THE KOCH RAJBONGSHIS,
AS AN ETHNIC ENTITY:
PLANTS IN RELIGIO-CULTURAL AFFAIRS
CHAPTER IV

The Koch Rajbongshis as an Ethnic entity:

Plants in Religio-Cultural affairs

History tells us that the Koches were a powerful tribe who built an empire in Assam and that which sustained for long. At the present day the word Koch is a term of some ambiguity. In Assam proper it has become the name of the Hindu caste, into which are received the converts to Hinduism from the ranks of the Kachari, Lanung, Mikir and other tribes; in North Bengal and undivided Goalpara, (At present Goalpara, Dhubri, Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon Districts), on the other hand, the term Koch to a great extent, been abandoned in favour of the appellation Rajbongshis. The Koches are frequently referred to as Kavacha in the Puranas and Tantras. The historian of Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji’s invasion at the end of the twelfth century says that the features of the Koch, Mech and the Tharu, tribes’ resembled those of the tribes of Southern Siberia. The keen observer Bryan Hodgson (1849) classed the Koch with the Bodo and Dhimal. On the other hand, Colonel Dalton (1872) considered them to be Dravidian, and Risley (1891), while admitting an intermixture with Mongoloid stock held that Dravidian characteristics predominate. The divergence of views seems to have arisen from the confusion caused by the use of the term Rajbongshis. It originally referred to an entirely distinct community of Dravidian affinities but was afterwards adopted by the Koches west of the Monas river, who, when they attorned to Hinduism, appropriated the caste when they attorned to Hinduized community in their neighborhood. So long as the Koch kings ruled, there was a considerable intermingling of the two races in the country subject to their domination. There seems, however, to be no doubt that the true Koches were a Mongoloid race very closely allied to the Meches and Garos; and we find that in Jalpaiguri, Koch Bihar and undivided Goalpara, the persons now known as Rajbongshis are either pure Koches who, though dark, have a distinctly Mongoloid physiognomy, or else a mixed breed, in which the Mongoloid element usually preponderates.
The language that the Koches once spoke is now extinct to all intents and purposes; the traces of it that might eventually linger would connect it with that of the Garos, the Kocharies and the Lalungs. These people, the Koches ruled for a longtime over Assam and North Bengal till ultimately they were overthrown by the Ahoms and the Muhammedans about the beginning of the 17th Century. In the erstwhile district of Goalpara, the Koches are known even to this day as Rajbongshis which means “men of the royal race”. Biswa Singha and Naranarayan, both of whom belonged to this dynasty, occupy a place of pride in the annals of ancient Assam.

There are numerous old manuscripts, which contain some accounts of the Koch kings, but by far the most detailed narrative yet brought to light is that contained in the Bansabali of the Darrang Rajas. This manuscript, which ends abruptly with the death of Parikshit, belonged to the late Raja Lakshmi Narayan Kuar, who was the leading representative of the Darrang branch of the Koch royal family. The reign of the Koches is an enflaming chapter of our history; both in the domains of political and cultural expansion.

The history of the origin of the Rajbongshis is a mystery. It is said that they belong to the great Bodo family that entered India in the ninth century B.C., from the east and settled on the banks of the Brahmaputra and gradually spread over Assam and the whole of North and East Bengal.

The first introduction in the modern history of the people living in the furthest north of Bengal is found in the accounts of invasion of Baktyar Khiliji when he entered Tibet in 1206 A.D. It is reported that at that time between the country Lakhnavati and Tibet lay the hill or rather the jungle tract which was inhabited by three non-Indian Mongoloid tribes, the Koch, the Mech and the Tharu.

S. K. Chatterjee in Kirata Jana Kirti (1951), writes, “According to Minhaju- S- Siraj, the author of the Tabaqat- I- Nasiri compiled in c. 1261, Kamrupa was inhabited by the Kwn, the Myj and the Thirw (i.e. the Koc or Koch, Mec or Mech and Th’rw or Tharu) people whose Mongoloid race and speech made a distinct impression upon the Turks, themselves also of the same race. These races had, Turki countenances” i.e., slanting eyes, snub noses, high cheek bones and yellow complexion of the Mongols, and they spoke a different idiom’ from the language of India proper.”
Hodgson (1849 A. D) reported, that Hajo founded the Koch kingdom. The Koch belongs to Tamulian extraction and lived before the Aryans came. Hajo's grandson Visva Sinha became Hindu, renounced the name Koch and adopted Rajbanshi. In his opinion Kubach was identical with Koch. In Assam the Koch were divided into three sects (a) Kamthali, (b) Madai (c) Kolita. In Rangpur they had two sects (a) Rajbansi (b) Koch.

Dalton (1872) describes that the very appearance of the Kochs shows that they are non-Aryans. He considers them as belonging to the Dravidian stock and probably a branch of the great Bhuiya family.

Beverly (1872) comments that "The Koch, Rajbansi and Paliya are for the most part one and the same tribe. Rajbansi is an indefinite term and some few of the individuals may possibly belong to other castes. In the lower delta, Rajbansi are said to be a sub-division of Tiyars, but by far the great majority coming from the districts of Danajpur, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri, Cooch-Bihar and the Goalpara are clearly the same as Koch and Palliyas. Capt. Lewin a deputy commissioner of Cooch- Behar while commenting on the census of 1872 observed 'the present inhabitants of Cooch-Behar State do not belong to any particular race. The Meches who inhabit the Bhutan Duars coming into contact with the immigrants from the south. intermarriages took place and the descendants are the modern Cooch-Beharis'.

Dr. Hunter (1876) observed that about the close of the fifteenth century one Koch king Hajo founded a kingdom at Kamrupa. His grandson Visva Singha, together with his officers and all people of the condition apostatized to Hinduism. A divine ancestry for the Chief was manufactured by the Brahmins. The converts abandoned the name Koch and took that of Rajbansi. Hunter (1876) also notes that in Rangpur, Jalpaiguri and Cooch-Behar, the name Rajbansi, which literally means 'Royal Race' is adopted by the cultivators and respectable men, that of Koch being restricted to labourers and specially to the palanquin bearers. Hunter (1876) places the Rajbansi under "Semi-Hinduised Aboriginals".

Rowny (1882) describes that intermarriage with Koch tribes with Hindus has considerably changed their old habits. They resemble the Bengalees more than any other people. One class of this tribe, the Rajbansi, worship Hindu deities and have adopted Hindu manners."
H. Boileau while commenting on the census report of 1891 of the district of Jalpaiguri, (his memorandum No. 387 J. 18th March, 1892, reports (p. 20) stated that 'The Koches or Rajbansis, are not within the pale of Hinduism, but aroide Hinduised aboriginal tribes of the district has been authoritatively fixed by the Privy Council ruling, in reference to the succession of the present Raikat Phanindra Dev of Jalpaiguri. The Raikats of Jalpaiguri, the Maharaja of Cooch Behar belong to the same family. Both the families trace their descent from the common ancestor Bisu Singha who was the offspring of Siva and Madhavi Devi, a Yogini, very highly presided by god Siva himself. In the Yogini Tantra 'The Raikat of Jaipalguri and Cooch-Behar families are Koches and Meches mixed.' As both royal families call themselves Sivabangshi, so the mass of the Kochhs call themselves Rajbansis as connected with royal families. 'Some of the Rajbansis are now trying to establish that they are descendants of the Kshatriyas, who have taken shelter in North Bengal, being pursued by a Brahman hero Parasu Ram who extirpated the Kshatriyas from the earth twenty one times. Some of them still call themselves Bhanga Kshatriyas. There is no historical evidence behind this assertion of the observations on the Koches and their language.

O'Donnel (1891) writes - 'Another interesting tribe is the Rajbansi or Koch of North Eastern Bengal, the localization of whose racial position has long been a subject of dispute'. 'They are however, only the third wave of Mongols who have advanced through the eastern passes the first being the Chandal, the second the Koch and the last the Aham'.

Risley (1891) stated that Koch, Koch-Mandi, Rajbansi, Palliya and Desi Belong to large Dravidian tribeif North Eastern and Eastern Bengal amongst whom there are grounds for suspecting some admixture of Mongolian blood. The transformation of Koch into Rajbonshi, the name by which they are now known in Rangpur, Jalpaiguri and Kuch-Behar is a singular illustration of the influence exercised by faction is the making of caste' "Now the great majority of Koch inhabitants of Northern Bengal invariably describe themselves as Rajbansis or Bhanga Kshatriyas". 'They keep Brahmas, initiate Brahmanical ritual in their marriage ceremony and have begun to adopt Brahmanical system of Gotras.' In respect of the last point they are now in a curious state of transition, as they have all hit upon the same gotra (Kasyapa) and they habitually transgress the...
primary rule of Brahmanical system which absolutely prohibits marriage within a Gotra'.

'They are thoroughly Koch under the name Rajbansi. There is no historical foundation for the claim of Rajbansis to be a provincial variety of Kshatriya. It is a singular fact that the title Rajbansi serve much the same purpose for the lower stratum of Hindu population of North Bengal as the title Rajput does for the landholding class of dubious origin all over India.'

'The original nucleus of Rajbansi was certainly Dravidian'.

Grierson(1903) comments, 'there can be little doubt that the original Kochs were the same as the Bodos. The Koch, Mech and Bora or Bodo all connoted the same tribe or at most different sects of the same tribe. The name Koch in fact connotes a Hinduised Bodo who has abandoned his ancestral religion for Hinduism and ancestral Bodo language for Bengali or Assamese, Rajbangsis are the Hinduised Kochs of Rangpur and Goalpara'. 'These Koch, who are now Hindus, are principally known under the name Rajbansi. The Rajbansi dialect bears many close points of resemblance to the dialect of East Bengal'.

'Gait (1901) described the Rajbansis of North Bengal, 'as a synonym of Koch, this represents a real caste and in this sense only it may be entered in the schedule. The term is also a title of Tiyars, Kaibartta, Namasudras and other fishing castes, also of Barua Mugs in Chittagong and of Bagdis, Mals etc. In Tippra the term is applied to Tippras and to Hindus who have lost caste by eating with hill men. In Burdwan person using this title are usually Bugdis if fishermen and Kaibarttas if cultivators.'

Gait (1901) also stated ‘Dhimals Darjeeling and Nepal Terai as Rajbansis. They often call themselves Rajbansis. Their title is Maulik (Mallik). 'The Koch are cultivators and same as Rajbonsis.” “The Koch-Monde of East Bengal are the Kochs who are still non Hindus who speak their own language Koch-Monde’. 'It is stated in the Imperial Gazetteer of India, ‘Though the Koches freely call themselves Rajbansis, it is believed that the two communities sprang from entirely different sources, the Koch kings of Mongoloid origin, while the Rajbansis are a Dravidian tribe who probably owned the name long before the Koch kings rose to power. In Cooch Behar the persons now known as Rajbansis are either pure Koches, who though dark have a distinctly Mongoloid
physiognomy, or else a mixed breed in which the Koch element usually predominates'.

Thompson (1921) stated - 'The Rajbansi are the indigenous people of North Bengal and the third largest Hindu caste in the province. Their total number has been exaggerated by the fact that a number of fisherman caste in Mymensingh Nadia and Murshidabad returned themselves as Rajbansis. In 1901 many Koches in North Begnal were returned as Rajbansis. Many of the Rajbanis have now taken sacred thread and were prepared to use force in support of their claim to be returned as Kshatriyas'.

Porter(1931) commented, 'The Rajbansis have now to some extent regularized the anomalous position in which they found themselves until recently owing to the fact that upon assumption of the Kshatriya status they had all adopted themselves into the same gotra (kasyapa ) with the result that all marriage amongst Rajbansis as Kshatriyas would depend upon a strict interpretation of Hindu law, have been invalid owing to their being within the same gotra'.

"But even amongst those families which have invested with sacred thread, it is apparently only the literate section who claim to belong to any gotra and those, when it is necessary to disclose a gotra at all, plump for the kasyapa gotra as a matter of course."

Porter(1931) also stated Koch, Palia, Rajbansi were originally the same. The Kaivarttas of Assam and North Bengal have more affinity with Rajbansis. They all claimed to be recorded as Rajbansis and all Rajbansis claimed to be recorded as Kshatriyas at the beginning of the 19th Century. The more backward and illiterate members of the Rajbansis caste still maintain practices inconsistent with orthodox Hindu belief.

Chatterjee(1951) wrote, 'The masses of North Bengal areas are very largely of Bodo origin or mixed Austric – Dravidian – Mongoloid. They can now mainly be described as Koch i.e. Hinduised or semiHinduised Bodo who have abandoned their original Tibeto-Burman speech and have adopted the northern dialect of Bengali'. ‘They are proud to call themselves as Rajbonsis and to claim to be called Kshatriya’. ‘Nothing much is definitely known about the Koches of North Bengal prior to 16th century; they may be described as western Bodos, an extension of the great Bodo race of Assam and East Bengal which at one time
peopled the entire Assam valley from Sadia right up to North Bengal. ‘With the full Hinduisation of the Koches, and the rise in power of their chiefs, Ksatriya origin was, as was natural, found out or suggested for them.’ Bisu or Bisa as the real founder of Koch power. He rules from 1496-1553 A.D. Bisu embraced Hinduism and took the name of Biswa-Singa. ‘He himself was a workshipper of Siva and Durga, revived the Shakta Shrine at Kamakhya. This is an old shrine of hoary antiquity and of Mongoloid or possibly even earlier Austric origin.’ It witnessed the final Brahmanisation of a pre-Aryan cult. It is a symbol of the final Aryanisation or Hinduisation of the Indo-Mongoloids of North Eastern India.

The above observations point to the fact that the Kochs are non-Aryan in origin. Some of them adopted Hinduism and became Rajbongshis. These Rajbongshis later on claimed to be Kshatriyas. There has been a controversy regarding marriage within one Gotra. It is true that a Hindu male cannot marry a girl of the same gotra or Provara. This rule does not apply to the Sudras who are said to have no Gotra of their own but it applies to the Kshatriyas and the Vasiyas although it is alleged that neither of them have any gotra nor provara of their own. The Gotra of these castes are said to be those of the gurus or preceptors or the priests of their ancestors. These gurus or preceptors are probably the same as ‘Paruas’ of the Rajbongshis.

Some of the observations on the Koch-Rajbongshi language
It is difficult and vexed question to answer, since the Koch-Rajbongshis have no distinct language at the present century in the line of the Boros, the Rabhas, the Karbies and Tiwas. The present form of the Koch-Rajbongshi language is a curious conglomeration of Aryan, Austric, Dravir and Tibeto-Burman vocables dotted with numerous ‘desi’ words and any attempts to decipher them now is beyond possibility (Deb, 2006). The Koch-Rajbongshi language is primarily a Gramyabhasa as was Prakit, Pali and even Sanskrit in the Pre-Vedic time which was called a ‘Loka bhasa’. Abundance of Pali vocables is another notable feature of these language which can be inferred from that Buddhist monks and preachers haunted this part of ancient Kamrup to inculcate Buddhist doctrines which was primarily permeated through Pali and partly through Sanskrit. The existence of so many Buddhist stupas in the Sri Suryya-Tukreswari hill in the South bank of
the mighty Brahmaputra is speaking eloquently of the visit of the Tathagata’s emissaries to this origin. The Culture Heritage of India says of the visit of Panini to ancient Kamrup in the 5th century B.C. He coined many places names, rivers and hills in Sanskrit according to their significance. Sir George Grierson (1903) identifies this language as Rajbongshi language which is misnomer. Historically there is no such ethnic group as Rajbongshi, it is a term appended to the original word “Koch” in the late 16th Century when Biswa Singha of the Koch tribe established a Rayal dynasty and the people of the Koch tribe claiming lineage real or fictitious with the Royal dynasty called themselves as Rajbongshi. The Koch-Rajbongshi language as named by Sir George Grierson (1903) is a curious conglomeration of heterogenous linguistic elements chiefly of Sanskrit, Prakit of all form, Austric, Tibeto-Burman (Boro), Dravir, Persi, Thai and Onomatopoetic formation. Onomatopoetic formation on a lavish scale are characteristics of almost all the languages prevalent in India. NIA, Tibeto-Burman, Austric and Dravir have large scale use of Onomatopoetic. as ornamental decoration and the Koch-Rajbonsi language is no exception.

Material culture of Koch Rajbongshis

The Rajbongshi villages are generally named after

- a) The type of inhabitants living there
- b) The nature of soil and elevation of the land
- c) The previous owner of the village
- d) Some incident that occurred long ago
- e) Name of the deity

Building customs

Rajbongshi people buys or takes settlement of a plot of land for house building after verifying the plot by person called pandit. There is a common saying about the plan of house. The house must have –

- Uttore gua: Areca nut plant on the north
- Dakhine dhua: Open on the south
- Pube hass: Pube hass
- Pasime bass: Bamboo on the west
A Rajbongshi house has two parts. An outer portion with huts and yard and an inner fenced portion with separate hut and yard. The outer yard is used for business, sitting, receiving guests, threshing corn and for such other purposes.

The inner yard is called “Bhitar agina, agina or eghina’. The inner portion of the house is the real living part with sleeping room, cookshed etc. At the north east corner of the inner yard there is a Tulsi plant (Ocimum sanctum). A chita (Plumbago zeylanica) or a sotomul (Asparagus racemosus) or a Kalomegh (Andrographis paniculata) is grown near the Tulsi plant as a protection against any evil spirit entering the house.

A small kitchen garden is seen outside the living house compound. Here they cultivate vegetables foods e.g. lafa or nafa sag (Malva verticillata), chillis (Capsicum frutescens), potato (Solanum tuberosum) garlic (Allium sativum), raddish (Raphanus sativus), brinjal (Solanum melongena), onion (Allium cepa) etc. A gourd creeper (Kodu) is generally allowed to grow by the wall over the thatched roof of a hut in the inner yard. It is two varieties e.g. Cucurbita maxima and Benincasia hispida. The bottle gourd (Lagenaria vulgaris), Khira (Cucumis sativus), snake gourd (Trichosanthes anguina) is allowed to creep over the bamboo strips.

Catte byre

It is a meager thatched hut (gohali) with earthen floor about one foot high. It is built at a fair distance from dwelling rooms. The walls are made of split bamboo. The size of the hut depends upon the number of cattle. The calves are kept in a separate enclosure inside the room. This hut is kept clean. It is usually built on the western side of the outer yard with a two sloped roof. Paddy straw is given to the cattle either inside the shed or sometime outside. Earthen basin generally enchased in a bamboo network is placed in the open yard about 1½’ ft above the ground so that the animals can eat or drink while standing.

Well

A well is called ‘Cua’ by the village people. Poor villagers generally dug a mud well (Kutcha Kua) outside the living premises or on one side of the outer yard of a
house. Earthen ring wells are also made by the villagers whose living standard are slightly higher. Earthen ring is locally made which are 2’ in diameter and 1’ - 1½’ high. The thickness of the ring rarely exceeds one inch. It is made of sticky earth, sun dried and burnt till the colour is deep yellow or red. Each well requires 20-30 such rings according to the depth at which water is available. The rings are placed from the bottom of the well upto 12 above ground level.

Most of the wells of the villages are “Kuccha’ that is the well is dug into the earth and is left without any other support. The upper side of the well above the ground is protected with a net work of bamboo strips (Khorung) woven around the well upto a height of about 2½’. The subsoil water being very near to the surface the wells are not very deep.

**Spinning and Weaving**

Spinning and weaving are still to be found in the villages. The weaver uses handlooms for weaving ‘phota, urani’ etc ‘Dhokra’ is a jute cloth used for covering the body during winter or for using as a bed sheet. Cotton spinning is few. They weave commonly gamcha (napkin), phota, gilap (wrapper), patani for women. Weaving is also their trade.

**Fishing**

Fishing is not only a sport but also a part of economic life of villagers. It is delightful sight to see the burning torches of jute sticks moving by the side of wet lands, bheels or a drain or a riverin the night. Generally two persons form a batch. One holds the torch and starts moving so that the edge of the water is lighted. The other man takes a Kata, Koka or Dao in his hand to pierce or cut any fish that comes ashore attracted by the light. Thus the march goes on for three to four hours after night fall.

In the month of March-April-May when the severity of winter is just over and the river and ponds dry up considerably batches of young and old men each with a chandzal or small fishing nets cover a huge area of water and stir the big area by dipping and raising the net to have catch of small fishes which are at once placed inside the “Kholoi’ tied to the waist of each one. Small ponds and tanks are found in this season studded with human heads with Dzhoka in each head,
dipping in the water and searching for any fish by thrusting the hand through the cone. This is Dzhoka or Polo fishing. Fishing with traps, large nets and angles are done in the rains when water is plenty and there is every possibility of big fishes coming up.

**Agriculture**

The Koch Rajbongshis are mostly cultivators and paddy (*Oryza sativa*) is the main crop grown. The paddy which is grown on high lands is ‘Aus’ and is called ‘Bhadoi’ and paddy grown on low lands is called ‘Amon’. Different varieties of ‘Aus’ and ‘Amon’ are grown in this area. Other crops like tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum*), Ramie (*Boehmeria nivea*) are also cultivated.

**Foods and their preparations**

The staple food of Rajbongshi are rice. They usually take three big meals a day, one in the morning usually puffed or flattened rice (Tsura) or previous night’s cooked rice “Khokora bhat” or “Pontha bhat”, after coming back from the morning ploughing work and before going out with the plough for the second time, one at noon usually freshly cooked rice curry and one at night the same food in the noon. Wheat and millet are not generally taken. They eat cooked vegetable pulse, fish and mutton. They use mustard oil for cooking and for smearing on the head and body after bath. No other oil was known to them till recent time.

**Some special foods of the Rajbongshis**

**Choba**

The Choba is a roasted delicacy of the Rajbongshi. Baigon or Bengon choba is a brinjal roast. The uncut entire brinjal fruit is burnt in smouldering ash of the oven. As soon as the skin is burnt and turns black the brinjal is taken out of the fire. The skin is peeled off and the softened pulp eaten with little mustard oil, green chillies, onion or garlic and salt. Alu choba (potato roast) is also prepared and eaten in the same way. Likewise much choba (fish roast), meat roast are also prepared and eaten.
Cheka
The hard base (tuber, murba) of a plantain tree is cut up into small bits and dried thoroughly in the sun. These dried pieces are slowly burnt over a flame until they are turned into white ashes. The ashes are collected and preserved in an earthen jar and the mouth kept tightly closed. Sometimes before cooking a small earthen jar is taken with a small hole at the bottom. A little jute or cotton is used to plug this hole completely. A little plantain ash from the big jar is placed into this small jar and some water is poured over it. The jar is then placed over a hollow receptacle and the liquid trickles down and accumulates. This is 'Cheka'. It is an alkaline salt solution.

Cheka-Sak
Some tender shoots with leaves of young jute plants (Chorchorus capsularis) are collected from the field or some dried jute leaves (Sukati) preserved in the house are taken. They are washed clean of all dirt. A cast iron pan (korai) is placed over a burning oven and when it is hot the jute leaves are poured in the pan with a few chillis. The whole thing is stirred with a an iron ladle. As soon as the leaves are lightly fried some salt and enough water is poured on the mass for boiling the leaves. After boiling for a few minutes the 'Cheka' water prepared as above is added to the mass, allowed to boil for sometime and then taken out of the oven. The curry so made is called Pata Saker or Sukatir cheka'. The alkaline water that is the cheka water is said to dissolve the mucilage of the leaves. Such curry is also prepared with the leaves of kochu (Colocasia), gourd, pumpkin or Nafa (Malva verticillata). Nafa a small plant containing a lot of mucillege in the leaves and stem. In very poor houses mustard oil is not used on account of high cost. The leaves are lightly fried without oil. The curry is enjoyed by the common Rajbongshi and forms an item of their daily diet.

Sukta Sak
Sukta is sundried fish. A curry of gourd or pumpkin or sweet gourd is prepared by boiling in water with condiments and while boiling a few pieces of washed
sukta fishes are added to the curry and boiling is continued for about fifteen minutes.

Sukati
Leaves of jute plant (Corchorus capsularis) are dried in the sun and preserved in bamboo cages. This is taken when other vegetables cannot be had. The dry leaves are boiled in water sometimes with a few sukta (dried fish) and cheka solution. The boiled leaves are eaten with garlic and chilles.

Pata Saker Khata
The tender leaves and shoots of young jute plant are lightly fried in a pan without oil and then some water and salt are added in the and boiled for sometimes. After boiling has proceeded some way a few pieces of ripe tamarind are added into the curry and boiled for about ten minutes. It is a peculiar curry as the jute leaves are bitter and tamarind is sour but it is relished by the Rajbongshis.

Much pata, Mats patao
Some small fishes are taken. They are cleaned by removing the scales and entrails. The fishes are then washed clean with cold water and wrapped in three to four layers of gourd, pumpkin or plantain leaves and tied with a string to form a packet. The packet is put on the hot oven when the fire settles down. The packet is kept there for about twenty minutes. After the first two layers of the leaves are burnt turning them black the packet is taken out of the fire. After cooling it is opened. By this time the fishes are boiled in their own juice. The fishes are then put in a metal cup, mixed with a little mustard oil, chillies and onions and served with rice.

Other special foods are ‘Sidza’ (boiled vegetables) ‘Pelka’ (preparation with the leaves of ‘Nafa’ Plant Malva verticillata), ‘Sidol’ (preparation of sun dried fish with green stacks of black Colocasia, Kala Kotsu (Colocasia esculenta) or Man Katsu (Alocasia indica) etc.
Customs associated with Birth

For the Koch Rajbongshis whether they are Kshatriyas or non-Kshatriyas, there are certain turning points of life. They are, it is believed, guided by supernatural agencies rendering the outcome of events favourable or unfavourable. Hence certain rites and rituals are observed to ward off the evil spirits. These are time-honoured customs and the common folk of the Koch Rajbongshis strongly believe that observance of those rites produces an auspicious effect. Some of the modern educated amongst the Koch Rajbongshis doubt the efficacy of these customs and consider them as mere superstition. Whatever may be the feeling, all Rajbongshis resort to the Puja and odzhalis (exorcism) when trouble erupts in the family. They are accustomed to these rites rituals from the very beginning of their life.

Belief during pregnancy

When a woman becomes pregnant (Gao-bhari), she is not considered unclean and is allowed to go about her regular works and do all cooking and household duties. But she is not allowed to go about alone at night nor to attend any funeral, nor go to eat in a house where a ‘Sradh’ (post funeral) rite is being performed. Such lady is not allowed to cross any river. It is believed, this may do some harm to the child in the womb and may even cause its death. The husband of the pregnant women is forbidden to carry a funeral or to go to attend cremation. He is not allowed to sacrifice any animal with his own hands.

People of interior villages where modern medical facilities are not available follow traditional customs in all the phases of child birth such as during pregnancy, labour, pre-delivery and post-delivery stages. A pregnant woman carries a bit of iron in the form of knife in her possession to prevent or to ward off an attack of evil spirits. If the pregnant woman falls ill, decoction of herbs are given. After the child birth the first three days no medicine is given if there is no complication. From the fourth day a mixture is given. It is prepared by grinding some ‘pipli’ (Piper longum seeds) and immersing then in cold water for about two hours. The mixtures are boiled and then some treacle is added. About two tea spoonfuls of this mixture is given in morning and two tea spoonfuls in evening. It is slightly warmed before administration. This mixture is said to help
contraction of the uterus and drying of wounds. A curry is prepared with the juice of 'usuni sak' (Spilanthes paniculata), ginger (Zingiber officinale), garlic (Allium sativum), onion (Allium cepa) and roots of 'pipli' (Piper longum) and papaya (Carica papaya). The curry is very pungent and is said to dry up the uterus quickly.

**Customs associated with Marriage**

In matters of marriage the Koch Rajbongshis are in a state of transition. Porter (1934) describes that the more backward and illiterate section of Rajbongshis caste still maintain practices inconsistent with orthodox Hindu belief. These are (1) divorce at will without going through formalities (2) Gao-Goch, a companionate marriage (3) pani-sorpon (4) Widow marriage (5) Ghor-dhoka (6) Dangua (7) Marriage within the same gotra

Porter (1934) describes pani-sorpon as Ghor-jia form. But it is the form of delayed marriage or marriages with retrospective effect.

Hunter (Statistical account of Bengal, 1876.) describes three forms of marriage among the Rajbongshis caste:

1) The Gandhorbo, which is different from the old Hindu custom where the bride selects the husband, but amongst the Rajbongshis the father or the guardian selects the girl (and the boy). A simple ceremony is performed in front of ‘Chalan Bati’ and garlands are exchanged between the bride and the bridegroom.

2) The Brahma marriage (Phul bia) is the regular marriage and the ceremony is performed almost like the marriage ceremony of the caste Hindus.

3) The widow marriage takes place without any ceremony but the children to the union are acknowledged as heirs and successors to the property of their father. Such children were not recognized as legitimate in the orthodox Hindu society till lately.

Another deviation of the Rajbongshis from the orthodox form of Hindu marriage is stated by O'Melly (Census of India 1914). It is usual custom for a Hindu bride to be married in the parent's house and to stay there till the marriage is consummated when she finally goes to her husband's. Among the Rajbongshis the bride goes to the bridegroom's house to be married, until very recently it was
the custom for the bride to be carried to the bridegroom’s house on the back of her sister’s husband; but the custom has been given up as degrading. At the present moment many of the old customs are fading away.

**Death**

The Rajbongshis burn their dead bodies on a pyre. When a man/Woman is about to die, the dying man is made to drink a little water from the Ganga when available. Failing this a little water purified with ‘tulsi i.e. basil leaves (*Ocimum sanctum*) is given to drink. As soon as a person is dead the body is fully covered with a clean and wasted pieces of cloth. The sons of the dead then put a little sacred water, containing basil leaves into the mouth to the deceased.

The body is then carried to the cremation site by observing some rituals. No woman is allowed to accompany the funeral procession. In exceptional cases where the deceased has no son, the widow goes with the procession but should never shoulder the bier.

There are cases where the body is also buried. A person dying of cholera, small pox, snake-bite, suicide, drowning and children before teething or children before eruption of permanent teeth are buried. If a woman with a child in her womb dies, she is buried with the child. In some area husband is made to cut open the abdomen and take out the child. The child is then buried. The abdomen of the mother is sewed up and she is cremated as usual.

Modern Koch Rajbongshis burn all their dead excepting children before teething.

**Religious beliefs and practices**

The Rajbongshis worship nature gods and goddesses such as the goddess of rivers, god of the forest etc. but modernity has changed those belief and practices. They worship ghosts e.g. bhuts, pettenis, and make offerings to them for their propitiation. They are essentially Saivas but the impact of Saktaiism, Vaisnavism, Buddhism, Tantrism have produced a curious blend in their religious usages. They believe in witchcraft. They worship Siva(Mahakal), Bisahari (Bisohori – Snake goddess), Durga, Kali, Lakshmi (Than-Sri), they worship Narayan, Visnu, the sacred basil plant and take part in kirtan. They also perform Dharma-thakur
puja, Chandi puja, take part in Goroknather gan, and worship their ancestors (Sradh). They formerly worshipped Siju (Cactus) representing Bisahari (Bisohari), but this has now been largely abandoned. They also believe in transmigration of soul.

• Their religious practices are in common, in a great measure, with those of the Upper-Caste Hindus in East and North Bengal, the Kacharis, the Meches and the Ahams. The more and backward illiterate members of the Rajbongsi caste still maintain practices inconsistent with orthodox Hindu beliefs.

• It has been gathered from the old folk of the villages that formerly all the images of the deities in the form of Chalan or Mondus or Moura were made with cork. This practice still exists in the remote villages. The pith of a leguminous plant of sub-group Papilionaceae (Kunhila) growing in the swamps is used for the purpose. The plants are about eight to ten feet high and the submerged portion of the stem swells up and attains a diameter of one and a half inches. The writer examined some plants to verify this. Before using, the plants are uprooted and kept in shade for a few days. Then the roots and the above-water portion of the stem are cut off. The skin of the swollen portion is stripped off with a sharp knife and the pith is sized into required shape. This plant is called “batala” gach (Aeschynomene aspera).

Clay images were first made about forty years ago. Some men called Mali of Hari class took up this work in addition to making the cork images. The Kali image made for Rajbansis did not stand on Mahadev nor was her tongue protruded. Probably due to the influence of the Bengalis, at present many of the clay images have the conventional feature of the images as in of the other parts of Bengal.

**Rituals of Worship**

**Bisohari Puja**

In all ceremonies related to marriage, Sradh, pregnancy and child birth, worship is offered to Bisohori Thakurani in the outer yard of the house with curd, flattened rice and ripe plantain as offerings. There are two types of Bisohori. One is Koni-Bisohori which is more commonly worshipped. The other is Gitali Bisohori. She is worshipped during a marriage ceremony. The image consists of
Beulani (Behula, Bala (Lacchindar), Goda, Gadani, washerwoman, Siva, fish, snakes etc. The story of 'Bisohori' is depicted on a sheet of cork. It is called Mer Ghar. Song and dance performances in different parts of the district, womenfolk perform the puja of the Bisohari.

**Sannyasi Puja** (Mahadev or Mahakal)
Mahadev or Dang dhora Sannyasi is also worshipped in all ceremonial occasions with curd, ripe plantain, flattened rice, flowers of Datura and a little hemp (Ganja- Cannabis)

**Cheoni Puja** (Tsauni puja)
This is also called Poiri puja, that is the worship of the female evil spirits so that they may not come and attack the expectant mother or the new-born. This worship is done when the pregnancy advances to six or nine month or when there is a case of hysteric fits in the house. A basketry tray is taken on which some sun-dried rice, ripe plantain, curd etc. are placed. The tray is then kept near the centre of the inner yard, An “odzha” sits near it, utters some incantations and sings songs to drive away the evil spirits, and his associates join in the song. The song sometimes continues for two to three hours. After the song the tray is taken outside the house and tied to a high branch of a neighboring tree. It is believed that evil spirits do not venture come up to a place from where this tray is visible.

**Religious festivals and pujas**

**Modon Kam : Bas Khela**
In the month of Baisakh after harvesting of paddy, the Koch- Rajbongshis young men perform the Bas puja o. This is called Modon Kam puja. A few bamboo poles are wrapped with coloured cloth and tied at the top of each bamboo. Seven bamboos are taken and they are kept stanting on a banyan tree. The first day of this puja is called Bas Jagao day. There are various folk dances related with the puja.
Kali puja
This worship is done in any part of the year and is performed during the day. The offerings of the Kali puja consists of goats-two, pigeons-four pairs, ripe plantains-eight bunches, sun-dried rice three seers, flattened rice-two seers, curds, milk, one piece of new cloth, one new napkin, flowers etc. for all the deities; some hemp (ganja) for the Sannyasi (Mahadev).

Jagannath Puja
This is the puja of the Vaisnavas amongst the Rajbansis. It is the puja of Narayan. Congregational singing or Kirtan is the main function of this puja in which the people of whole village irrespective of faith, take part.

Oa gara puja or Gotsu Puja
In the first week of the month of Jaistha (May - June) the cultivators celebrate the first transplantation of paddy if there is sufficient rain for the purpose, Otherwise it is delayed till there is sufficient rain to cover the field with water. This ceremony is called Oa gara puja or Gostu puna puja or Moodhottir puja probably it is a corruption of ma dhoritri puja, that is, the puja of the Mother Earth.

Kati Puja
Kati Puja is the folk version of god “Kattikeya” and is a fertility deity worshipped for both offspring’s (particularly male) and good crops. The songs also consist of both narratives and shorter pieces sung to the accompaniment of dance performed only by women, the rites as well as the songss and dances are full of erotic overtones. Kati-puja and Hudum- puja dancer are all female affairs in which dramatic depiction of nature and life figure predominantly.

Kushan-gan or dotra –gan ,a folk dance drama are popular in this westernmost parts and have a cheerful and friendly quality. It draws the themes from the epics supported by a principal assistants dancing boys or girls and other assistants. Now it is gasping for breath.
Plants associated with Kati Puja

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scientific Name</th>
<th>Local Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. <em>Areca catechu</em> L.</td>
<td>Tamol.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bisuwa (Bisuwa)

On the last day of the month of Choitra (March-April), all male adults go out with weapons in the jungle for hunting. This 'Bisuwa' or spring hunt is celebrated by the Rajbongshis of North Bengal and Assam. During the whole month of Choitra the Rajbongshis eat or drink decoction of some bitter vegetables e.g. Basak (*Adhatoda vasica*) etc. On the last of Choitra none will eat rice. They eat chura, curds and fried dal.

Plants associated with Bisuwa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scientific Name</th>
<th>Local Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7 <em>Vitex negundo</em> L.</td>
<td>Nisinta.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
12. Drynaria quercefolia (Linn)J.Smith. Garurpankhi
13. Flemingia strobilifera (L)Br. Makhiati
15. Mesua ferrea L. Nageswar
16. Ocimum sanctum L. Tulsi
17. Polygonum hydropiper Linn. (Syn. P. flaccidum Meissn.) Biscutali
18. Curcuma aromatica Salisb. Keturi
19. Sterculia villosa Roxb. Adala
20. Artemisia vulgaris L. Nagdona

Hudum deo puja / Hudma: It is a special Puja. When there is drought, the women of the village each with a sharp knife in hand, as a protection against "Bhuts", go in dark night, into a distant paddy field. They make a small image of the rain God with plantain leaf stalk and install Him on the field. Then the women strip off their clothes, unite the hair of the head allowing the hair to hang freely on the back. Thus completely nude they dance and sing abusing the rain god. Two women kneel on the ground like cows and the land. Into the furrow thus formed draw a plough to scratch a few feet of they sow some paddy seeds or plant a few paddy seedlings. It is a general belief that rain invariably falls shortly after the Puja is done. No men are allowed to go near the dancing place. This Hudum puja is not seen now totally.

Plant associated with Hudum puja

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scientific Name</th>
<th>Local Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Euphorbia nerifolia Linn.</td>
<td>Siju</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Bambusa tulda Roxb.</td>
<td>Bah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Ocimum sanctum L.</td>
<td>Tulsi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. *Ficus bengalensis* L.  
6. *Ficus religiosa* L.  
8. *Oryza sativa* Linn  
9. *Musa paradisiaca* L.

**Monosa puja**

This is the puja of the snake goddess. It is one of the important pujas of this area. The puja is usually performed in the month of Kartick (Oct – Nov) in this area. Milk and ripe plantains are the main items of the offerings as it is believed, that the snakes are very fond of those articles of food. A special type of flute is played. This flute is called “mokha or mukha basi”. This is the puja to save men from the attack of snakes.

**Dhan Kata Puja**

This is the first paddy harvesting ceremony generally on the first day of Agrahayana (Nov – Dec). When the paddy is ripe in the field, the Gitthani or the seniormost wife of the owner of the field takes an earthenware lamp, a scythe, a little vermilion on a plantain leaf and goes to the field. She cuts a few ears of the paddy, sprinkles some vermilion on them, moves the lamp in front of the cut ears several times and come back with paddy ears and fixes them over the doorway of the sleeping hut. After this ceremony regular harvesting of paddy begins. The sheaves are kept in the field for two days and then brought home and stacked in the Kholan, the thrashing floor in the outer yard of the house.

**Naya khawa**

On an auspicious day in the month of Agrahayana (Nov – Dec), some new paddy is husked and new rice eaten with ceremony. Some rice is boiled with milk and offered to the basil, and then all the members of the family eat the new rice.
Plate-3

Temple of Raja Thakur: Bhumeswar Hill

Performing Kartik Puja

Bagheswari Temple

Performing puja at Mahadev Hill

Performing Kartik Puja
Paddy cultivation

Rajbongshi cultivators cultivating ‘Patchauli’ & ‘Mushroom’ apart from paddy

Rearing of muga silkworm on Persea (= Machilus) bombycina
Plate 5
Author with a Rajbongshi family
Dry ears of rice displayed on the doors of residential house as auspicious omen.

Rajbongshi woman in her loom.

Brooms used for cleaning houses.
Plate-7

Heap of paddy straw stored for cattle fodder

Areca nut trees in the backyard of Rajbongshi house

Young Rajbongshi boy with a nest of ants made by dried leaves
Plate 8

Rajbongshi women working in their field wearing ‘Japi’ during rainy season

Bullock Cart carrying bunches of paddy from rice field

Winnowing of paddy after collection
Rajbongshi women pounding rice with mortar and pestle

Preparation for making 'Topola bhat'

'Topola bhat' after preparation — a favourite item of food of Rajbongshi people
A cultural troupe

Rajbongshi girls performing ‘Kushan’ and ‘Goalini’ dance
Few scenes of market

‘Kadam’ made from Aeschynomene indica
Selling vegetables