

CHAPTER V

CONTINUITY, TRANSITION AND CHANGE IN RELIGION

5.1 Concepts of Continuity, Transition and Change

The concepts of continuity, tradition and change occupied anthropological and sociological thinking for a long time. Initially anthropologists were more fascinated by the notion of discontinuity, which they identified as creating something which is new or terminating the old in cultures. However, today the more favored approach is one which seeks to understand the process whereby societies and cultures persist through time, maintaining their unique identities, while at the same time undergoing transformation. This concept is very much applicable to the field of religion as well. The religion of any community, if observed closely, depicts elements of continuity in the context of a society by inviting the members of that society to preserve time tested values which are indispensable for the healthy forward movement of a coherent population. However, we also notice a clarion call to move away from the age old statutes to be relevant and forward looking communities, to catch up with other similar communities who have marched ahead on various counts. So a clear link is seen in any given society between the traditional and the contemporary, in our case this is noticed in the life, culture and religion of the Rangdani Rabha of Goalpara district, Assam.

When we dwell on the various elements of change and continuity in any society we can observe a thread of elements which unite traditional society with the evolutionary changes taking place in the same society due to communication net-works, educational initiatives, health care systems, development paradigms, political aspirations, market logic, globalization and other markers. Various communities across the globe have been meticulously adhering to some elements of their culture on the one hand and making calculated changes most specifically emulating the cultural traits of other numerically or politically/economically dominant or vibrant groups who have acted as reference models on the other. However, some changes are certainly not entirely within the purview of the society which is swayed by many powerful agents too.

Any observer of a society for a prolonged period of time will find out that over a long enough period of time, changes have taken place in that society (Herskovits 1955: 359). We recognize the universality of change when we study the change as a process in any evolving community and we find that no two groups have exactly the same bodies of custom, rituals and mores. As continuity is observable change too is a universal cultural phenomenon, and the process of change over a period of time constitutes the dynamics of culture. However, students of culture have devoted far more time and energy to study change than to analyze stability or continuity for various reasons. There are two principal reasons for this. One derives from the notion about non-literate people or primal societies that they are extremely conservative, and therefore, they are much unwilling to make any change in their life style as a whole. The second is that it is seen from our every day experience that it is much easier, methodologically, to study change than to study stability or continuity.

It is imperative to define social and cultural continuity and change. The term 'social change' is a term used within sociology and applies to modifications in social relationships or culture, while the term 'cultural change' is the term used within anthropology. Since society and culture are interdependent, 'socio-cultural change' is a more accepted term. The study of socio-cultural change is the systematic study of variation in social and cultural 'systems'. There are inherent methodological problems of identification and measurement of change. All societies are involved in a process of social change, however, this change may be so intertwined with

everyday events of the life that the members of the society are hardly aware of it, or they find it very difficult to compartmentalize the changes in specific geographical and time zones.

In *Social Change in Modern India* Srinivas (1996) gives a social anthropological perspective of change in Indian society. He elaborates on how social change is brought about by *sanskritization*, westernization, and secularization and their inter connectedness. Srinivas discusses on the theme of *sanskritization* as the process by which a group of people, originally members of a Hindu caste or tribe changes their customs, ritual and ideologies and way of life in the direction of a high and frequently twice-born (*dwija*) caste. This results in an upward mobility in their status.

As the present scholar has undertaken a micro study on Rangdani Rabha society of Goalpara, Assam with special attention to their religion it is imperative that he takes a look at changing contours of their religion based on the empirical data. This study contains much descriptive material based on their religious observances learned in structured interviews from their ritual experts, intelligentsia, and common folk. It is observed that a number of religious elements in their day to day life are carried on by the people with great devotional precision, yet some elements are modified over a period of time. Has the influence of changing environment, or social structure, or socio-political and economic systems contributed to this? Has the neighbouring communities influenced their way of life with special reference to the arena of religious perception, rituals and practices? What are the areas wherein we see tangible and major changes taking place due to the inter community religious interactions? What is the level of religious transformation including syncretism empirically observed in the life of Rangdani Rabha in the context of Goalpara district in Assam? These vital queries will be our point of focus in this chapter as we study at some length on the role religion which plays out in economic and socio-cultural life and its importance for understanding the Rangdani Rabha approach to reality as a whole.

5.2 Changing Religious Beliefs and Practices

From time immemorial religion has influenced the thought patterns and behavior of human beings. This is all the more perceived in the ethical and metaphysical values handed down from generation to generation. Religion seems to loom large in the lives of most of the peoples described in classic anthropological studies. This may be a major reason why religion has always been a central field of inquiry in anthropology, even if, as Pritchard (1962) has pointed out, social scientists have themselves often been indifferent or hostile to religion. Therefore, we can say religion pervades in every realm of human existence. We also find there are innumerable definitions of religion concerned with feeling, instinct, reason, cult and ritual, perception, belief and faith and so on. Here below we shall look into changing contours of religious beliefs and practices which is deeply rooted in the ethos of human mind. Definitely the ethnological studies of anthropology have provided with ideas and values which guide the mind of people towards contemporary adaptations to make religious belief relevant to everyday life.

Everything in this world changes so also 'all cultures are in constant state of change' (Linton 1960: 468). This process of change is noticeable in human society and culture everywhere. In the nineteenth century this ideology found wide acceptance following the revolutionary theories prescribed by Darwin which were later on strongly supported by many personalities like Huxley, Haeckel and others. In India studies of this kind started only in the second quarter of the twentieth century when striking refinements and innovations in the anthropological approach to the study of culture based on a combination of the historical and functional methods, which has resulted in a renewed emphasis on a field of anthropology known as Culture, Dynamics and Acculturation in particular, flourished in Europe and America (Majumdar 1956: 5).

In any society we can observe a thread of elements which unite traditional society with the evolutionary changes taking place in the same society due to communication networks and other markers. Various communities across the globe have been meticulously adhering to some elements of their culture on the one hand and making calculated changes most specifically emulating the cultural traits of other numerically or politically dominant groups who have acted

as reference models on the other. Mann (1979: 7) maintains that social change and culture change are two interwoven cultural values, which form, directly or indirectly, the basis of social system. While for Malinowski the transformation from one type into another social, spiritual or material civilization is culture change. But MacIver would consider the similar changes in technology, cultural complex and biological aspects as social change.

In the anthropological study of religion in India, the major emphasis has been on descriptive account of religious customs and their association with ethnic groups, including tribes and their modernization process. Milton Singer, who along with Robert Redfield and Surajit Chandra Sinha, studied the 'anthropology of Indian civilization', states that the Great Tradition of Indian civilization may be identified with what Srinivas calls 'Sanskritic Hinduism' which has an all-India 'spread'. Singer also used Srinivas's concepts of 'All-India Hinduism', 'Peninsular Hinduism', 'Regional Hinduism' and 'Local Hinduism' in his various studies.

Srinivas's 'sanskritization' model through which lower castes and tribal groups are brought into the Hindu fold with elements from the Sanskritic tradition of Hinduism (Srinivas 1952), is clubbed together by Singer with model of 'Hindu method of tribal absorption' (Bose 1941). Singer uses the term 'popular Hinduism', to include within it numerous beliefs and religious practices observed among tribal people, including the worship of numerous godlings, animal sacrifice, witchcraft and magic (Singer 1972: 45). Singer as per his own admission is indeed not sure about the basis and persistence of 'Lower Level' popular Hinduism. Singer quotes Surajit Chandra Sinha (1959) who says that 'the culture of tribal India represents a 'folk' dimension of the 'Little Tradition' of Hinduism, while the culture of Hindu peasantry represents 'a mixture of folk elements with elements from the greater and Sanskritic tradition of Hinduism' (Singer 1972: 46). With new data that are with us now it is felt that this whole perspective indeed calls for a reappraisal.

Religion of tribals is observed as a combination of animism, animatism, nature-worship, shamanism, fetishism, anthropomorphism and ancestor worship. Their practices of religion are to ensure personal security and welfare of both individual and community. Often life-crisis rites, cyclic community festivals, taboos all merge into one, so it is not at all easy to distinguish one

ceremony from other. These communities have variety and complexity in the belief systems as well as religious practices. Even these religions have historical antecedents which are documented in their oral epics and songs. Tribal communities too have their legends about the birth and meaning of the universe. According to some scholars, tribal people believe that the ultimate purpose of life is the creation of a meaningful order through imitation of the celestial model transmitted by myths and celebrated in rituals.

Singh (2003) discards the views of the Orientalists and anthropologists, who described 'tribal religion' in terms of a set of 'primitive values' surviving in Hindu religion, and the sureness of tribal religion being swallowed up by major religions, a claim equally made by colonial scholars and Indian anthropologists alike. In his view nothing has happened. It was indeed J. H. Hutton, an administrator-anthropologist, who was the first to have reconstructed tribal religion as an integrated whole. He is credited rightly with having liberated tribal religion from 'animism', identified the parameters of its autonomy and the range of its linkages with Hinduism. But like most census officials he too was prone to describe tribal religion as the 'surplus material not yet built into the temple of Hinduism' (Hutton 1931: 399).

Indeed W. G. Archer had blamed the enumerators for terming tribals as Hindus, and pointed out that the census questionnaire was not detailed and specific. Singh, however, adds a corollary: Was this because the census enumerators were only recording a process? Singh opines that many elements of tribal religion are as alive, even vibrant as ever. As studies have recently shown tribal religion has not lost its distinct identity in spite of its long years of interaction mainly with Hinduism and Christianity. It has maintained its system of beliefs and practices including propitiation of spirits, magic and witchcraft, its priesthood and its calendar of fairs and festivals, which reinforce the tribals' sense of identity. Recent trends even suggest the revival of many of pristine elements of tribal religion by those who have gone out of its fold (Troisi 1979, Singh 1985, Das 1989 and 2003). In fact branding variously pre-existing religions of tribal communities, as 'essential ingredients of Hinduism' will be a serious negation of empirical findings.

Religion permeates all aspects of life in North East India. It is basically a community religion. To be truly human is to belong to the whole community, including the ancestors and creation. To do so involves the active participation in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of the community. Another distinctive characteristic of tribal religion is that it doesn't have sacred scripture or scriptures as other religions do. The religious ethos is contained in the people's hearts, minds, oral history and rituals. Since they did not have any written code of rubrics in all its specificities, most Rabha groups have lost some of their original worship patterns side by side with their originality in language structure, with special reference to the Pati Rabha. However, the process of acculturation has contributed to the development of Assamese society in its multi-dimensionality. The major point to be noted is that during the process of assimilation the Rabha community succeeded in retaining some of the distinct identity markers in spite of the push and pull of development perspectives. This is also a shining example of toleration from dominant culture and persistent, positive and successful efforts from the community of the Rangdani Rabha under consideration (Field, May 2013).

As we observe various changes among the entire Rabha tribe as a whole, it appears that the matrilineal Rabhas while coming in contact with the patrilineal Hindu castes many of their traits were adapted by many of the Rabha sub-groups. For example, in the life cycle ceremonies there was no employment of a Hindu priest in the very beginning but around 1346 B.S. (= 1939 A.D.) a revolutionary change in Rabha culture is noticed in their acceptance of Hindu officiator of life cycle ceremonies. Due to the adoption of Hinduism many of the deities and festivals of the Hindu religious tradition have been accepted by many of the Rabha sub-groups. Here we can not but mention that all these changes did not wipe away some of the finer tribal elements and values with regard to their religion. In fact, some of their original beliefs and customs which are not directly opposed to the new religion have been retained (Raychaudhuri 2007: 84).

It has been pointed out earlier that *Runtuk* and *Basek* are the two important family deities of the Rangdani Rabha, though the latter is no more in existence and has lost its importance to the Hinduised Rabhas. Other indigenous tribes such as Rajbanshis also do possess a bamboo piece, known as *bahstu* or *dhamsiri* planted with some other articles in the floor of their northern apartment and is propitiated as their family deity. Now, the *Runtuk* concept of the Rangdani

Rabha has been syncretised with the *bahstu* of the Rajbanshi. Again, the traditional concept of the Rangdani Rabha is that, the soul of the deceased used to cross the river Sundi holding the tail of the sacrificed pig to the other world. This concept is being reinterpreted as crossing the river Baitarini holding the tail of a cow to the other world. But as the sacrifice of pig is contradictory to the Sanskritic norms, this ritual is not performed any more by the Hinduised Rabhas.

The Rangdani Rabha people traditionally practice a few animistic rituals. They prepare offerings of fruits, betel nut (*kui*), tamulpan (*pana*), *tulsi*, sugarcane, mango leaves, lamp (*dupi*), etc. in the name of their deceased ancestors. However, today they more often follow a faith, which is a blend of some Hindu and a few animistic rituals. We often encounter today the worship of Hindu gods with special reference to Shiva in their traditionally revered sacred ground (*dham*) and in some cases in their courtyard *mandir*. The forest dwelling Rangdani Rabhas follow traditional animistic practices tinged with some rituals of mainstream Hinduism. On the other hand village dwelling Rangdani Rabhas have shown some affiliation with local Hindus as far as their religious practices are concerned. The Rangdani Rabha people's religious world is pervaded with various spirits and natural objects. The main deity of the Rangdani Rabha is called *Rishi*. The *Rishi*, for the Rangdani Rabha, is a male deity. Some of them say that he is also known as *Mahakal*. Rangdani Rabhas worship him in all important social and religious ceremonies.

In addition, there are the deities *Rungtuk* and *Basek*, represented by two earthen pots of rice placed on the northern side of the store house. These two deities are considered as the daughters of *Rishi* or *Mahakal*. *Rungtuk* and *Basek* are household deities and considered as the deities of wealth like the Hindu Goddess Lakshmi. The *Rungtuk* and *Basek*, are inherited by the heiress of the family. Their traditional priest *Deuri deosi*, counts the auspicious day for the foundation of these deities. The room where they are kept is occupied by the head of the family. The deities do not have any idols. A red coloured earthen pitcher filled with rice represents the deity *Rungtuk*. An egg is kept on the neck of the pitcher. Like in most tribal communities, dances and music play an important part in the lives of the Rangdani Rabha. After every ritual they perform various dances to please their deities. Most of the Rangdani Rabha women can both sing and dance. Like most tribal dances, those of the Rangdani Rabha are connected to some daily

agrarian activity. They have a unique dance form named *Nakchung Reni* to celebrate fishing in the forest rivulets. Rangdani Rabha women of all ages take part in this dance whole-heartedly.

In earlier days they made elaborate sacrifices with killing fattened pigs, goats, chickens, etc. in large numbers. Today, they choose to sacrifice very small and weak animals and birds. In some cases it is also found among the Pati Rabha, another sub-group of the Rabha tribe, that they bring a small quantity of meat or fruits, food grains and cash for offering to the deities. It is also observed that in the earlier years during the life cycle ceremonies elders used to sing songs of praise and worship to Sankardeva and other holy saints, but today these songs are sung by young people.

Though present day beliefs are externally seem to be simple it is really complex when we learn in its totality. The systems of beliefs in the spiritual qualities of nature and at the same time the conception of a Supreme Being are the two significant traits which characterize the traditional religion of Rangdani Rabha. They are aware that the spiritual realm of the people is always dominated by a number of spirits either benevolent or malevolent. Most of the time, they are aware of the fact that various diseases, miseries and misfortunes are caused by the malevolent spirits. These spirits have such great powers that they may exert influence on people in their earthly life and after life too. The benevolent spirits are given *puja* by the tribal priest (*Gurphang/Deuri*) and the malevolent spirits are propitiated by medicine men (*ojha*). This means the worship aspect of the religion is taken care of by *Deuri* by offering prayers through asking pardon for sins, etc. And by uttering magic chanting (*mantra*) the *ojha* (also called *huji* in some areas) takes care of the healing aspect or bodily wellbeing of the persons who are tormented by any sort of ill health, and calamity. They are able to do this by tracing back the dreams, omens and predictions based on the forecasting power of the medicine men. However, almost every Rangdani Rabha believes in a Supreme God (*Rishi Bai*), who is just, benevolent and very concerned about human welfare and welfare of all created beings. The Bodo, Garo, Koch-Rajbongshi, Yougi (Nath), Goal (Ghose), Hira, Muslim, Bengali and Assamese people who are the neighbors of Rangdani Rabhas are in many ways influencing their religious and other socio-economic and religio-political engagements.

At the present day though the *Deuri* is belonging to the Rangdani Rabha tribe elements of Hindu worship is amalgamated by them step by step. They have taken up the use of animal sacrifices like killing of chicken, goats, etc., following the animal sacrifices of neighbouring Bengali population. Earlier days the use of *sindur* (vermillion), *trishul* (trident), prayer flags, bells, etc. were completely absent. As times passed they have also purchased many calendars and photos of popular gods and goddesses of Hinduism, Christianity and even others who are heroes and models of honour and valour. We also are able to observe their affiliation with Christianity as they put up general shops which display photos pertaining to the religion. Now, here below in the following paragraphs we shall take a look at the intercommunity religious perceptions and linkages with special reference to Rangdani Rabha of Matia and Majerburi villages.

5.3 Intercommunity Religious Perception and Linkages

Earlier days, the Rangdani Rabha staunchly adhered to yearly sacrifice of pig (*masi*) and major feast was arranged for the entire village community. It was also observed that *Masi puja*, an elaborate ritualistic sacrifice of pig slaughter was undertaken for the fertility of the fields and welfare of human fraternity. This was done to ward off every sickness and usher in good health. The Rangdani Rabha community took great pride in making the five large stone erected in the worship place (*dham*). They were representations of *Mama Shibu Darman* (Shiva), *Ayi Jashram* (Parvati), *Achu Tura* (Grandfather of the place), *Ranga Dara* (consort of *Achu Tura*) and *Achu Koncho* (worshipped by Garos and Rabhas), in whose presence things sometimes get lost, who are, however, also positively capable of bringing in prosperity in cultivation.

Today, one can see a number of changes taking place because of the contact with Christianity, Islam and Hinduism as well. The church has provided education, medical care and to some extent orientation for the youth. However, it has not emerged as a motivating force which gives greater leadership in orienting people to become socially minded and take up challenges faced by the people as a whole. There is a need to be more sensitive and take up more socially relevant programmes reading the signs of the present day situation. Islam as a religion has not in a major way impacted the life of the indigenous people, though their presence is becoming substantially evident in the last one decade and more. However, in the case of

Hinduism it also has not taken up socially oriented programmes except that they invite the tribal fraternity to take part in their fairs and festivals which have religious significance at regular intervals.

As Rangdani Rabhas live amidst the Garo, Bodo, Assamese, Muslim population from Bengal and others they are attuned to taking up many elements of religious worship following their examples. The larger markets are generally controlled by the communities other than that of Rangdani Rabhas, though some of the smaller economic engagements are done by them. This also may be as well a pointer to the economic standard of the Rangdani Rabha as a whole. While in the festivities it is pertinent to note that even if many other things like elaborate cleaning around the ritual place, putting up *pandals* for markets, food preparation as *prasad* for the guests, public utilities for the devotees, some of the cultural shows, etc. are done by one or the other number of neighbouring communities, the worship place (*sanctum sanctorum*) is only approachable to the *Deuri* who are invariably Rangdani Rabha men sometimes assisted by other *Deuri* men as well.

When we speak about the inter community linkages we have to often keep in the mind major contributions of the neighbouring communities not only in relation to religion but in relation to over all socio-cultural, political and economic development of Rangdani Rabha community as a whole. Here we take special notice of the fact that it was certainly learned from the neighbouring communities like Bodos and Garos that rubber can be cultivated in the territory of the Rangdani Rabha in a much more organized way. In earlier days the Rangdani Rabha community only observed that in Kamrup district there was about 15 per cent of the people have at least a small rubber garden, now we see in Goalpara it has picked up so well and about 60 per cent of the population are engaged in organized rubber plantations and this give them adequate income for their daily sustenance and more.

Now, the concern of this district with special reference to the entire Rabha community is that they be given the status of VIth Schedule to make more development possible. They have aspirations to make more law enforcement bodies, medical facilities, higher education, cultural and *Mahila Samitis*, and many more centres which will create better prospects in life. In the

context of recent day developments of strife and violence too we have reasons to believe that they have many concerns about themselves and their brothers and sisters of the community as well. On the one hand they believe people of various religious affiliations and people of neighboring indigenous communities should live side by side; on the other hand they are deeply concerned about their own identity, land and other natural resource which seem to be depleted and alienated day by day due to greater presence and proliferation of outside communities.

The influx of newcomers often makes new twists and turns to tribal ways of living and has a massive impact on social relations and tribal belief systems. In the Rabha tribal community set up the immigrants have brought on nothing less than the total disintegration of the communities they entered. Even where outsiders are not residents in villages, traditional forms of social control and authority are less effective because tribal people are patently dependent on politico-economic forces beyond their control. In general, traditional headmen no longer have official backing for their role in village affairs, although many continue to exercise considerable influence. Some village headmen have tacitly approved of leasing village land to outsiders, thus enriching themselves at the expense of the rest of the tribes. Conflict over land rights has introduced a point of cleavage into village social relations; increased factional conflict has seriously eroded the ability of tribes to ward off the intrusion of outsiders. In some villages, tribal school teachers have emerged as a new political force, a counterbalance to the traditional headman.

Tribal beliefs and rituals have altered in the face of increased contact with other religious affiliations. In our field of observation Muslim communities are seen making greater impact with special reference to land, political affiliations, job opportunities and market logic. Certainly, the tribal intelligentsia sees this trend as an impoverishment with special reference to their age old cultural and religious practices which eventually affect their economic and political landscape in a large measure as well. Recent years have witnessed sporadic violence and even killing of 'suspect' members of the communities and even targeted people who are seen potential 'enemies' of the local aspirations. State government is often blamed for these and similar problems encountered by the people of various communities affected by law and order and other socio-economic and political problems. What are the ways to make people live in peace and

prosperity on the one hand, and live according to their own traditional moorings on the other? Here below we shall look into some aspects of religious transformation and syncretism (Field, May 2013).

5.4 Religious Transformation and Syncretism

It is noticed that tribal religions in India were termed as animism in various census reports and books wherein animism was applied as most basic form of religion in which magic is the predominant element. It conceives of man as passing through a life surrounded by the company of powers and elements mostly impersonal in character. Some of these are regarded as presiding forces over the various segments of life each force having its sphere of specific influence. Thus there may be a spirit presiding over various diseases, spirits dwelling in rocks and mountains, trees or associated with river and waterfalls, spirits or deities with special reference to life cycle ceremonies and so on. These are propitiated at regular intervals to ward off the dangers associated with their negative influence.

In this context, we can only understand the elaborate functioning of the society if we comprehend the basic beliefs of the people in the all encompassing spirit world. This is important for understanding the overarching inner dynamic of religion in that particular society as well. It is all the more true in the case of cultural sphere wherein religious tenets are so intrinsically interwoven. Therefore, we can understand its cultural nuances when we understand the religious beliefs which are amalgamated by the members of the given society over a period of time. It even calls for a longitudinal study with special reference to their religious adherence and transformation. Throughout the history of human evolution, in all ages and stages of society, religion has been a mighty and central unifying force in culture. Thus, it has been the guardian of traditions, meticulous preserver of the ethical codes, and teacher of collective wisdom of ancestors who may have otherwise never been educated in present day educational institutions.

The Rangdani Rabha are unique in their specific mythologies and rituals, however, they do not term their religious belief as animism though they have a strong leaning towards propitiating a number of spirits in their day to day spiritual realm. In fact the tribal animistic

perspective is so fundamental, mundane, everyday and taken-for-granted that most animistic indigenous people do not even have a word in their languages that corresponds to 'animism', the term is a purely anthropological construct rather *than* one designated by tribal people themselves. Largely due to such ethno-linguistic and cultural discrepancies, opinion has differed ever since Sir Edward Burnett Tylor's 19th century popularization of the term on whether *animism* refers to merely a broadly religious belief or to a full-fledged religion in its own right.

Today religious transformation is taking place in various tribal communities. One major reason the adherents of religions propose is the lack of a written code of conduct in the form of scriptures. This has been thrown open the various oral traditions handed down through religious experts and other practitioners of religion. Family, clan and society as a whole nurture the religious beliefs in a subtle way through various folksongs, dances, stories, dramas as well. This is also handed down in a subtle way while performing house hold rituals, village level festivals and other social interactions. So definitely a religious transformation is taking place while people also nurture and cherish a sense of the sacred in their every day existence.

In the broader Rangdani Rabha concept religion is always an equanimity creating exercise by undertaking various ritualistic actions whereby one keep appeasing the punishing god. However, a large number of Rangdani Rabha also opine that interceding for the people of the family, village and clan is done through adhering to religious tenets. They also say the prosperity of human beings and other living beings, healing from ailments of all sorts, getting rid of the fear haunting human life is all done by taking recourse to religion in everyday life. As a practice they do this now-a-days taking in to consideration the presence of the neighbouring communities. This has made them to adhere to better standards of education, taking some elements of religion with special reference to Vaishnavism, Christianity, Shaivism, and so on. They have also made some changes in their marriage celebrations, for eg; if they used cock sacrifices earlier, now in some instances they have also got used to garlanding the bride and bride groom. Earlier there was no invitation cards printed and distributed to the relatives and friends, now it is seen in some instances of marriage it is done.

Deuri who is assigned for a period of three years to officiate the sacrifice and lead the ceremonies are getting more and more convinced that while Rangdani Rabha people adhere to the core elements of worship including their king *Dodan* they will do well in accepting the larger community affiliations of the organized religion of Hindu neighbours. The *Deuri* of Matia and Majerburi claim that there is no change with regard to the rituals performed in the sacred place (*dham*) of the Rangdani Rabha year after year; the place of worship is exactly the same – only clearing of the large shrubs which has grown over the months will be done by a group of volunteers. The officiating *Deuri* is separately appointed once in three years.

Hasong Puja: This is a *puja* for the fertility of land. All the gods and goddess are invited. They are represented by different stones erected in the worship place. While *Mama Shibu Darmang* (Shiva) is given a prominent place while placing the stones and the Rangdani Rabha *bhasha* is invariably used during the chanting of *mantras*. They also place gods and goddesses with special connotation to Rangdani Rabha tradition on the one hand, yet the adaptation of Hindu deities also deserves our attention.

Holi Puja: It is very revealing to observe the celebration of Holi among the Rangdani Rabha fraternity. Here we see some elements of sanskritization especially when the celebration gets a clear view amidst the traditionally dressed *Deuri* and the magnificent flood of Rangdani Rabha population with traditional *ryphang*, and especially traditionally attired womenfolk. Each of the *mantra* and ritualistic performance is meticulously handed down to younger *Deuri* by the elderly ones. It is strongly believed that if children are taught the *mantra* and other rituals there is every possibility of untoward incidences occurring in family and in village community. So the traditional prayer rituals are only handed down to initiated *Deuri* who are made the official keeper of the larger Rangdani Rabha religious conscience.

Syncretism, as defined by the *American Heritage Dictionary* (2000), is ‘the reconciliation or fusion of differing systems of belief’. This is most evident in the areas of philosophy and religion, and usually results in a new teaching or belief system. Syncretism as a concept was introduced into anthropology by Melville J. Herskovits as a study of acculturation, contact between different cultures. It is evident in the case of the Rangdani Rabha who are over a period

of time getting Hinduised. There are many Rangdani Rabhas who claim to be Hindus belonging to various sects of Hinduism. However, when detailed queries were made so as to find out how they perceive religion it is often found that they have remained traditional Rangdani Rabhas while adhering to the life cycle ceremonies though some worshipping patterns like offering a chicken, goat, etc. is done by them in the annual village *puja*. Traditionally they practiced animism. Each Rabha sub-group has its own faith of religion and surrounded by some benevolent and malevolent deities. But in the course of time, a large number of Rabhas had been Hinduised due to the great influence of the neighboring communities.

Culture, Religion, and Philosophy: Critical studies in Syncretism and Inter-faith Harmony (Das 2003) portrays the phenomenon of syncretism, an unexplored and rarely studied aspect of culture, which has escaped the notice of conventional social science. Syncretism exists not only as a vibrant tradition but also as a coherent cultural reality in different parts of India. It is, therefore, rewarding to undertake empirical studies on traditional modes of cultural synthesis and religious syncretism, which are fundamental sources of social tolerance in an increasingly globalizing world. In the case of Rangdani Rabhas we observe that syncretic elements find more and more acceptable arena.

Religious syncretism exhibits blending of two or more religious belief systems into a new system, or the incorporation into a religious tradition of beliefs from unrelated traditions. There are a number of reasons for these phenomena. Often it happens quite commonly in areas where multiple religious traditions exist in proximity and function actively in the culture, or when a culture is conquered, and the conquerors bring their religious beliefs with them, but do not succeed in entirely eradicating the old beliefs and/or especially practices. In this way syncretism helps create possible cultural borrowing and amalgamation. It contributes for an opportunity to establish beliefs, values, and customs in a place with different cultural traditions. This also allowed expansive traditions to win popular support over a period of time in largely alien land. In a sense syncretism also is often seen as a product of the large-scale imposition of one alien culture, religion, or body of practices over another that is already present.

During the colonial period when many tribes of North East India embraced Christianity the Rabha of Assam partly adopted Hinduism and their way of life became partly sanskritized. The Pati and the Totla were very much concerned about their social status in the broader Assamese society. Hence, with a view to uplift themselves to the Hindu caste they accepted various sects of Hinduism including Saktism and Saivism. Besides, Assamese Vaishnavism too has made inroads into the Rabha society as a whole. Thus, we see in some localities of Assam in all practical purposes the Rabha are just like the Hindus. The 1971 Census recorded 98.19 per cent of the Rabha of Assam as followers of Hinduism. Of course, this is a very farfetched observation by any yardstick. We know often times census fraternity ask lead questions which ultimately make all the people Hindus, those who do not follow Christianity or Islam. However, the sanskritized groups of Rabhas including Totla, Pati and Dahori have been more influenced by Hinduism than the non-sanskritized and has begun to worship different Hindu gods and goddesses like Kali, Lakshmi, Durga, Saraswati, Satyanarayana, *Rishi*, Biswakarma, Ganesh, and others (Rabha 2000: 63).

It is also seen that today the Rabha follow Hinduism and in some places Christianity as well to a great extent while abandoning their own tribal religion. Today all the sub-groups of the tribe irrespective of their religious order are striving to retain their socio-cultural and religious identity for survival of the race. It is a struggle to maintain the age-old practices of their forefathers without turning away from the fruits of modernity. This is clearly evident from the present empirical study conducted on the Rangdani Rabha. Only time can reveal that how much of the traditional elements of their faith and culture will be maintained by them amidst the fast changing scenario of modernity, globalization and development.

Though it was much less than a central theory in anthropology, 'syncretism' has recently re-emerged as a valuable tool for understanding the complex dynamics of ethnicity, interconnectedness and post-modernism in any forward moving indigenous societies. Today with an increasing cultural exchange, and condensation, syncretism is a prevailing context. The sociologists and social anthropologists have thrown much light on the variety of religious forms through their studies of belief systems, rituals, celebrations, symbols and meaning all over the world but they have not paid adequate attention to the phenomenon of syncretism, though we

find a few exceptions (Firth 1996: 87). In anthropological literature the Cargo cult has been described as a form of syncretism. Cargo cults are essentially syncretistic, blending the 'Christian doctrine' with 'aboriginal beliefs' (Worsley 1990).

Syncretism has always been part of the negotiation of identities and hegemonies in situations such as conquest, trade, migration, religious dissemination and intermarriage. The growth of a western-dominated world economic system, however, was accompanied by the growth of a Western-dominated world cultural system (Hannerz 1987 and 1992), in which processes of capitalism and cultural hegemony transformed not only relations of power and production but also experiences of personhood, of the body, gender, time, space and religion. Some scholars argue that there are debates over syncretism in societies in which identities are defined through religion. Since India combines these by being a secular state in which religious affiliation partially defines cultural identity, it makes sense that syncretism and multiculturalism are often equated in Hindu political discourse.

Many scholars have observed that in complex societies, people have come to live with apparently conflicting worldviews increasingly. In the Rangdani Rabha society it is observed that a sick person simultaneously consults a diviner as well as a doctor, or visit a medicine man (*Ojha*) and a temple almost side by side to receive medical help and recovery through medical cum spiritual favour. We also have this emphasized in a number of religious movements and plethora of religious ideas, in varied historical phases, motivated the people and brought them closer towards numerous religious cults, sects, reform movements and diverse belief systems (Das 2003). These observations are perpetuated whereby people obtain solace and assurance while they are struck by illness and other untoward incidences. We also have incidences in the Rangdani Rabha society where they have blended prominent aspects of their religion with the religious affiliations and religious dogmas of the neighboring communities with special reference to Christianity and Hinduism.

Religion and ritual had long attracted the interest of anthropologists, who had documented it in a wide range of empirical forms. While we observe the present day religious practices in the village communities invariably we notice a process of sanskritization among the

Rangdani Rabha through a number of rituals carried out in different time span of the year. Religion among them has continually evolved because of the numerous factors affecting their life. The various phases of religion throw light on the fact that religion has been moulded and modified with the advancement of human society and thought. Some of the *puja* undertaken by the Rangdani Rabha shows a clear element of syncretism where the tribal *Deuri* adapts to the Hindu symbols such as *trishul*, *sindur*, metal bells, incense, (*dhupi*) representations of Shiva and other gods. Their neighbouring communities certainly make an impact on their worship patterns, though there is no change in the *puja* location (*dham*), traditional *mantra* in Rangdani Rabha dialect and other elements used for *puja* by traditional *Deuri* for several years.

Some scholars belonging to Rangdani Rabha say that Rabhas have no particular religion of their own in its strict sense, though they call on *Rishi Bai* who is considered to be the supreme God. Yet, they believe in some magico-religious rites and beliefs which relate more or less to their own religious concepts (Hakacham 2010: 144). Earlier the *Baikho* which was celebrated in memory of four Rangdani Rabha heroines – *Tamai*, *Nakkati*, *Susari* and *Daduri* was for duration of seven days yet, now it has been shortened to two days only. It is also noticed that the great sacrifice of a fattened pig in honour of the supreme god *Rishi Bai* is avoided to make room for all the people of various religions to take part. It is also noticed that earlier days on the bed of a sick person a sickle, a branch of *siju* plant, a broom etc. was kept to ward off evil spirits; now it is abandoned. However, the field observation and extended interviews with the intelligentsia of this community amply make it clear that the Rangdani Rabha has a clear indigenous religion which is of course, more vibrant in some parts of the district while in some areas it has shown assimilation with other organized religions as well.

5.5 Religion of the Rangdani Rabha: A Descriptive Analysis

Bera (2012: 39) states that the intermingling of different ideas taking place in varying proportions under local conditions in different areas of India formed a composite type with more or less common characteristics. Many indigenous communities, like the present case of the Rangdani Rabha, retained their purer forms owing to either safeguard their identity or for lateness of contacts. It is understood that since time immemorial various forces of cultural

immigration took place in India. After an initial phase of hostile contact in some cases these cultural forms settled down in a peaceful manner with an attempt for fusion of ideas, thoughts, beliefs, practices and so on.

Murdock's (1945: 124) list of universal aspects of culture reports that all societies have the custom of propitiating supernatural beings and have religious rituals. These universals apply to cultures rather *than* to individuals. Nineteenth century writers who wrote about 'primitive religion' hoped to figure out how religious beliefs originated that became characteristics of the earliest primordial religion. Tylor's two-volume work on *Primitive Religion* (1877) is devoted to religion finding out a minimum definition of religion that applies to all religions in different parts of the world and different stages of development. Theologians considered this aspect stemming from revelation, a view Tylor rejected. Tylor developed the concept of monotheism from animism in the evolutionary scale and elevated the concept of one God dominating over others. Emile Durkheim, who emphasized the social, collective nature of religion in his book, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* claimed that religion is a collective enterprise that involves a church or community or fellow believers. Malinowski (1954) referred to that religion is an end in itself and religious belief is more complex, involving pantheons of supernatural beings. To him, religion gives humans the confidence to carry on, but on a more long-range basis, establishing positive attributes and values.

While dealing with ecclesiastical institutions, one comes across two forms, namely Olympian, which recognizes a pantheon of Gods; and monotheistic, in which there is worship of one Supreme Being. As examples of monotheistic cults one finds references of Hindu-Buddhist, Judeo-Christian, Islamic, and Chinese monotheism. But the characterization of Hinduism as monotheistic is questionable; in so far as traditional village practices are concerned it is better characterized as Olympian. An evolutionary sequence of forms of religion has been proposed by Bellah (1964) who sees five stages: Primitive Religion, Archaic Religion, Historic Religion, Early Modern Religion, and Modern Religion. The classification of Bellah merits little explanation. His *Primitive Religion* has two main features: (i) the high degree to which the mythical world is related to features of the actual world, and (ii) the fluidity of organization. In *Archaic Religion* there is a more definite distinction between humans and Gods and more

distances between them. The *Historic Religion* is relatively recent and found in more or less literate societies. It stresses the theme of world rejection; it is dualistic and transcendental and has a pessimistic view of the human condition but a potentially better (or worse) conception of the afterlife. Salvation is regarded as the main purpose of life, and religious elite, priesthood, is committed to helping people attain it. The *Early Modern Religion* is the state of Protestant Reformation, when salvation no longer needs to be mediated but is potentially open to anyone. There is stress on faith rather *than* on ritual behaviour, and there is more individualism. In *Modern Religion* the tendencies set in motion during the preceding stage are carried further. There is a collapse of orthodoxy, and there is still more individualism. Indeed, freedom increases at each of these five stages. However, psychoanalysts like Sigmund Freud, Abram Kardiner, Cora Du Bois and others have developed the notion of God as a part of pantheism based on different religious beliefs.

All these put an anthropologist, who specializes in the study of preliterate societies, to face the difficult problem of defining what kind of phenomena can be called religious. This has led social scientists to try a whole range of definitions, usually settling with little conviction on formulae such as: religion involves the belief in supernatural forces (Goody 1961). But the problem lies in the line of demarcation to understand: what is 'natural' in contrast to 'supernatural' knowledge. Durkheim, on the contrary, referred to religion as all beliefs and practices which are believed to be right of themselves, not merely right because these were the best way of doing something according to practical criteria. The first type of beliefs and practices are 'sacred' and the second 'profane'. However, in practice it is impossible to distinguish on the basis of this criterion, as it separates what is not separated in ordinary life. On this issue Weber (1905) stresses how particular religions are coterminous with particular ways of acting, particular ways of life; as a result the 'sacred' and 'profane' are ultimately inseparable.

This, however, does not help in defining what religion is, and the only solution seems to be to abandon the notion of religion as an analytical category and to look at social reality in terms less closely tied to a particular cultural tradition. This is implicit in the work of Marx where religion is subsumed under the wider label of ideology, which also includes such ideas as the 'rightness' of competition in capitalist systems (Marx and Engels 1845-46).

Through the famous theory of ideas in *The Republic*, Plato argues that all one apprehends through his senses is in fact a necessarily compromised and misleading shadow of a clearer, simpler and eternal reality which he may not see but which governs what he sees. The intellectual speculation about metaphysical questions is well illustrated by Claude Levi-Strauss in *An Introduction to the Science of Mythology* (1970-81) through his work on the mythology of South and North American Indians.

In the world of religions there are also professional theologians trying to organize and systematize beliefs, where their ideas seem curiously distant from the everyday religion of people (Tambiah 1969; Geertz 1960). Accordingly, some anthropologists have distinguished between two types of religion, a folk religion and an official theological religion (Srinivas 1952). It is partly as a result of these problems that anthropologists and sociologists have found it almost impossible to agree about the notion of 'belief' (Leach 1966). What seems to matter above all in religion is the declaration of the limitations, if not outright pointless, of conscious human action. Hence, religion in the Indian cultural setting traditionally permeates virtually all aspects of life, not through mechanical diffusion, but in an integrated, holistic perspective (Radhakrishnan 1927).

With the passage of time these theistic traditions started fusing with Sanskritic as well as folk religious traditions. It is apparent that the religious traditions as is prevalent in India manifest pluralistic tendencies emanating from various sources and inspirations. At the same time there had been a binary tendency of both fission and fusion at various levels of thought (Bera 2012: 47). It is rather an agglomeration of diversified ritualism, idolatry, magic, miracles of faith under the stranglehold of Brahminic traditions. There is also a tendency to Sanskritize, secularize and universalize some of the local traditions, and also parochialize elements of greater Sanskritic canopy (Bera 2012: 51). Hence, while looking into the present data on the Rangdani Rabha, it is apparent that it has a strong base for claiming itself as a folk religion though with the passage of time many of its elements have been sanskritized under the greater canopy of Hinduism practiced at the local level. In fact religious diversity and pluralism operates at two levels in India. One is at the inter-religious level and the other at intra-religious level at which sectarian and quasi-sectarian movements operate. Further, of late, it is trying to assimilate

different tribal religions into its fold in response to the challenges posed by proselytistic religions. But this has long back been attested by the eminent Gandhian anthropologist, Nirmal Kumar Bose, as the 'Hindu method of tribal absorption' (Bose 1941).

Every religion imagines a special kind of relation between God and the World as well as God and the Man. On this basis, religious and social ideas and morality are well systemized. Religion is meant to foster peace, harmony and community-building. Called by any name and worshipped in any form, the ideas of God must lead one to promote Life for all peoples everywhere. If religionists can come together and respond to the larger problems of life based on their experiences of God, and only later, as a second step, articulate their theologies and conceptions of God, one might have a more harmonious society, and religion would have played a pivotal role in fostering peace. The Rangdani Rabha are an ideal example of this thought as is evident from the present empirical research carried over a long period of time as a longitudinal study.

5.6 Conclusion

Earlier in our study on rites of passage we have come across data which speak about the various elements which continue for a long period of time on the one hand and some of the elements which have undergone sporadic changes in the Rangdani Rabha society. In the larger context of the people of India these changes and continuity have greater significance. As someone aptly remarked 'change is the only constant thing in the world,' may it be political, economic, environmental, socio-cultural or whatever. All over the world changes are making people wonder what will be the new thing tomorrow. What shall we expect that will change for the good of people, more humane, more becoming of peace ... we are in fact frightened to change, because of the uncertainty it holds. To change or not to change is the million dollar question. So undoubtedly there is a challenge to change (Purie 2009).

In this perspective we need to be reasonably aware that these changes are not water tight compartments. We are also in the web of continuities. For better or worse we are encountering change in the context of continuities. The present investigator is aware these above written

paragraphs are not exclusive. Yet, they are pointers to change in the larger context of world civilizations. We cannot certainly think of a change outside the purview of continuity. That tells us the whole story of our belongingness to each other. We are not an island in itself, we belong to one another. So our change in one part of the world should be seen in the light of continuity in other areas and vice versa. This is also pertinent in the Rangdani Rabha community who are making changes in various spheres of life with special reference to religion. And this makes their life meaningful and keeps them relevant in the present day context of the society.

It is also true that the societies in various parts of India have evolved through dialogue and interactions at many levels. The multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious society like India could survive because of dialogue and exchange of ideas. Scholars agree that the great heritage of Indian civilization spanning over 5000 years is sustained broadly through its pre-dominant agricultural and rural character of its population. Yet, any major adaptation or change in religious sphere of a community has also affected other spheres like social, cultural, economic and political. However, the prominent marker of this change is an overall wellbeing of the community keeping the soul of a community or people, in our case it is the Rangdani Rabha culture, intact while pursuing elements of other religious affiliations most specially the Hindu religion and at times Christianity which are constantly in contact with these tribal conglomeration.

Tribal society, in our case, the Rangdani Rabhas are undergoing a number of changes most especially because they are in constant contact with other ethnic groups having distinctive socio-cultural and economic and religious dynamics. This cultural contact is one of the most sensitive factor by which the social changes in the Rangdani Rabha society takes place in present day context. This is also experienced in the field of rites and rituals performed by Rangdani Rabhas in the study area. Food habits, dress patterns, agricultural up-gradation, cash crop planting with special reference to rubber cultivation, modernized house constructions, educational and communication net-work patterns etc. have impacted by the proximity of other communities like Assamese, Muslims, Garos, Bodos, Rajbongshis and others. However, on the other hand there is also a growing tendency to adhere and safeguard the cultural heritage of the

given community due to the fear of the loss of identity and individuality – these efforts are carried forward by various socio-cultural and student organizations too.

It is also observed that during the last one decade or so the number of outside population coming into Goalpara district is increasing day by day. The strategy used by the Rangdani Rabha student leaders and other politically oriented people is to make the major Rabha habitat to be included in the VIth schedule of the Indian constitution. They believe that if this is achieved no other community other *than* the people living within the territory of Rabha Hasong able to buy or sell property. This will only take place if the formation of *Rabha Hasong* Autonomous Council takes place before the *Panchayat* elections, if not there will be a large number of elected candidates belonging to the outside population who will make decisions which are not helpful for the indigenous Rabha population (Field, May 2013).

As the Rangdani Rabha community takes note of the developments related to other communities they are also deeply aware that if materialistic attitude of people get mixed up with political issues there are many possibilities of growing in violence towards each other and one another, however if various communities' aspirations are taken into consideration with understanding and sympathy and find amicable solutions, then there is a possibility of working and living together in the larger context of Assam and of North East India (Field, Matia, Majerburi, Sarapara and Borjhuli villages in Goalpara district – May 2013).

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