is sacrificed and kept under the mat on which the dead body is laid. This ceremony is known as the *remdengkai*, i.e., opening of the passage for the soul. The dead body is generally kept overnight, to enable close relatives who live at a distance, to attend the cremation. It is customary for the villagers not to take the normal food till the cremation is over. Usually powered rice mixed with boiled pulse and salt are eaten during this period.

The dead body is carried to the cremation ground by the sons including a village elder. Generally cremation is done on the bank of the river. In an unnatural death caused either by epidemic or suicide, the dead body is, however, buried and not cremated. After the cremation the members attending the ceremony return to the village and assemble in the house of the deceased. On their way they are required to take bath in the nearest river or in the pond and receive some amount of smoke produced by burning cotton and dried leaves of jute, which is kept ready by other members not attending the cremation ceremony. This is done to drive away the evil spirits that might accompany them while returning from the cremation ground. Then the party arrives at the house of the dead and performs some preliminary death rites.

A period of pollution is observed till the completion of the final death rites. The period of uncleanness ends on the day of *Shraddha* which is normally conducted 10 days after the death. Both Maituri and Rangdani Rabha prefer priests from their own community. The Pati, Totla and other sections have largely adopted Assamese Hindu rites and rituals, so far as death and disposal of the dead body are concerned. In comparison to Rangdani and Maituri funeral ceremonies of the Pati, Totla and Dahori are less expensive.

As has been observed earlier, life cycle ceremonies or rites of passage are ceremonial events, existing in all historically known societies that mark the passage from one social or religious status to another. Many of the most important and common rites of passage are connected with the biological crises of life – birth, maturity, reproduction, and death – all of

which bring changes in social status and, therefore, in the social relations of the people concerned.

Understanding the role of religion is important for answers to questions related to religion form their view of life, death and meaning. Many people do not know their position on religion until disaster strikes, and then their religious faith and beliefs are formed. Some religions give individuals more power over life than others. Some religions give spirits more power over life than the living. All have defined ways of dealing with death.

In the above explanation we see that as in all the societies of humankind death is not conceived to be on the natural order. Death myths express both the desire for life everlasting and the recognition of death is as a penalty for evil deeds. Death is unnatural as the mythical causes of it show for it is introduced to man as the result of negligence or evil, and usually the cause is very minute, for example, a chameleon's pausing to eat berries, the eating of an apple, a bird's singing. It is always an upsetting of previously existing conditions in which dying had no meaning for man (Wedgwood). (www.afrikaworld.net/afrel/gluckman.html).

On the day of death the *Deuri* comes and helps others to bring the dead body to the centre of the house. It is necessary for them to keep the body on the bamboo mat spread on the ground. They keep some cotton (*hampa*) on the nostrils and both the toes are tied in the criss cross manner. Normally body is covered with a new white cloth. Women are invited who are professional mourners with the help of the cymbals made of gold. The main chanter sings narrating all the good and positive qualities of the dead one: 'you came for good but going back so early, if you come back again do not be born again as a chicken (*to*) because they will kill you for any ritualistic celebrations; do not be born again as a cow, the people will take the milk away from you', etc. Villagers pay respects with flowers; uncooked rice are thrown all over the corpse and nearby ground. Earlier until 25 years ago invariably the custom was to bury the dead, now due to the influence of Hindu neighbouring communities cremation is also done often. As a matter of fact it is very difficult to find traditional burial taking place in the Rangdani Rabha community as a result of Hinduisation (Field, May 2013).

In death ceremony, a number of religious practices are followed by the Rangdani Rabha. After the death of the person, the dead body is bathed in water and dressed up with new clothes and offered his/her favourite food for the last time. All the offerings to the dead are done by the left hand. The *Deuri* chants incantations which have to be in Rangdani Rabha language, imploring the spirits to clear the passage for the dead person's soul along with the soul of the killed hen. One of the post funeral rites is called *Ganthi-Thupai* (i.e. tying of cloth as a symbol of the departed soul), which is a part of *Farkanthi Sraddhha*. All the Rangdani Rabha people believe that those who do evil will not be given a permission to be reborn again in the place of eternal peace = *Antapuri*. They also propitiate Ticker, *Botakay/Bainemchakai* or *Joy jorakai* who are always on the lookout for people who live not in conformity with the traditional lore of the Rangdani Rabha forefathers. However, such rites are not strictly found among the organized and Sanskritized sub-groups (Hakacham, 2010: 156 and field, May 2013).

3.3 Perception of Religion and Practices

Anthropologists across the world bear witness to the fact that human cultures universally acknowledge the existence of religion (Lowie 1936). The Rangdani Rabha are no exception to this as they partake in a number of religious observations as part of their belief in the supernatural power. Religions fulfill psychological needs as they help relieve fears and anxieties about the unknown. Supernatural powers and beings may be appealed to or manipulated by people in times of crisis, as for example in praying to win a battle or survive a fierce storm. Religions help ease the stress during personal life crises such as birth, marriage, serious illness, and death. It is not a coincidence that in most societies the rites of passage that are performed to help people adjust to these often highly emotional transitions are strongly religious.

Though, earlier religion was thought as a bundle of irrational beliefs, the contemporary world has shown that religion continues to be the most important aspect of human life (Channa 2000: iv). Therefore, it is not surprising that many of the leading minds of the nineteenth century would turn their attention to religion. It has never been difficult to make a case for the significance of religion in human life. Religion has been found in all societies studied by

anthropologists. It is highly visible and, in the words of Firth (1995: 214), represents 'a massive output of human enterprise'. Religious beliefs and practices are an enduring tribute to humankind's nearly infinite resourcefulness and adaptability in coping with the problems of daily life.

Studies have long noted that religions are highly dynamic, and the role of religion in fostering social change has been extensively explored. An interest in religious change is discernable in the evolutionary theories of Tylor and Frazer as well as the twentieth-century diffusionist studies of Spier and Kroeber. Anthony F. C. Wallace (1966) identified a five-stage progression to account for attitudinal and organizational changes that occur within religious movements: prophetic, utopian, messianic, millennial, or millenarian. Wallace is best known for his conception of 'revitalization movements' and his application of this concept to the Plains Indian Ghost Dance and cargo cults in Melanesia.

It is easier to say what religion is not than to frame a positive definition of it. We have seen that Tylor's 'minimum definition' as the belief in spirits comprehended only a segment of religious beliefs and practices. Moreover, to define religion in terms of any particular system of belief or dogma restricts our view, since in such terms religion can only exist by definition. Some have sought to find the basis of religion in fear; others have stressed ethical content as its essential element.

Some definitions have focused too narrowly on only few aspects of religion, and have tended to exclude those religions that do not fit well in their scheme. In this context Kile Jones has very aptly wrote in his *Essay on Defining Religion*:

'...is apparent that religion can be seen as a theological, philosophical, anthropological, sociological, and psychological phenomenon of human kind. To limit religion to only one of these categories is to miss its multifaceted definition'. (www.hirr.hartsem.edu/ency/Anthropology.htm).

Among most peoples, non-literate or literate, belief in supernatural forces of the universe does undoubtedly comprise the core of religious belief. Yet if we approach the phenomena of religion from the point of view of their essentially emotional character, we recognize that many reactions that have no basis in supernaturalism must be thought of as religious.

While in perfect agreement with Kile Jones, we may deem it pertinent here to refer to some of the definitions of 'religion' furnished by social scientists in general, and anthropologists in particular. To begin with, Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Practical Reason* (1898) suggested that in essence, religion is 'the recognition of all our duties as divine commands'. Edward Burnett Tylor in his monumental book *Primitive Culture* (1871) defined religion as 'belief in supernatural being'.

In a broader term, religion may best be defined as belief in, and identification with a greater force or power. A belief may so pervade attitude and action as rarely to enter the stream of conscious thought, except in moments of crisis when it is called upon to steady a world that seems to be falling about one's head. Above all, religion implies the emotional response to the power that rules the universe, however it may be conceived.

3.3.1 Perception of Religion and Practices among the Rabha

Rabha religion includes a number of traditional beliefs and practices. It is observed in the traditional religion of the Rabha, idolatry is absent, yet the influence of Hinduism has made them observe the worship with the help of Brahman priest and reading of the *sastras* also have come to effect. According to the traditional ways the Rabha worshipped benevolent spirits and this was done by tribal priest (*Deuri*), however the malevolent spirit was propitiated by medicine man (*Ojha/Huji*). However, in the final analysis there is a very definite point to be made that there is a very little stratification in the Rabha society between secular and religious realms, in fact both merge into one.

Tribal religions are on the decline but most tribes combine the magico-religious practices with their traditional customs and beliefs. Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism, the religions to which they have been converted in recent decades, have been influenced by tribal beliefs and have, in their turn, influenced them (Fernandes and Barbora 2002: 186-189).

3.3.2 Perception of Religion and Practices among the Rangdani Rabha

All religions consist of a mental attitude regarding the supernatural power. It is the expression of manner, and type of adjustment effected by a people with their concept of the supernatural. The religion of the Rangdani Rabha is based on animism and naturalism. In animism, the supernatural forces make it possible for inanimate objects to become entities, motivated by good or ill will among many people in a humanly controllable essence. The need to ascertain and interpret the will of gods and to negate the factors of time and distance is felt by many people. Various techniques like divination must be considered as a way in which control of the supernatural is attained. People use occult techniques, not only to shape the future by prying into it, but restore divination from early times to present days.

In all systems of religion, individuals are required to perform certain activities by means of which supernatural beings are propitiated and influenced. In many societies, the individual and community prayers and other similar activities form the bulk of religious acts. However, there are few or no societies in which such behaviour is not supplemented and guided by the religious practitioners. Some persons are always found in societies who by virtue of special training, inherent qualities, or by both, are regarded as more skilled than others in influencing supernatural beings. The ways to invoke the powers of the supernatural beings may be by recitation of elaborate formulae, sometimes chanting of *mantras* at regular intervals; or may be without uttering a single word; sometimes songs or dance may form part of the exercise too.

Religious beliefs and practices of the Rangdani Rabha are dominated by a number of spirits and deities, both benevolent and malevolent. They believe malevolent spirits seek out for opportunities to bring ill health and misfortune to the people. Therefore, propitiation of these deities is done by a number of priests (*Deuri*) in Rangdani Rabha society. The village

priest/*Deuri* officiate the religious ceremonies as he is a specialist in the traditional priestly functions. The office is not hereditary. Often the priest has got an assistant who makes the immediate preparations for the religious ceremonies in the particular prayer/worship place called *dham*.

The Rangdani Rabha society seeks to address the pressing problems of life. For example disease, misery, calamity, misfortune and death, etc. the people realized that they have no power over them rather the invisible spirits were very powerful to harm them if they choose to. So the people began to worship those spirits and implored them to protect them. They conceived of many protecting deities near the village or in the hills. All the Rangdani Rabha ritualistic functions with regard to the appeasement of spirits are community engagements and thus it is often difficult to distinguish between religious and social functions.

In some incidences we see people undertake death ceremonies with special reference to ceremonies one month after death (*Farkanthi*) even without the assistance of *Deuri*.

3.4 Conclusion

The preceding paragraphs speak of the *rites de passage* with special reference to conception/pregnancy/child birth, marriage and mortuary rites. In each of these events an element of religion is observed either very tangibly or in a subtle form. One has to understand the larger context of belief related to the various rituals undertaken in the life cycle ceremonies. Rangdani Rabhas belonging to Matia and Majerburi villages perform a number of ceremonies which are handed down to them by their ancestors. However, many of the rituals have become an adapted version of the neighbouring communities with whom they have come in contact with for the last number of years.

It has also been noticed from the field study that elaborate rites and ceremonies are undertaken by the people who are comparatively richer. However, in our study we have observed the role of *Deuri* is minimal and it is only necessary with regard to the propitiation of spirits who may do havoc in their life cycle events of life. The Rangdani Rabha religion is an amalgamation

of a number of traditional beliefs and customs and practices. They still believe in a number of malevolent and benevolent deities and spirits. Many of the Rangdani Rabha ritualistic functions with regard to the appeasement of spirits which are malevolent and propitiation of them are invariably community engagements and thus it is often difficult to ascertain between religious and social functions.

However, it is apparent from the above discussion on the entire rites of passage of the Rangdani Rabha that they have been maintaining their age-old practices concerning their rituals in a very traditional way. While performing such practices they adhere to their traditional mode of religion inculcating the continuity of knowledge. Of late, though there have been impact of other religions especially of Hinduism and Christianity as forces of change, yet the domain of rites of passage is still guided by traditional norms under their indigenous religious practices. This has helped them to maintain cohesiveness and corporateness in their society particularly in the domain of religious adherence to the ritual performances. In the next chapter (IV) we shall discuss magico-religious beliefs and practices among the Rangdani Rabha of the study area.

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