

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **MAGICO-RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES**

#### **4.1 The Background**

Any religion is a system of beliefs usually involving the worship of supernatural forces or beings with a particular doctrine. Most cultures of the world have religious beliefs which uphold the dictum that supernatural powers can be influenced, to act in certain ways for good or evil purposes, by using ritual formulae. These formulae are, in a sense, magico-religious rituals. By performing certain magical acts in a particular way, crops might be improved, game herds replenished; illness cured or avoided, animals and people made fertile. These religious beliefs provide shape and meaning to one's perception of the universe. In other words, they contribute to a sense of order in what might otherwise be seen as a chaotic and meaningless existence.

Religions also provide understanding and meaning for inexplicable events such as the death of a loved one in an earthquake or some other unpredictable force of nature. For most people, their beliefs about the supernatural being are at the very core of their world views which are based on their surrounding nature, animals, spirits of the ancestors, ever nourishing earth, plentiful air, abundant water and awe inspiring forest.

The important point to be kept in mind is that magic, which was thought about as an isolated element in a human society is actually an integral element of religion. It is almost impossible to distinguish between them both. Frazer (1935: 220-225) equated magic with science; though to call magic 'primitive science' will not bear too close scrutiny. The difference between them are important, as a scientist works in a closed mechanical system, but in magical operations one includes and accounts for the play of supernatural forces.

When one travels through the tribal religious world it is noticed that they are commonly endowed with belief in spirits and their veneration and worship can be invoked, propitiated and even forced to help or harm human beings by various magical acts and practices. Though they are often unaware of the true law of nature and the cosmic order, the tribal have developed a largely magical world outlook. They believe that the whole world including the individual life and works are largely governed by superhuman powers: personal and impersonal. They are convinced that magico-religious rites have the power to take control over the supernatural powers that can cause disease, misfortune or even death (Fuchs 1992: 67-72).

While discussing the magico-religious rites of the Rangdani Rabha, Majumdar (1971: 245-256) observes that they do not worship natural forces, such as thunder, rain or the sun, though some of their deities are named after hills and streams. Each clan is also associated with a stream, cave (*poma*) and a hill (*hachu*). When a member of that particular clan suffers from certain ailments the clan-God is to be propitiated. On the basis of these and other materials, Majumdar comes to the conclusion that Rangdani Rabha one of the sub-groups of Rabha tribal fraternity still remains away from the orbit of traditional Hinduism.

It is universally accepted that human beings live always in close collaboration with nature and other eco-systems. This has made them to develop various conservative techniques for the balanced life based on their cultural values. In this process they make use of the natural resources for ensuring the smooth functioning of the community as a whole. The various socio-cultural beliefs and practices emerged in course of development of human society, undoubtedly, reflect the customary laws for their action. Different communities maintain their indigenous ways to

manage the community resources in terms of food, storage, wild herbs and shrubs for their benefit to promote health and well being. The sacred conservation practices, superstitions, religious taboos and prohibitions no doubt play an important role in protecting the natural resources and thereby managing the ecosystem. Their knowledge about different aspects and elements from their traditional environment is also amply reflected in their folk literatures.

## **4.2 Sacred Places (*Pithr Dham*)**

Indigenous sacred places are central to the ongoing spiritual, mental, and physical health of the people and the survival of tribals. Therefore, the protection of patches of forest as sacred groves and of several yet select tree species as sacred trees belong to the religion-based conservation ethos of people all over the world from ancient times. Although such practices became extinct in most parts of the world, basically due to the absorbing process of syncretism and changes in religion, and during recent times due to changes in resource use patterns, yet sacred groves and sacred trees continue to be of much importance in religion, culture and resource use systems in many parts of the world as also in India.

Most religious rituals are performed in special places and under special conditions, such as in a dedicated temple meant as the altar of the almighty or at a sacred spot. This is an intentional separation between the secular and the sacred, profane and holy, ordinary and set apart. By being removed from the ordinary world, the sacred acts are enhanced for the believers. The separation seems to make the rituals more effective. Often it is observed that only allowing initiated people to participate in religious rituals can also have the expected effect. Thus sacred places are an important constituent element of magico-religious practices (Khan *et al.* 2008).

In India as well as in some parts of Asia and Africa, care and respect for nature has been influenced by religious beliefs and indigenous practices. The existence of sacred groves has been reported in many parts of Asia, Africa, Europe, Australia and America by Hughes and Chandran (1998). We also find references of existence of such sacred groves in many parts of India, especially eastern, central and north east India.

If the loss of oral traditions, such as prayers and ceremonies, have wounded the collective heart of indigenous people, then losing the sacred land that came to define tribes could mean the end of an entire way of life. The sacred space also includes places that are a part of a tribe's ancestral land but are now publicly or privately owned by someone else. The local tribes do not have a list or maps of sacred spaces that need to be protected, yet they have their elders' memories in their cognition, which may fade with time. In some cases they have no official body of elders or spiritual leaders to oversee a definition of sacred places, a process that is ongoing as developers express interest in different land areas where peoples who practice their traditional religions go to pray for the good day, the precious earth, the blessing waters, the sweet air and peaceful life for all living beings the world over.

‘Most indigenous peoples do not view land as a ‘commodity’ which can be bought or sold in impersonal markets, nor do they view the trees, plants, animals, and fish which cohabit the land as ‘natural resources’ which produce profits or rents. On the contrary, the indigenous view is that land is a substance endowed with sacred meanings, embedded in social relations and fundamental to the definition of a people’s existence and identity. Similarly, the trees, plants, animals, and fish, which inhabit the land, are highly personal beings (often a kinship idiom is used to describe these beings) which form part of their social and spiritual universes. This close attachment to the land and the environment is the defining characteristic of indigenous peoples’ (Davis 1993).

Setting aside patches of forest land and leaving them intact on the grounds of religious belief of the traditional communities has been the practice for centuries in our country. Indian society comprises several cultures, each with its own set of traditional methods of conserving nature and its creatures. Sacred groves are found all over India especially in those regions where indigenous communities inhabit. In India the earliest documented work on sacred grove is that of the first Inspector General of Forests, D. Brandis in 1897. Later some scholars traced the historical link of sacred groves with the pre-agricultural, hunting and gathering stage, before human being had settled down to raise live stocks or till land.

During the empirical study among the Rangdani Rabha, it is observed that each village has common property in the form of forest, sacred bushes, *dham* (prayer land), sacred grooves, etc. Besides, each household in the villages has individual bamboo and pine groves surrounded by green vegetation and agricultural fields. Various sacred places play an important role in maintaining ecological balance in the surroundings. Moreover, forests have been the traditional habitat of tribal people throughout the world. Almost all tribal people have a symbiotic relationship with the flora and fauna of the surrounding forest. The value of the forest for them has been for survival, satisfaction of their dietary and medical wants and not for commercial exploitation. Because of it, the tribal people have an inbuilt concern about nature and its importance in the tribal customs and traditions (Bera 1996).

In many tribal areas after cutting a tree, a sapling is planted on the spot. The people of the locality keep a vigil on the growth of the saplings. There are many examples which can be cited for focusing the awareness of the people towards preserving the plant, and thereby, the environment. From ancient times, every community has a tradition of conserving patches of land in each village, which contain certain trees or bamboos and are considered as sacred, and some time, sacred groves were dedicated to some deity and kept free from all everyday thoroughfares.

Various ethnic groups of north eastern India have preserved and protected several forest patches and even individual trees or animals due to their traditional belief and respect for nature. Many sacred groves were reported from the states of Meghalaya, Manipur and from Karbi Anglong areas of Assam, in north eastern India (Tripathi 2001). In Arunachal Pradesh a few of the sacred groves managed by *Lamas* and Monpa tribe, are attached to the Buddhist monasteries and they are called *Gompa* Forest Areas (GFAs). These monasteries are mainly in West Kameng and Tawang districts of the state and 58 GFAs were reported from these two districts (Malhotra *et al.* 2001) and a few sacred groves from Lower Subansiri and Siang districts of the state (Chatterjee *et al.* 2000).

In a recent inventory, Khan *et al.* (2007) have reported a total of 101 sacred groves with detailed information from the different districts of Arunachal Pradesh. Most of the sacred groves

are located at high altitudes in the state. The largest number (39) of them is located in the Tawang district followed by West Kameng (24) and Lohit (15) and only 2 in the Papumpare district. Many of these sacred groves are attached to the *Gompa*, i.e., Buddhist monasteries and they are under the control of monasteries and conserved due to religious considerations.

The forest dwelling tribes such as Bodo and Rabha, inhabiting the plains and foothills of western Assam have the traditions of maintaining sacred groves which are locally called *dham* (sacred place). Karbi Anglong district of Assam also has about 40 sacred groves. Dimasa tribes in the North Cachar hills in Haflong district of Assam call sacred groves as *madaico*. The size of *madaico* is generally not more than one acre. Sacred groves are also found in the plains of Brahmaputra valley in Assam. The *Vaishnav* temples like *Shankara Deva Mathas* distributed all over the state of Assam also have sacred groves (Malhotra *et al.* 2001).

It is found in the Goalpara district that the Rangdani Rabha consider various places as sacred ones. They also call some of the sacred places *dham*. However, the importance given to *Dodan Mandir* at Baida in Goalpara and *Baikho Mandir* in Nadiapara, Goalpara deserve particular mention. They are constructed for permanent places of worship for the members of the tribe and even for others. We find three images, i.e., king *Dodan*, captain Marukhetri along with saint *Rishi* and eleven goddesses, i.e., attendants of Chari, consort of Darmang are placed respectively. Now-a-days it is noticed that other places have lost importance due to lack of organized programmes with the help of elaborate rubrics and written documents explaining the traditional religion of the Rabha with tangible celebrations (Hakacham 2010: 157-58).

### **4.3 Auspicious Days and Months (*Jet/Purnima*)**

Although it is observed that the Rangdani Rabha have become Hinduised to some extent in the apparent sense, yet in many of the villages their ancient beliefs and practices are still embedded in their traditional mores and folkways. They have a distinct belief system with sacred practices and rituals and rites for individuals and social wellbeing. The foregoing discussion will take into account the major auspicious days and months observed by them with special reference to their deities that are classified by them into benevolent and malevolent categories.

As observed empirically, generally prayers are offered at the evening time, most specifically after the dusk, when various invocations are done by the *Deuri* (priest) of the village. May and June are the intense months with engagements in agricultural operations. *Hasong puja* deserves a special mention in this regard. These agricultural months are set apart to propitiate some spirits which guard the crops (*Kusuri puja*) and as October-November approaches they invoke the same spirits with gratitude and reverence since this is the time before harvesting.

The major prayer rituals of Rangdani Rabhas are incorporated in the festivals namely *Baikho*, *Kokshi*, etc. The deity *Rishi* of the Rangdani Rabha has a number of variants, viz. *Rishi*, *Sarga Rishi*, *Maha Rishi*, *Ju Rishi*, *Karg Rishi*, *Rachi Rishi*, *Bag Rishi*, *Amai Darbar Rishi* and *Amaikal Rishi*.

At the same time epidemic or calamity in the village is thought to be due to the anger of some malevolent spirits. On those occasions the family members of the affected persons take vows to appease the spirit. In this case, as the evening falls, the *Deuri* is called to perform ritualistic sacrifice to appease the spirits. In the traditional Rangdani Rabha religion, idolatry is not seen altogether. But with the arrival of Hinduism, idols of the Hindu deities have given them more opportunities to assimilate some of them in place of the Rangdani Rabha religion (Field, May 2013).

#### **4.4 Magico-Religious Practitioners (*Deuri/Ojha*)**

Few people in today's world admit to believing in magic, yet many people hold on to a number of magico-religious beliefs without even realizing it. A magico-religious belief is a belief that divine energy, sometimes in combination with human energy, can cause concrete change in the world. Most religions do have some degree of magico-religious belief attached to it.

In order to practice religious magic, the practitioner must enter into a meditative or altered state, raise personal energy, connect with his deity and make clear to that deity what he wants to perform. In most religions, this is commonly achieved through rituals. Whether it is as simple as communal prayer, as standardized ritualistic singing and worship in other religions, or

as spontaneous and wild as a voodoo fest, all these rituals are designed to change participants' mental state and open a channel between them and their gods – the first steps in religious magic (www.what are magico-religious beliefs).

Sometime folk therapies are associated with rituals and beliefs. This is normally done by the priest or spiritual healers. Besides, using herbal medicines the Sonowal Kachari try to cure diseases through magico-religious beliefs and practices. It is also found that the Sonowal Kachari believe in supernatural forces for disease causation and seek remedies through magico-religious practices. 'Evil eye' is considered to be a cause for certain ailments particularly among the children. They offer prayers and sacrifices as per direction of the medicine men to appease the supernatural being, which may be responsible for the disease. They also use amulets to protect themselves from 'evil eyes' or malevolent powers.

A religious leader who is a part of an organized religion is considered to be a priest or priestess. Of course, different religions have different terms for these individuals, which may be known by the name *rabbis*, *ministers*, *mullahs*, *Imams*, or *priests*. These individuals are the keepers of the sacred law and tradition. They are found in all societies the world over. They are empowered by the community to invoke the spiritual power in a more coherent and meticulous manner so as to bring in the desired result.

Priests are authorized by priesthood, or some other religious organization, to perform religious rituals designed to influence the supernatural world and to guide the believers in their religious practices. Some of the select priests personally have special powers to invoke the spiritual powers though do not have supernatural powers for their personal welfare. Yet, they are initiated and ceremonially inducted members of an established religious organization that makes them as members of priesthood endowed with special merits and certain elements of superiority among the common believers. Their rank and function results from holding a religious office held by others before them.

In most of the tribal cultures it is noticed that a number of magical and religious rituals are conducted to achieve the desired end and to make it sure their present and future are made a



lot more tolerable. In most of the beliefs it is found that what is found desirable and praiseworthy on earth is equally desirable for the spirits. Therefore, people make a generous offering to appease the spirits which are often seen malevolent. Both religious practices and magical acts in many cases overlap. An act which is observed as religious is overshadowed with acts of magic and mystery. Often the ordinary people who are not initiated in these supernatural rituals see the magical rituals as religious and vice versa.

While shamans and priests are both religious practitioners, they differ in many basic ways. While shamans enter into a direct relationship with the spiritual world, priests mediate with respect to deities. Winkelman's (1992) research, particularly in *Shamans, Priests, and Witches: A Cross-Cultural Study of Magico-Religious Practitioners* provides empirical evidence for these differences: shamans of hunter-gatherer societies reflect biological adaptations to an evolved psychology involving altered states of consciousness (ASC), while priests reflect adaptations to the social leadership needs of agricultural groups.

A shaman is a person who is not a part of an organized religion and is in direct contact with the spirit world, usually through a trance state. He has spirit helpers at his or her command to find out the cause of suffering, sickness, etc., who carry out curing. Shamanistic power is acquired individually, usually in physical and/or mental solitude and isolation from other human being. Spirits or some other supernatural entities are revealed to the shaman and he or she learns how to control them.

In addition, a shaman is essentially a religious entrepreneur who acts for human clients. He or she intervenes on behalf of a human client to influence supernatural beings to perform some act such as curing an illness or discovering the cause of an unexpected death. The shaman essentially acts as a middleman in this. In contrast to this, a priest's clients are the gods. A priest tells people what to do. A shaman tells the supernatural beings what to do. However, both shamans and priests are paid for their services with material things and/or prestige, i.e., either in cash or kind or in both.

A prophet is an individual who receives divine revelation concerning a restructuring of religion and usually of society as well. They call for dramatic change while priesthoods usually act as conservative forces in preserving long standing traditions. Not surprisingly, prophets are usually placed outside the concept of priesthood. It is not unusual for prophets to come from humble or unknown origins.

In the Rangdani Rabha society the *Deuri* (priest) is neither hereditary nor the performance of the ritual is taught by anybody. Any Rangdani Rabha who has learnt the art in dream revelation is regarded as their *Deuri* and is highly esteemed by the whole society. He has a great duty to perform for the welfare and for the service of the whole village. He does not do this service for a price, but often an honorarium is readily given to him by the one who requests his magico-religious service at any time of the day or even in the late hours of the night. He is chosen from the various people who have a proven record of good temperament, whose life is beyond any blame, who is able to undertake fasting up to two days for the benefit of the village community, who is in good control of himself including the ability to take vegetarian food even for a day or two, especially in preparation for the most important village festival – *Baikho* celebrations.

On some occasions before the major *puja*, the *Deuri* is expected to remain on fast even abstaining from drinking water. There are also female *Deuri* who assist the male *Deuri* in preparation of the main festivals like *Baikho*. It was identified that there were 18 male and 9 female *Deuri* during the *Baikho* celebrations. During one of the data collecting sessions it was found that those who aspire to become *Deuri* were selected for a period of apprenticeship and that period of time is used to assist the head *Deuri* in preparation for various *puja* and training also is received in uttering various essential *mantras*.

Magico-religious ceremonies accompanied by behavioral restrictions binding upon community and/or individual performed during the year. These ceremonies are the major cure prescribed for ills among the Rangdani Rabha. In addition to these rites, a number of medicinal herbs are used for their curative properties. The brain of the *khokhe* fish, the bile of the toad, the casts of earthworms, a dog's eyes and hairs, raw eggs, are among the animal parts and by-

products used for medicinal purposes by them. During our study we have identified a number of very useful herbs which are administered by magico-religious practitioners for the various ailments in the Rangdani Rabha community even today. Some of the most important ones which are also useful for the general well-being of the people are described below:

<i>Gandakuthlai/Sokorphena</i>	- for curing cuts in the body
<i>Jalkumra</i>	- vitamin
<i>Maliskora</i>	- massaging the sprained body parts
<i>Lemthe sak</i>	- curing stomach upset
<i>Anaros panchak</i>	- gastric
<i>Tuchipok</i>	- to increase breast milk
<i>Salkumra</i>	- burns
<i>Gungumula</i>	- urinary disorders
<i>Salkumra milkai</i>	- urinary disorders
<i>Harjora</i>	- fracture
<i>Gynal jiming</i>	- pain killer
<i>Baktuk sakkai</i>	- massage for body pain
<i>Gandai kulija</i>	- chest pain

(Field, May 2013).

#### **4.5 Taboos (*Harichokkay*) Related to Religion (*Dorom/Dormo*)**

A taboo is something that is not permitted in the society or in a literal sense ‘prohibited’ or ‘proscribed’. It is a prohibition which, if violated, leads to an automatic supernatural penalty. The practice of taboo covers and affects all aspects of the tribal people’s life. Some taboos are: not to kill an animal when one’s wife is pregnant; forbidding the felling of certain trees because of its sacred consideration; incest is not permitted; it is taboo for a woman to hunt, climb on a roof or carry corpses especially because when the observance of taboo is neglected, the human community not only suffers but also animals and plants are affected (Longchar 2000: 44-49). Nagas, for example, believe that certain stones, trees, jungles and rivers cannot be touched as

these are thought to have supernatural powers and touching these would invite calamities or destruction to the individual or to the society as a whole.

A taboo is a strong social prohibition relating to any area of human activity or social custom that is sacred and or forbidden based on moral judgement, religious beliefs and or scientific consensus. Breaking the taboo is usually considered objectionable or abhorrent by society. The term taboo often has specific religious associations. American author Herman Melville, in his first novel *Typee* describes both the origin and use of the word in Polynesian culture.

‘The word taboo itself is used in more than one signification. It is sometimes used by a parent to a child, when in the exercise of parental authority forbids the child to perform a particular action. Some taboo activities or customs are prohibited under law and transgressions may lead to severe penalties. On the other hand taboos result in embarrassment, shame, and rudeness’.

A look at major religions of the world shows that, without exception, they have placed restrictions on menstruating women. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism have all made statements about menstruation and its negative effect on women, leading to prohibitions about physical intimacy, cooking, attending places of worship, and sometimes requiring women to live separately from men at this time. The exploration of these taboos gives first-hand accounts of certain religious attitudes toward menstruating women, and suggests a course of research that could lead to change.

In any given society there are a number of taboos or ‘social ban’ concerning any area of human activity or social custom. Breaking of that social custom is not acceptable to the society at large. Therefore, the taboo is often regarded as ‘not allowed set of behaviors’ by a society. In some cultures, a taboo often has particular religious ramifications. In any religion there exist taboos which determine not just things people are to do, like sacrifice and ritual, but as well things they are not do: eating particular foods, putting on certain clothes, communicating with people of lower status and so on. Taboos about food - what to eat, when to eat it, with whom to

eat it – are of primary significance in many religions, as a fundamental concept of purity and pollution. However, all taboos have emerged in the given societies based on the needs of the society.

Sigmund Freud is a member of a group of thinkers who is against religion in its formal expression, but at the same time he analyzes basic religious notions and relates them to the human psyche. Freud was Jewish but he never practiced his religion and thought that every religion was an illusion that had developed to suppress particular neurotic symptoms in humans. In his famous works *Totem and Taboo*, *The Future of an Illusion*, and *Moses and Monotheism* Freud supposed that religion developed as a response to human feelings of helplessness concerning a world they cannot control.

Another point of view concerning religious taboos is expressed by Mary Douglas, an influential anthropologist. In her well known work *Purity and Danger* she argues that taboos of a particular culture can reveal many interesting facts concerning its sense of its own identity. For instance, she analyzes the dietary restrictions noted down in the Biblical book of Leviticus. These rules forbid to eat pork and shellfish, as it is known, but lions, rabbits, vultures, camels, and many other foods, are forbidden too. In sum, both Douglas and Freud believe that unconscious motivations drive religious prohibitions ([www.essay-paper.net/40-religion\\_essay.html](http://www.essay-paper.net/40-religion_essay.html)).

Movies and television also reflect various taboos in communities. For example, as Elizabeth Arveda Kissling explains in her article, ‘On the Rag on Screen: Menarche in Film and Television’, the early 1990s movie, *My Girl* contains a scene where the main character, Vada, experiences her first period. The explanation given to her by a female role model of what is happening to her is done off camera and the subject is never mentioned again. This shows that desire of society not to see or hear of the unpleasantness of menstruation in their movies. Also in one of the few films where menstruation is shown on screen it seems to reinforce the taboo of menstruation being somehow wrong by having Carrie's first period become the starting point for her telekinesis which then leads to murder.

It is important to understand the different restrictions and views of menstruating women in different religions. One reason for this importance is the fact that there are many people who still follow these laws. For example, Hindus, Muslims, and Orthodox Jews still abide by these taboos. An understanding of these beliefs will help in dealing with people of these faiths. Additionally, these ideas have an impact on people who do not practice religion. As recently as 25 years ago, it was reported that many peasants in eastern and central Europe believed that a menstruating woman should not bake bread, churn butter, or spin thread. In modern Western culture, women still feel that they must hide their menstrual cycles. This is clearly evident from the marketing of products that allow them to do so; they promise women a sanitized, deodorized, and fresh bodily presentation. The origin of these stigmas is in the different religions described above. By learning the origins, we can more effectively combat their continuance. Feelings about menstruation represent biases against women. Understanding the religious origin of biases against menstruation can help feminists as they struggle against cultural prejudices.

Steinem (1986) has written amusingly and convincingly that if men could menstruate and women could not, menstruation would become an enviable, worthy, masculine event'. However, religions developed their menstrual taboos, the fact that they have endorsed them has served to accentuate and perpetuate biases against women. It is believed that women regaining confidence through the explicit demonstration of their cycle and its powers in life could move from many conflicts within themselves into a gender unbiased world. This would create a marvelous crack in the armour of patriarchy, and might help all to break through to a world where being female will be a delight and a powerful lever of change.

Community worship days on the day of *Baikho* (the goddess of fertility) all the villagers are expected to suspend the agricultural operations. It is popularly known as *Karichokkay* (can be compared with Naga concept of *Genna* or Polynesian concept of *Mana* – terms used for taboo). When we come to the Rangdani Rabha community of Goalpara we have instances of taboo related to their traditional religious sphere. Here below we shall see some of the beliefs and taboos related to agriculture, house building, dream and cosmic bodies.

## 4.6 Beliefs related to Agriculture, House Building and Dream

Assam is basically an agrarian society, so are the Rangdani Rabha of the state. They occupy areas suitable for rice cultivation which is the main economic pursuit and main source of livelihood. They cultivate many varieties of rice depending on the fertility and topography of the land. Some of the main crops cultivated by them are *ahu*, *sali*, *asra*, *masri*, *aijong*, *bilsa*, etc. In order to prepare rice-cake (*pitha*) they also cultivate some special kinds of rice known as *bora*, *joha*, etc. It is assessed here some of the major beliefs related to agriculture, house building, dream and cosmic bodies.

### a) Beliefs Related to Agriculture (*Hamjar* = shifting cultivation/*Norong*)

Traditional agriculture, as it was originally applied, can neither be fully resumed nor would it satisfy the food needs of the increasing population. It is, however, useful to preserve and mobilize local knowledge, which reflects expertise in and understanding of the environmental aspects gained over thousands of years (Kumar 2010: 5). There are a number of beliefs and rituals related to agriculture based on the local knowledge. The main agricultural season begins in February-March. Therefore, the ordinary village folk believe that a couple of days before entering the agricultural field calling on the all pervasive divine power are a must to ensure good yields. A major rite which takes place among the Rangdani Rabha community is a sacrifice for the deity, namely *Dhan Kuber*. This rite is undertaken by the *Deuri* in the presence of the village elder and some representatives of the village. A representative sample of seeds of all kinds that are to be sown during the period of a month is offered to the deity invoking blessings for a good climate, no harm from pests and a final good harvest. Generally they take a measure of seeds and deposit them in the house of the *Deuri* for a couple of days and later on an auspicious day they collect the 'blessed' seeds, and families in turn mix the 'blessed' seeds with the seeds which are set apart for sowing.

Assam is very rich in plant biodiversity as well as in ethnic diversity and has a great traditional knowledge base in plant resources. It is inhabited by the largest number of tribes and they lead an intricate life so much dependent on forest plants. The Mising is the major section

and fourth largest tribal community of Assam and have a rich tradition of religion and culture. Their religious practices and beliefs are based on supernaturalism. A study of the plants related to magico-religious beliefs or a study of plant species used both in religious purpose as well as in the treatment of different ailments will be rewarding.

Tribal folklore is rich in magico-religious beliefs and taboos. They believe that some gods and deities reside on the trees in the forest. If they do not show respect to them their full clan will be destroyed. So they preserve the plants which they regard sacred for social, cultural and religious purposes. Their taboos, festivals, rituals and other cultural aspects are closely associated with the surrounding vegetation preserved on religious ground. The fear of getting attacked by the forest spirits or getting cursed by the deities eventually makes the local communities to resort to worship the spirits and making sacrifices and offerings to pacify them.

The farmers in tribal areas mostly depend on the forest all the year round; but they believe that the forest belongs to all. Before using the community resources such as forest, water and pasture they always discuss among themselves. Before going for *jhum* cultivation, the village elders sit and plan out of the future. Agriculture has been the main source of livelihood of the community in the. Agriculture being practiced by the farmers of the village is still rooted in traditional notions of divine blessings for a good crop and the practice of appeasing rituals is still continued. Agriculture is not just an enterprise for livelihood but a socio-economic and cultural activity. While agriculture revolves around seasons, the socio-cultural life of the tribal farmers in the region revolves around agriculture. However, many beliefs and religious rituals are now giving way to rational thinking in the cultivation of the crops.

During the course of field study it was noticed that among the Rangdani Rabha there was strong belief that the time from the middle of March (*Jeth*) to the middle of August (*Sravan*) is good for sowing rice (*bichi phukay*) especially of the poromai variety. Vegetables like Gika, bitterguard, pumpkin, long beans, chilly, etc. also were done by them in these months. There are times when agricultural operations are completely suspended for example plowing is not done when full moon days appear, lunar eclipse days, village festival days, death of a member of the village, marriage celebrations and so on. In most of the cases it was found the restriction was



imposed or the activity was completely postponed for the practical purposes, however, a number of cases it was also because of the significance of the belief system attached to it as well.

It is also observed that before the beginning of the agricultural operations some people believe that invoking the name of supreme God (*Rishi*) or *Mama Shibu Darmang* and his wife *Chari*, God of one's garden (*Rakshi*), *Garo devta (Koncho)*, *Nangol puja (Vishwakarma)*, *Bura lakor - Chota lakor* (God of cows), etc. results in great crop. The first phase of ploughing is known as *karaykay*. This is an overall ploughing to make the land rather soft. This they start as soon as they perceive beginning of good cultivable season. Secondly, they plough the field comparatively deeper. This is known as *chas rakhukay*. The third and last phase of ploughing is known as *hapchi-rakhukay*. Through this process land is made leveled and completely fit for the planting of seedlings.

Towards the beginning of the harvesting (*mai-khankay*) season they propitiate *dhan kuber*, *bakra bai*, *bai-ma-ba* (in some cases his wife *dhanketro* also), *hungrybai* (also known as *nakati*) and in the time of pests in the garden propitiation of *kusuri* deity is also done by the members of *Matia* and *Majerburi* villages (Field, May 2013).

#### **b) Beliefs Related to House Construction (*Nok-hamkay*)**

Religion leaves an imprint on every aspect of life of a community. It has a great bearing on the landscape, through culture and lifestyle. It is not only religious structures - such as places of worship, and other sacred sites - dominate many landscapes, even the simple dwelling of human beings and other beings too come under the purview of religious traditions. Given the many ways in which religion affects people and places, there are many possible themes which could be considered here while studying the beliefs related to house construction.

However, it is felt to take a note on the beliefs related to selection of a place and the time feasible for the construction of the house based on the *Rangdani Rabha* belief system. In our study it was noticed that the *Rangdani Rabha* houses were constructed based on the understanding that the plot selected by the village headmen and other spiritual heads who gave

very high premium on the directions in which the house has to be facing. The doors will have to be facing northwards. It was also technically useful to provide ample light on a regular day and protection from the windy rain in rainy season. In most of the cases they believe that one particular land was more suitable to house construction in comparison to another. However, it was often found that the final approval of the place was based on their ancestral belief systems which were handed down from the elders, because it embraces themes such as sacred space and sacred directions in an overall scenario of the village.

In case of house construction, the Rangdani Rabha have particular folk beliefs nurtured from unknown past. The location of each part of the house, for example, building of cowshed, pig house, granary, poultry farm, etc. is said to be determined according to their traditional beliefs. The courtyard is generally made at the southern part of the house. They dig a well on a plot where fire flies frequently fly in groups. The cowshed is supposed to be on the other part of the courtyard. The *Namghar* or the temple is generally located in the eastern part of the household. On the eve of construction of a dwelling house, some raw rice is put on the ground, if the next day if any of the rice grain is lost the ground is considered to be not fit for the construction. They light an earthen lamp on a banana leaf and offer a few coins on the ground in the evening on a plot on which the foundation is supposed to be laid. If the earthen lamp keeps on lighting till the next day morning, then only the proposed plot is considered to be suitable to erect a dwelling house.

At other times they throw some uncooked rice, make a boundary with a thread and set apart the place where the offering has taken place. They observe about 24 hours if they have lost anything from the *puja* ground, if nothing is lost the ground is feasible for construction. All these rituals are undertaken by the house owner (*nokni malik/nok-swami*) and the officiating *Deuri*. They also sacrifice a chicken (*to*) and sprinkle a few drops of blood on the ground, offer *chocko* on the ground, and incense the ground (*dhuna*). After having constructed the house they make sure that while they sleep they place their head towards eastern (*pu*) direction of the earth (Field, April and May 2013).

### **c) Beliefs Related to Dream (*Jamang*)**

Dreams are successions of images, ideas, emotions, and sensations that occur involuntarily in the mind during certain stages of sleep (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 2000). The content and purpose of dreams are not definitively understood, though they have been a topic of scientific speculation, as well as a subject of philosophical and religious interest, throughout recorded history. The scientific study of dreams is called oneirology. To some, dreams are natural but to many others, supernatural. Cultural anthropologists hold that if one closely observes any culture, s/he can notice three basic assumptions on which its world view is constructed (Joseph 2012: 9).

1. The assumption or faith that all of us are in some way part of a Higher Power which is beyond this world of changes.
2. The faith that the purpose of our life is to return to that Higher Power from whom we emerged.
3. The faith that the Higher Power reveals itself to human beings through dreams, visions and inner voices.

It is assessed here some of the tribal beliefs related to dreams with special reference to Rangdani Rabha society.

Dreams are private mental experiences which have never been recorded during their occurrence, while dream reports are public social performances which are accessible to researchers. There has been a major shift in cultural anthropological methodology away from interviewing 'non-Western' dreamers in order to gather dream reports which might then be subjected to a statistical content analysis. Instead, anthropologists today are relying more on participant observation, in which they interact within natural communicative contexts of dream sharing, representation, and interpretation. In such contexts the introduction of an anthropologist's own recent dreams is quite natural, even expected. This methodological change

has resulted in the publication of highly nuanced, linguistically informed analyses of dream narration and interpretation as psychodynamic intercultural social processes. Recently, anthropologists who are also trained in the field of psychology have also become more skilled at uncovering their own unconscious reactions to the peoples they are attempting to describe. In time, perhaps, cultural anthropologists may become like psychoanalysts in the skill with which they listen to emotional dream communications of others and examine their own responses.

In recent years dream researchers have become sensitive to the differences between dream accounts and dreams. While dreams are private mental acts, which have never been recorded during their actual occurrence, dream accounts are public social performances taking place after the experience of dreaming. When dreamers decide, for whatever reason, to share a dream experience, they choose an appropriate time and place, a specific audience and social context, a modality (visual or auditory), and a discourse or performance form. While some clinicians and experiential dream workers operate with the fiction that when they hear or produce a sufficiently dramatic dream report they can recover the dream itself, as if entering into a 'real dream life' (Mahrer 1989: 44-46). Of late, cultural anthropologists have turned their attention to the study of dream sharing as a communicative event (Tedlock 1987).

Anthropologists no longer set out to elicit dream reports as though they were ethnographic objects which might be arranged, manipulated, and quantified like items of material culture. Rather *than* making typological or statistical comparisons between the dreams found in so-called 'Western' versus 'non-Western' societies, cultural anthropologists have turned their attention to studying dream theories and interpretation systems as complex psychodynamic communicative events. By studying dream sharing and the transmission of dream theories in their full social contexts, anthropologists have realized that both the researcher and the subject of research create a social reality which links them in important ways.

Today, fieldworkers are participating within native contexts and learning not only the local cultural use of dream experiences, but also paying attention to their own dreams. This latter practice has helped them to become aware of their unconscious responses to the people and culture they are attempting to understand and describe. In time, perhaps, cultural anthropologists,

like psychoanalysts, will develop the necessary skill and training to listen to the emotional dream communications of others as well as to their own feelings (Kracke 1978). For, as Rosalind Cartwright and other dream lab researchers have suggested, dreams play an important part in mastering new affective experiences and assimilating them into one's self-schemata (Cartwright 1977: 131-133; Palombo 1978). This particular form of self-mastery would seem to be an important undertaking, not only for psychoanalysts but also for anthropologists who use participant observation as their key research methodology.

Dreams might mean nothing, but many people take them seriously nonetheless, as Sigmund Freud did, new research finds people in at least three countries, including the United States, who believe dreams contain important hidden truths, said researcher Carey Morewedge, an assistant professor at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. In six different studies, Morewedge and his colleagues surveyed nearly 1,100 people about their dreams. The results are detailed in the February issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. The interpretations of the psychologists about the meaning of dreams vary widely, but our research shows that people believe that their dreams provide meaningful insight into themselves and their world (Morewedge *et al.* 2009).

The Rangdani Rabha believe that if they experience a howling sound of an owl in the dream within the vicinity of their house it is really a bad omen and this will make one of the family member die in the very near future. Likewise, when one person dreams that he or she is about to undertake a journey and at the very outset if someone seems to ask 'where are you going' then it is believed to be a bad omen. Under such situation they need to postpone the trip; however, while in a dream if a person sees a funeral procession it is considered to be a good omen; so also in a dream someone observes a chirping bird building a nest it is considered to be a promotion to the impending good luck.

Anyone who has learnt the art in dream among the Rangdani Rabha is regarded as their priest and is highly esteemed by the whole society. But the medicine man learns the art from someone else. There is lots of lore regarding the interpretation of their dreams in the Rangdani Rabha society. For example, if somebody dreams to have meat or fish, then a bad news makes its

way. If somebody encounters with a white elephant or a white snake in dream, then good news wait for him. If a tooth is struck out in dream, then bad days will pave way to someone's life. If the dream is of a snake bite it is presumed that someone in the family will get sick. If someone dreams of crying it is considered to be good dream. If a lion is seen by a member it is considered to be a sign of great wealth that will be soon received by the members of the family. On the other hand if one sees in the dream the scene of stomach upset then, it is considered to be situation wherein the family will face a lot of expenditure for various reasons. Finally, if a dead person comes to invite somebody in dream, then life span is considered to be very short (Field, May 2013).

#### **4.7 Beliefs (*Pitikay*) Related to Cosmic Bodies (*Apha* = Star; *Lankry* = Moon; *Rangrang* = Sun)**

When we dwell on the tribal beliefs related to cosmic bodies it is often the sun, the moon and the stars we need to consider since the tribal fraternity mention about this aspect of cosmology in their folklores as well as in their daily life. The Sun has been given an extraordinary position in early human culture. As man observed eclipses, comets, meteorites and other phenomena, he sometimes related to these larger, more powerful elements as substitute deities. Many ancient spiritual traditions existed and flourished that incorporate many different understandings of the Creator and of celestial bodies. Objects such as stars, planets, the moon, the sun, comets and meteorites would have commanded awe and wonder. Similarly, events such as eclipses would easily have led to marvel at the forces of nature. Whilst all these objects are still as awe-inspiring as they were in ancient times, huge advances in science mean we are constantly exposed to new research on celestial bodies. We are thus no longer astonished upon hearing that a new star or galaxy has been discovered, whereas ancient man would have looked into the sky and been perplexed at objects that he could neither reach nor comprehend. However, it is Divine religion that has always given human the proper context for his place in the universe and in relation to his Creator. It is religion that confirmed to mankind that all of the powerful features and forces observed on earth, in the sky and as events, all originate from that same Creator and all observe the same laws of nature.

The present empirical study finds references to all the cosmic bodies with special emphasis on the sun, the moon and stars that were comprehended by the Rangdani Rabha as wonderful supernatural elements which nourished the life here on earth. They were very vociferous when they observed that ‘even though they live far away from us their warmth and agility is unimaginable’. They specifically experience that while the moon guards them in the night, it is the sun which gives stamina for the living beings, especially the plants to grow and produce rich harvest. The stars were seen by them as celestial bodies which directed the course of events among the people on the earth as a whole.

The Rangdani Rabha have various cosmic bodies which are found to be feared and therefore to be worshipped. During their contact with other people who mainly adhere to Hinduism they have assimilated some Hindu deities, and they have their own deities or cosmic bodies who may be benevolent or malevolent as well. For example, they believe that the cosmic power inhabits with the *Deodini* of the greater Bodo tradition (the cosmic dancer) of *Manasa* worship. They believe that anybody can obtain cosmic power or can have the capacity to encounter with cosmic bodies after a rigorous life in penance and spirituality.

#### **4.8 Omens Related to Religious Practices**

An omen (also called *portent*) is a phenomenon that is believed to foretell the future, often signifying the advent of change. Though the word ‘omen’ is usually devoid of reference to the change's nature, hence being possibly either ‘good’ or ‘bad’, the term is more often used in a foreboding sense, as with the word ‘ominous’. The origin of the word is unknown, although it may be connected with the Latin word *audire*, meaning ‘to hear’ (<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=omen>).

Omens may be considered either good or bad depending on their interpretation. The same sign may be interpreted differently by different people or different cultures. It is intended here to see the significance of omens related to the religious observances among the tribal communities with special reference to the Rangdani Rabha society.

For the tribal, any natural phenomena are not just mere inanimate objects, but are living and dynamic. All knowledge, wisdom and understanding come to a person by observing the signs and listening to the voices of nature. Natural objects and living creatures are believed to be the Supreme Being's gifts and symbols he/she uses to disclose or reveal his works to the people. Therefore, the tribal try to listen to the voices of nature and be sensitive to the message from beyond. Consequently, the idea and belief in omens, divination and dreams have a tremendous effect on the lives of the Rangdani Rabha people.

Tribal people meticulously look for warnings or alerts before undertaking anything such as proceeding on a journey, doing farming, and going for hunting. For example, the chirping of a particular bird similar to a kind of pigeon can either be a green signal or a red signal according to the direction of the chirping. The chirping on the right side is a good omen and the person can go ahead with the plan in strong faith of meeting success ahead. If it chirps from the left side, then it is a bad omen and one has to abandon the plan remaining at home whatever be the situation (Longchar 2000: 35-36).

The Rangdani Rabha have certain taboos related to their religious practices. For example, if somebody is not open hearted in the propitiation of a particular deity or if somebody is indifferent to his assigned duties, he or she is sure to be the prey of the wrath of the deity. If there is incest in the society, then the *Deodini* comes to know automatically with her divine power. Women are not allowed to participate in religious activities during their menstruation period. During *Ambubasi*, performance of any type of religious or auspicious activities is prohibited strictly so also digging, planting, weaving, etc. are not allowed during those days as the mother earth is considered to be in her menstruation period.

#### **4.9 The Religious Calendar**

Though Hinduism has made certain changes in their religious observations undoubtedly the Rangdani Rabha have not ignored some of the finer tribal beliefs and practices. Their religious calendar plays a very important role in their activities in a meticulous way. Moreover, knowledge of a particular culture can be obtained through the religious practices of a given



group of people, and these elements of culture pervade all aspects of their life. As Pohlong (2004: 12) says,

'I will tentatively define religion as a practical system of beliefs which organize our life individually and communally. From this, it follows that religion also can be treated as a 'way of life', especially since every religion has its own ethics which is a code of conduct to be followed by individuals for social action in relation with other members of the community. While in the tribal context religion is intimately interwoven with their tribal way of life, their day-to-day activities, their material and ethical life'.

As Tako Davi (2004: 10) observes, 'tribal religion is a part of their everyday life, not confined to individual faith or creed. It has simple social ethical codes distilled all through the ages'.

As all tribal people live not only in their human surroundings but also in greater society consisting of spirits and unseen supernatural beings both benevolent and malevolent, their religious calendar is not a static written calendar but a socio-religious mechanism whereby they perform an important social role in animating the welfare of the community as a whole. They worship spirits and deities who according to them control rain, crops and epidemics. They propitiate them with sacrifices of fowls, goats, pigs, cows, buffalos and other animals. They worship deities for good harvest of crops and fertility of agricultural land, and also for the good health and welfare of the village. Thus one can say that tribal religion has a distinct character of its own.

As a large number of Rabhas have now come under the fold of Hinduism due to the great influence of the neighboring Hindu society, a number of religious practices are very much similar to that of the traditional Hindus, while the Rangdani, Maituri and the Koch Rabha have still retained the traditional form of their religion to a greater extent. It is found that their religious observations throughout the year are directed towards rites and ceremonies to appease benevolent and malevolent spirits of various categories. It is also observed that there are no

religious observances on daily basis. However, the invocation of deities is based on the need of the individual or community with special reference to welfare of human beings and prosperity of crops and animal stock. As malevolent spirits are considered to be more numerous in number in comparison to the benevolent spirits the intervention of *Ojha* (village medicine men) are called for.

In a traditional Rangdani Rabha society religious observations are done especially if they encounter sickness and other difficult situations. There are a number of spirits to be propitiated as the case may be: *Kuber*, *Bakra Bai*, *Pisuli*, *Huduma Bai*, *Bai-ma-ba*, *Hungry Bai*, *Ticker Bai*, *Panba Bai* (the biggest spirit) are the major ones to be propitiated in various situations of sorrow and sickness. In the case of *Kuber*, one chicken (*to*) is fried and offered; in the case of *Bakra Bai* four chicken are offered, and this *puja* may take even a couple of hours of chanting of *mantras*. The *Deuri* makes a statue of the deity on the ground; on both sides of the statue banana stems are planted decorated with flowers, finally *chocko* is poured on the ground to appease the deity. While *Pisuli Bai* is offered *puja* in the nearby jungle; one bamboo stand is made on which a fire is lighted, one chicken is killed taking the name of *Pisuli*. While in the case of *Huduma Bai* there is a need to make a statue like figure on the ground and near the place of its head a lamp is placed; a goat is killed and the head of which is buried near the lamp. For *Hungry Bai* a lamp is lit and banana leaves are spread on which a black chicken is killed. The blood of the chicken is sprinkled on the ground. This *puja* may take about an hour. *Pamba Bai* is considered to be the biggest deity which will take long hours of *puja* (Field, April - May 2013).

In general we see that the Rangdani Rabha do not have any particular calendar to perform their religious activities. Most of them observe their rites and rituals following the universal calendar made for the Assamese Hindus. Some months and days are considered to be suitable or auspicious to perform religious activities like other caste Hindus. Yet, the only distinctive *Manasa puja* is observed in the month of *Phagun* (between mid February to mid March) or in *Bohag* (between mid April to mid May). Other religious activities are conducted according to the occasion, especially the need to propitiate spirits which cause illness and even death. However the decision of the villagers in consultation with the elders and the *Deuri* will be final.

#### **4.10 Analytical Observation**

From the analytical point of view of observation we have seen that most cultures of the world have religious beliefs and practices which uphold the dictum that supernatural power can be influenced, to act in certain ways for good or evil purposes, by using ritual formulas. These are magico-religious rituals which provide shape and meaning to one's perception of the universe providing an order and meaning to the people with reference to their whole cosmos.

While analyzing the data on the studied community it is found that among the Rangdani Rabha community also the people are endowed with belief in spirits and their veneration for which worship can be invoked, propitiated and even forced to help or harm human beings by various magical means and practices. Though they are often unaware of the true law of nature and the cosmic order, they believe that the whole world including the individual life and works are largely governed by superhuman powers, personal and impersonal. They are convinced that magico-religious rites have the power to take control over the supernatural powers that can cause disease, misfortune or even death. So they adhere to much specificity in relation to magico-religious beliefs and practices in special reference to life cycle ceremonies – birth, marriage and death.

Hence, it is apparent here that the Rangdani Rabha have great adherence to magico-religious practitioners, meticulously observing the taboos on the one hand, and number of belief systems related to agriculture, house building and other religious practices. Though Hinduism has made inroads into their life, making certain changes in their religious observations, undoubtedly the Rangdani Rabha have not ignored some of their finer tribal beliefs and practices which were also so devotedly handed down to them from generations of accumulated traditional wisdom. This also provides a window to their particular culture which pervades in all aspect of their life even today. In the next chapter (V) we shall see the continuity, transition and change in the sphere of religion among the Rangdani Rabha of Assam.

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