

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **DISCUSSION**

As we have come to the summing up of the thesis let us recapture the entire exercise of the past two years and more. It was indeed a laborious enterprise to journey through the length and breadth of Goalpara district with a keen interest to identify the major Rangdani Rabha villages located in a radius of about 50 kilometers; of course, this was done with a focused motive to notify major Rangdani Rabha hamlets of the district. Yet, at the end of a month long intensive search with the help of a couple of local scholars and friends it was made possible and when the present scholar looks back it was a labor of love to have found this enthusiastic tribal community on the one hand in their pristine originality and simplicity, and on the other hand as the research progressed it was not difficult to identify them as a group of people who even amidst their simplicity and straightforwardness underwent many hardships yet, cherished their dreams for a brighter tomorrow. The present investigator is privileged to have undertaken a prolonged period of empirical data collected through meticulous observation, interview schedule, case studies and focused group interviews. It is observed that cultural continuity is a tangible phenomenon however the changes amalgamated by the people are decisively and particularly mentionable too.

This micro study on the Rangdani Rabha society with special attention to changing cultural and religious contours of their society was based on empirical data collected through structured interviews from their ritual experts, intelligentsia, and common folk. During the course of our enquiry we 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. We have posed pertinent questions for e.g.: has the influence of changing environment, or social structure, or socio-political and economic systems contributed to this? Has the neighboring 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 the Rangdani Rabha in the context of Goalpara district in Assam? These vital queries have formed the major thrust, also our point of focus as we study their religious arena overarching against the cultural continuity and change in the larger context of understanding the Rangdani Rabha approach to reality as a whole. So, more *than* one count the individuality of the group comes to the fore, *vis-a-vis* their specific identity which is a discernible marker of the community under study.

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India is the second largest country after South Africa, having a large population of Scheduled Tribes. Some of them are much forward because they are educated and earning their livelihood and more. But, a large number is still living in dense forests and they are quite aloof from the main stream culture of the country. The state of Assam in India has a total of 31, 169, 272 populations (Census of India 2011) and 12.4 per cent of them are scheduled tribes. Their cultural identity is one of the major bottlenecks in the way of their social development. The state has registered 15.1 per cent decadal growth of ST population during the period 1991-2001.

Most of these communities with special reference to the ones who are exposed to the urban amenities are in a process of fast changes. Now, everyone will agree that utmost care has to be taken during this process of change that the tribal sentiments are not hurt. They have to be free to make choices of their own which affect their everyday life. In short, their choices should

be theirs which will affect their destiny at large. However, the scholars and intelligentsia from outside their society may reason it out the final call should be taken by the people who will live by the considered decisions they have taken which will give them satisfaction even amidst daily struggles of any sort. True, there are problems of being in debt, shifting cultivation draining away the fertility of the fields, land alienation is taking place due to the presence of people other than their own folk, market logic does not prove to be always in favor of the tribal communities who are often ordinary cultivators – yet the people find their way out if there is an overall sense of economic security, self-sufficiency, socio-cultural and religious identity among them.

The concepts of 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 society 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 depict 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 the present study this is noticed in the life, culture, society and religion of the Rangdani Rabha of Goalpara district, Assam.

All human societies have some phenomenon that can be described as religion. It is difficult to understand why religion is so pervasive in human culture. Some theories suggest that religion is a byproduct of evolution. However, no other animal group has anything that even remotely resembles the concept that has been labeled as religion in anthropology. Humans are adaptive at establishing and maintaining relations with agents beyond a physical presence. So, it is not very difficult to imagine a god who is although invisible and intangible, yet somehow involved with them and even directing the course of events in life. This is all the more evident

from the experiences when people are faced with challenges of life they become more loyal and cling on to the spiritual being.

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Having taken an elaborate journey through the tribal universe of Rangdani Rabha community of Assam it is time for us to make some very pertinent and pointed observations based on this study. However, the religious contours of tribal universe are a major realm to which every student of anthropology is beckoned to. Moreover, as we come to the end of our study it is mandatory for us to make an earnest attempt towards this goal of recapturing the awe inspiring and often incomprehensible modalities of tribal life interwoven both in the cultural and religious nuances both seemingly mundane and highly spiritual side by side. This discussion is even more relevant because, in the present study we focused on the theme 'An Anthropological Study of Religion among the Rangdani Rabha of Assam'.

We have seen that every known human society has given an envious place to religion as it interacts with other cultural institutions especially with family and society. It finds expression in material culture, in human behavior, in value systems and in morals and ethics. It so elusively enters into the formidable realms of medicine, globalization, science and technology too (Fuchs 1975:12). While religion is generally regarded as a section of human culture, it must be distinctly perceived from other cultural elements by the fact that religion assumes the existence of powers beyond human comprehension. Malefijt (1968: 12) defines religion as a system of actions and interactions based on culturally shared beliefs in sacred supernatural powers. Naturally sociologists and anthropologists are keenly interested in the study of religion, for it satiates an eminent social function in human life. In the above given chapters (chapters one to five) it has been seen how religion has fared in the life and works of the people of this country in general and with reference to people of North East India and among the Rangdani Rabha of Goalpara, Assam in a very particular way.

The early anthropologists like Edward Burnett Tylor, Herbert Spencer, and James George Frazer traced the origin of religion to the 'cognitive mistake' of the primitive man. Karl Marx reduced it to the inverted consciousness of alienated society; Sigmund Freud diagnosed it as the

‘universal obsessive neurosis of mankind’, Emile Durkheim suggested that it is nothing but the ‘worship of society’; and Bronislaw Kasper Malinowski attributed it to anxiety arising from uncertainty. Implied in these early analyses of religion is the belief that religion is a social fiction that has outlived its utility. However, as the sense of the sacred is common to all religions it’s all pervasive presence is very much felt in India.

It is evident from the data presented and analyzed in chapter I, II, and III that the local settings, to a considerable extent, determine the patterns of social relations and community life of the Rangdani Rabha, and also tried to find out answers to some of the questions raised in chapter I. In chapter IV it has been tried to understand the traditional magico-religious beliefs and practices among the community which reiterates the consistently interwoven elements of religious tenets in the Rangdani Rabha society.

## **6.1 Tribal Religions in North East India**

The religious community of North East India mainly comprises Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism and Buddhism. Apart from this, various indigenous groups also follow Animism, Tantrism, Brahminism and Vaishnavism. Despite such vast differences in their religious faiths and beliefs, all the people within the region live in perfect peace and harmony with each other. The understanding of a religion as an integral part of every human community is accepted in the region.

North East India is well known for its tribal cultures. Each and every ethnic community has its own distinctive cultural and religious beliefs which are often associated with their day to day activities like festivals, rites of passage with special reference to birth, initiation, marriage, death, agricultural operations especially *jhum* cultivation, sickness, natural disasters, spirits, gods and goddesses, magic, sorcery, sin, taboo and so on. As there are no written scriptures for tribal religions they are passed on orally from one generation to the other. These expressions of human experiences are found in villages, beginning from the family, clan and lineage ultimately culminating to the society. However, anyone who observes the practice of religion among the tribals will not fail to understand that the tribal concept of God and Religion are very noble

though in the tribal world view, one cannot make a clear cut distinction between the sacred and the profane and an element of unity and continuity is necessarily seen.

We have seen that according to Goode, religion plays a unifying role; it helps to avoid social chaos. In North East India, religions may be categorized as a) wholly or partially influenced by great traditions of Hinduism, Christianity and Buddhism; b) those communities who retain pristine tribal faith; and c) a minority group of ethnic communities having affiliations to other religions. Verrier Elwin in his acclaimed book *A Philosophy for NEFA* (1964: 222) observes that 'the people of NEFA, and of all the tribal areas throughout India, are making rapid progress in material prosperity, but this prosperity may be positively dangerous unless there is a parallel spiritual and ethical revival'. Yet, anyone who critically studies the concept of God or religions among the ethnic communities of North East India will certainly note that among the tribes in general there is a profound sense of the sacred in spite of their pre-literate or semi-literate condition of living. We see tribal religions of various kinds in each of the eight states of North East India. It has also been observed that sometimes a grave mistake is made to enumerate the tribal people as coming under the fold of Hinduism. Yet, anthropological knowledge makes it amply clear that they belong to indigenous tribal religions each in its own right, individuality and beauty (Kuzhikkattuthazhe 2012: 103).

Even though tribal religions have no specific sacred scripture(s) the religious ethos is contained in the people's hearts, oral history, and folklore and is brought in to community experience through various rituals and ceremonies. In the context of Tripura it was found that in the tribal religion of Tripura there is a close interaction of the people with the nature in relation to rocks, forests, serpents or even the belief in the transmigration of soul and spirit (Bera 2012). While when one dwells on Assam it is observed that the *Bhakti Dharma* of Sankardeva is seen in Assam as a religion of love that binds together all the peoples irrespective of caste, creed and color. His vision was to create a society wherein people of all walk of life may be considered equal, loved and appreciated (Kuruvachira *et al.* 2007: 43).

When one comes to study the context of Arunachal Pradesh, one can observe *Donyi-poloism* adhered to by all the tribes of Tani group. Literally the words *Donyi* and *Polo* mean the

Sun and the Moon respectively which are symbols of strength, nourishment, justice and life giving force. That is one of the many reasons why a number of efforts are being made to evolve a religion and name it as *Donyi Polo* religion in Arunachal Pradesh (Kuzhikkattuthazhe 2012: 104). In Meghalaya the annual *Seng Kut Snem* festival is celebrated to commemorate the *Seng Khasi* movement to preserve, protect and uphold indigenous Khasi religion and culture. This is clear evidence that the Khasi are intensely religious people as they stress on *Kamaiiakahok*, which they can fulfill only by means of honest work, truthfulness in thoughts and word, and justness in all their transactions. Thus religion permeates the life of a *Khasi-Pnar* in all its aspects because he or she must work to live and honest work is worship.

It is noteworthy that religions in North East India have shown praiseworthy acceptance of each other and mutual appreciation for one another. This will necessarily promote diversity of religion – a call for worshipping God in spirit and truth. So, living in the present day calls for a rediscovery of the essence of religions. ‘It will have to open its doors wide to welcome change, for in any case, it is too late to shut them’ (Doniger 2009: 34). In our days if they rise up to the expectations of people to provide the spiritual nourishment *vis-a-vis* promote harmony and mutual appreciation between peoples and cultures they will thrive and flourish beyond any doubt.

Religion has been found in all societies studied by anthropologists. It is highly visible and it represents a massive output of human enterprise. Religious beliefs are an enduring tribute to humankind's nearly infinite resourcefulness and adaptability in coping with the problems of daily life. Among all the religious communities of North East India there are many similarities in their rituals and worship patterns, yet, there are also tangible and substantial differences in their religious faiths and beliefs. However, all people by and large live within the ambit of peace and harmony with each other.

In the present study we came across the fact that some of the Rangdani Rabha people used to believe that the Garo are in some way inferior to the Rabha. They also believe Christianity is the religion of the Garo. So this belief in some way has made them think that they will be in one or the other way lowering their status if they accept Christianity which is the

religion of the vast majority of the Garo. This has made them not to take up following Christianity for a long time.

Having discussed the broad lines of religious context of the country and taken a bird's eye view of religions in North East India now, we have come to the context of Rangdani Rabha of Goalpara District, Assam. As it was clearly spelt out at the very outset that the present endeavor by the scholar is not merely a study of any religion, but it is a study of religion at work through various life cycle ceremonies, community rituals and festivals like *Baikho* in the Rangdani Rabha society and its various ramifications in the all-encompassing life of the community under study.

## **6.2 The Research Problem in Context**

Having done these we have taken a look at the research problem in the context of the community under study. We observed that religion in the contemporary society is a very sensitive subject. It has been the root cause of much strife and has also been a part of many hidden political agendas. In one way religion is looked upon in its most common image of worship. However, taking all this into account, there is a general agreement that people would not choose to study religion to get a better understanding of the whole 'worshipping' issue. On the other hand, one of the primary reasons for studying religion is to make meaning out of social and cultural interactions within a society and between societies of variant nature.

The present researcher from the very outset believed that the most compelling reason for studying religion today is to reach a better understanding of contemporary society. Without the study of religion, ignorance in this subject would create more global conflicts and prejudices. There is still a great need for a detailed study going deep into religion as there is still a lot of lack of adequate understanding in the subject and in today's society, with the amount of different religions/faiths; understanding is the key to a cultured social well-being. Certainly religions in the present form are faced with a number of challenges to be relevant and thus they are undergoing a number of changes. It is all the more true in the case of religions in the primal/indigenous communities. In the course of our study we also raised a pertinent question

asking 'what are their ways and means for the indigenous Rangdani Rabha community to be relevant today'?

Indigenous communities around the world have always witnessed strong pull and push to be relevant in the contemporary times. In this process it is imperative to ask how they have come up to the expectations of their own kith and kin. Then, what about being meaningfully interacting with other neighbouring communities in the immediate vicinity? This was also a challenge, yes, a major one at that to make changes in one sense, and yet to keep up the specific identity of the group was also an equally inviting challenge. Today when communities make relevant changes within their own accepted pace and rhythm they move ahead with great enthusiasm and equanimity. However, we have also pointed out that when the neighboring communities have their own priorities and concerns which are not in tune with the other community, there arose tensions and unrest situations.

In sum, we have stated categorically that in India a number of animistic belief systems as well as the great religious traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism have impacted and are still at work in the lives of Indians. Certainly religions in the present form are faced with a number of challenges to be relevant and thus they are undergoing a number of changes. All the religions in the future will have to survive in a multi-cultural, multi-religious society. So our research focused on the problem of religion and its various underpinnings in the comprehensive society of the Rangdani Rabha world.

### **6.3 Literatures Reviewed**

An elaborate review of literature though not an exhaustive one was made in the first chapter. In this process we made a very telling point that all students of human culture admit that religion is one of the most important factors in culture. In the following couple of paragraphs we have taken a brief look at some of the representative books which throws light on various aspects of religion of certain communities.

We have seen from several studies undertaken by eminent ethnographers, sociologists, anthropologists and others that there is a very strong relationship between tribal religions and

Hinduism in India. This holistic picture can be drawn in the framework of *The Sacred Complex in Hindu Gaya* (Vidyarthi 1961) of which their sacred beliefs, types of spirits, sacred geography, sacred specialists and sacred performance are the five components. There were also some concerted attempts to correlate the religious beliefs and practices and social life as has been seen in the chapter 1 that there were some acclaimed scholars who studied the impact of religion and its indispensable relation with the society from various perspectives. Among other noteworthy contributions, one can mention S. C. Roy, N.K. Bose, D.N. Majumdar, M.N. Srinivas, M. Marriot, M. Singer, P.K. Bhowmick, L.P. Vidyarthi, B.N. Saraswati, P.R.G. Mathur, Ralph Nicholas, B.B. Goswami, S.G. Morab, M. Jha, P. Chakraborty, L.K. Mahapatra, S.Narayan, B.N. Sahay and others.

Having taken an overall scenario in to consideration we have focused on the state of Assam where we find that the scientific study of religion here is of very recent origin. A number of scholars have done commendable studies on local culture and socio-religious spectrum of North East India. However, the noteworthy fact is that a good number of tribes of North East India are not yet studied systematically. The Rabha of Assam is such a tribe, about whom only sporadic information is available even though systematic reports on the entire Rabha community were initiated by some of the British administrators like Edward Gait and B. C. Allen. There are also a brief mention on the Rabha community as a whole by others as has been seen in preceding pages.

Important publications of recent times have enriched the discipline to a great extent. To name a few: *Religions of the North East* (Neog 2008), *Christianity and Change in North East India* (Subba et al. 2009), *Tribes of North East India: Issues and Challenges* (Medhi et al. 2009), *The Land of Fourteen Gods* (Bera 2010), *Ethnography of a Denotified Tribe* (Burman 2010), *Focus on the Rabhas: Language, literature and Culture* (Hakacham 2010), *Social Unrest and Peace Initiatives: Perspectives from North East India* (Bera et al. 2011), *Religion and Society in North East India* (Nath 2011), *Pedagogy for Religion* (Sengupta 2011), *Concept of God and Religion: Traditional Thought and Contemporary Society* (Kuzhikkattuthazhe et al. 2012), etc. are very valuable contributions dealing on the theme of religion and focus on various nuances of religion in contemporary society. A recent publication by Bera titled *Religion and Society in*

*Sovereign Tripura* (2012) highlights an important dimension of religious study in one of the frontier states of northeast India wherein factors of social mobility like Kshatriyaisation and Sanskritization have been dealt upon in detail linking it with the social and historical forces for the formation of a sovereign state as well the religious practices that have undergone mobility in an upward direction. One of the latest books by Kuzhikkattuthazhe J., (2013) titled *Understanding North East India: Contemporary Cultural Perspectives* has some important facets pertaining to religion and the sense of the sacred. Again, very recently Kuruvachira (2013) in his book *Religion: A Mystery and a Paradox* deals with some salient themes in religious studies.

Though the above given review of literature is by no means exhaustive, yet the books and write-ups mentioned above deserve special consideration and deeper analysis. An attempt has also been made to review the existing literature that has been published very recently.

#### **6.4 Importance of the Present Study**

The relationship between religion and society has been a chief concern of anthropology from the beginning. The most influential work in this field is the study of Emile Durkheim (1965) which attempts to demonstrate how religion arises from a community's social experience and constitutes the basis of its social organization. The essence of religion is the sense of the sacred which is common to all religions. *Anthropologists* study the origin, development, and behavior of humans. They examine the ways of life, languages, archaeological remains, and physical characteristics of people in various parts of the world. Though they often study the customs, values, and social patterns of different cultures, often through comparative analyses some anthropologists study current human concerns, such as overpopulation, warfare, and poverty, including the evolution of the human brain.

In the tribal societies, supernatural powers play a major role in every happening in the community. Therefore, the rites and rituals performed to propitiate the spirits come under the realm of religion which is a field calls for closer examination to understand the community in its entirety. This becomes all the more important in the context of various other factors which directly or indirectly influence the indigenous religious ethos of the community under study. The

Rangdani Rabha who are one of the segments of eight Rabha groups are principally distributed in the district of Goalpara, Assam. The present study done in the rural context of the given district is important especially in the context of tribal communities who are in a process of constant change due to contact with other communities, education, economic development, progress of media and communication and other factors.

## **6.5 Objectives**

We have seen a large number of important aspects to be taken into consideration for a study of such intensity. However, taking the review of literature in to consideration, the gamut of the study has been taken with the following objectives:

- a. to acquire an overall knowledge about the pristine religion of the studied population;
- b. to examine the concept of religion and understand the various aspects of the religious life of the Rangdani Rabha of the studied area;
- c. to study the role and status of the religious experts among the Rangdani Rabha;
- d. to evaluate the division of labor of the members of the society in ritual performances;
- e. to examine the impinging factors percolated from the outside world in the religious universe of the Rangdani Rabha; and
- f. to understand the transformation and change in the religious life of the Rangdani Rabha and its impact on their society.

## **6.6 The Locale**

While we considered the universe of our study we identified the complete localities wherein the Rangdani Rabha live mostly in three states namely Assam, Meghalaya and North Bengal. In Assam they are mainly concentrated in the district of Goalpara, the area of our study. However, after a preliminary perusal over the available secondary data a short field work was carried out for a period of time in the state of North Bengal and Meghalaya as well. In these

two states we found there is a greater measure of assimilation with the geographical and indigenous setting. So in one sense the Rabha of these two states completely live as assimilated communities. However, their sense of history with special reference to their customary laws needs to be appreciated.

It has been mentioned earlier that the title of our study is an anthropological study of religion among the Rangdani Rabha of Assam. For this micro study a complete and extensive survey of 121 households were undertaken from two adjoining villages, namely Majerburi and Matia in Goalpara district. The chief aim of taking the above mentioned villages was that these villages are medium sized and are homogeneous in its population pattern, inhabited by the Rangdani Rabha tribe only.

## **6.7 The Methodological Application**

For this study qualitative data was collected using the methods of observation, in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, case study, survey, etc. Quantitative data were collected from both the villages by visiting each of the households. Religious leaders (*Deuri*) of the village including the village head men (*Gaon Burah*) and Rangdani Rabha herbal experts (*Ojha*) were interviewed to gather ample data on the religious affiliations of the people as a whole. As there are very few published documents on Rangdani Rabhas and their religion the interview guide technique was used to collect information as people's sense of history and perception which have been considered a great value for such a study. Secondary data was collected from various libraries with special reference to North East India. Since the researcher stayed within the village during the collection of empirical data a close rapport with the *Deuri*, respectable leaders and other villagers was established.

It is to be mentioned that the religious places including their common worship places were visited and participant observation and interview schedule were made use of for taking note of the importance of their religious practices and opinions on socio-religious life of the Rangdani Rabha. Detailed field work for the present study was done intermittently from May 2012 to January 2013, and the data were updated based on the field studies during the month of April-

May and September 2013. An overall verification of the contemporary data was done in the month of January 2014 as well. There were occasions when the present researcher took part in the formal and informal gatherings of the people, especially in some of the festivals, and household rituals which were watched closely and intensely. This gave ample opportunity to perceive their religious aspects of life and culture in a more intimate way. To ensure a balanced research perspective, both *emic* and *etic* views were considered. As this is a micro study, in-depth and longitudinal observations were given more importance *than* mere presentation of meticulous numerical data. The whole data collected from two villages with a total of 121 households were analyzed to find the place of religion in the life of Rangdani Rabha.

## **6.8 Habitat and Inhabitants**

This part of the study (Chapter II) was done by the present researcher after having taken a look at the historical framework of Assam as a state. We have noticed that the process of social formation in Assam has been marked by simultaneous Sanskritization and tribalization of the diverse tribes and ethnic groups that have settled in Assam at different points of time.

Then, as we approached the study area, household survey was done in a meticulous way to ascertain the total number of families living there. Thus it was found in both the villages (Matia and Majerburi) together that there are 121 families in total and there are 539 numbers of the total population. Being enquired about the origin of the names of Matia and Majerburi it was found that the villages were set up in the year 1913. After the outbreak of *Kala-Azar* or cholera, and in that epidemic large numbers of people were wiped out. Later on slowly and steadily these villages were set up once again. During our investigation it was found that there are 16 families of Majerburi who are followers of traditional religion and 45 families are Christians, whereas in Matia 40 families are traditional worshippers and 20 families are Christians.

## **6.9 The Rabha of Assam**

It has been seen that the Rabha of Assam belong to the Tibeto-Burman family within the Sino-Tibetan family of languages. Linguistically they also belong to the Bodo family. They are

the fourth numerically largest tribe among 31 tribal communities in Assam and constitute about 8.14 per cent of Assam's total tribal population. Interestingly, the Rabha were earlier a matrilineal society, making them more like the Khasi and the Garo in their lineage. However, at the present day this trend has changed and now they are following the patrilineal system. The Rabha are one of the oldest and distinct racial communities of North East India. They are proud of their origin and cultural heritage. They inhabit the areas of Kamrup, Nalbari, Darrang, Goalpara, Bongaigaon, Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Nagaon, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, North Lakhimpur in Assam; and Garo Hills in Meghalaya. Besides, they also scattered in many places like Coochbehar and Jalpaiguri districts of West Bengal, Nagaland, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and in the neighbouring country like Bangladesh. Being an indigenous tribe, the Rabha have their distinct identity in respect of their racial origin, original abode, language, culture, customs and way of living.

## **6.10 Rabha Endogamous Groups**

At the very outset it was made clear that the Rabha tribe comprises a number of linguistic groups. Each group possesses its own socio-cultural elements with certain distinctive characteristics. Thus, based on their linguistic and cultural differences, the Rabha are broadly divided into eight endogamous sections *viz.* (i) Koch/Kocha (Sunga), (ii) Rongdani/Rangdani, (iii) Maituri, (iv) Pati, (v) Totla, (vi) Dahori, (vii) Bitolia and (viii) Hana. Hakacham *et al.* (2004: 37) observed that out of these sections the Koch/Kocha, the Rangdani and the Maituri are non-sanskritized groups, while the rest are considered to be sanskritized. Das (1960: 6) opined that the Rangdani, the Maituri and the Pati enjoy a superior social status compared to other sub-groups of the Rabha. Raha (1989: 10) seems to say that Pati section is the most advanced section of the tribe, for they have adopted the Hindu customs. The scholars of the day say that Pati Rabha have almost entirely merged with Assamese society and hence they cannot claim to be superior within the larger Rabha conglomeration while adhering to Assamese life style and culture, while Maituri Rabhas certainly cannot claim to be superior because they are too few and are found in a scattered manner across North East India.

Some of the scholars say that *Rang* also means 'strong'. They say this because Rangdani Rabha is the only one group believed to have preserved the language, customs, traditional dress patterns, etc. more or less intact. So, they believe that it was possible because of their strong adherence to their vital and traditional individuality. In this connection they call the other group especially *Pati* as 'small' because of their moving away from the larger Rabha group abandoning their language and customs and traditions. In many fields they cherish individual traits which represent their identity even in postmodern context. They do have a composite behavior pattern, individual language, social life, traditional dress, food habits, folk songs and dances, occasional festivals too. Except for physical features, these groups have lost almost all the traces of a Rabha.

## **6.11 The Rites of Passage**

In this chapter (III) it has been seen that human communities all over the world adhere to a number of initiation rites which are fundamental to human growth and development. These rites were originally established in order to link the individual to the community and the community to the broader and more potent spiritual world. Many of the most important and common rites of passage are connected with the biological crises of life - birth, maturity, marriage, and death - all of which bring changes in social status and, therefore, in the social relations of the people concerned. Rites of passage are universal, and presumptive evidence from archaeology in the form of burial findings strongly suggests that they go back to very early times. The root of these rituals are the acceptance of the fact that human beings are not in complete control of their life and the intervention of heavenly or supernatural bodies contributes to the smooth journey of people in this turbulent earthly pilgrimage.

### **Pregnancy and Child Birth**

During the study it was observed that generally, the Rangdani and Maitari groups of the Rabha impose some restrictions on the expectant mother as regards to her food, movement and activities. They make a sacrifice by offering a duck or a goat to '*Bay-ma-ba*' deity for safe delivery. One portion of the bedroom is used for delivery where men are not permitted to enter

whereas some older and experienced women of the tribe are called upon to perform the job of a *dhai* (midwife) (Raychaudhuri 2007: 49-50).

Empirical findings suggest that the cutting of the umbilical cord with a sharp bamboo, giving bath in the tepid water and showing the child to the Sun light for a short while are the major points to be noted. About three months after the birth of the child, completely of the floor of the house is done with a mixture of cow dung and mud as a part of the purifying ceremony together with the name giving ceremony and first feeding (*Tasigynkay*) is conducted. Among the post birth ceremonies *Bokthai Phakakai* (1<sup>st</sup> purification ceremony) and *Tasigynkay* (name keeping ceremony and in some cases feasting ceremony) deserve special mention.

### **Marriage Rituals**

Marriage creates new social relationships and reciprocal rights between the spouses. In the Rangdani Rabha society after the marriage ceremonies are over a person is believed to have entered into circle of great duties and responsibilities. Though polygamy is permissible, monogamy is the socially accepted norm practiced by them (Rabha 2000: 81). In this society there are three important types of marriages conducted such as (i) *Krangsi Buri*; (ii) *Buri Sinkay*; and (iii) *Bonkau Bakay*. However, the most common and the present day practice is only the first type wherein the boy's party prepares a bamboo basket with a pot of *chocko*, a container of mustard oil and a piece of cloth (*ryphan*) for the girl. Generally five people including both men and women go to the house of the girl's parents and keep the bamboo basket and return to their original house. This makes the girl's party respond positively and get ready with *chunni* (*kambang*), turban (*kodabang*), etc. for the bride. It is observed that marriage ceremony is officiated by the *Deuri* who will call for a red colored cock (*to*) to be sacrificed by twisting their necks which symbolizes auspiciousness and good luck.

### **Mortuary Rites**

As most of the tribes believe in life after death so also the Rangdani Rabha believe death is not the end, they will be reborn again each according to one's deeds, good or bad. The

sacrifice of a hen by the *Deuri*, the spreading of the uncooked rice by the participants to divert the attention of evil spirit, the killing of chicken by pressing it with the help of the dead person's hand are part of the rituals. All invariably can go in procession to the burial ground (*mangkhardam*) except the pregnant women who may easily be attacked by *tycker/botakay* who are witches.

Cremation - except in unnatural death by epidemic or suicide - is the usual pattern of disposal of the dead in the Rangdani Rabha society, though in the case of small children, burial is the normal practice. A fowl is sacrificed known as the *Remdengkai*, i.e., opening of the passage for the soul. The dead body is carried by the sons including a village elder to the cremation ground on the bank of the river. After the cremation the members attending the ceremony take bath and assemble in the house of the deceased and perform some preliminary death rites.

It is necessary for them to keep the body on the bamboo mat spread on the ground. They keep some cotton (*hampa*) on the nostrils and both the toes will be tied in the criss-crossed manner. Normally the body will be covered with a new white cloth. Women will sing narrating all the good qualities of the dead one: 'you came for good but going back so early, if you come back again do not be born again as a chicken (*to*) because they will kill you for any ritualistic celebrations; do not be born again as a cow (*masu*), the people will take the milk away from you etc. ...'. Villagers will pay respects with flowers, uncooked rice will be thrown all over the body and nearby ground, and at times a few coins or rupees will be offered near the dead body as well. Earlier until 25 years ago invariably the custom was to bury the dead, now due to the influence of other societies cremation is also done. As a matter of fact it is very difficult to find traditional burial taking place in all the Rabha communities as a result of Hinduization.

In death ceremony, all the offerings to the dead are done by the left hand. A *Deuri*/priest chants incantations, which have to be in the Rangdani Rabha language, imploring the spirits to clear the passage for the dead person. One of the post funeral rites is called *Ganthi-Thupai* (i.e. tying of cloth as a symbol of the departed soul), which is a part of *Farkanthi Sradha*. However,

such rites are not strictly found among the organized and sanskritized sub-groups (Hakacham 2010: 156).

## 6.12 Magic and Religion: Beliefs and Practices

In this chapter (IV) a study on the magico-religious beliefs among the Rangdani Rabha was made. Like many other cultures in the world the Rangdani Rabha believe that by performing certain magical acts they can influence the supernatural powers and in turn it contribute to a sense of order in what might otherwise be seen as a chaotic and meaningless existence. When one travels through the tribal religious world it is noticed that they are commonly endowed with belief in spirits and their veneration and worship can be invoked, propitiated and even forced to help or harm human beings by various magical acts and practices. They believe that the whole world including the individual life and works are largely governed by superhuman powers yet, magico-religious rites have the power to take control over those powers that can cause disease, misfortune or even death (Fuchs 1992: 67-72).

While discussing the magico-religious rites of the Rangdani Rabhas, it is observed that they do not worship natural forces, such as thunder, rain or the Sun, though some of their deities are named after hills and streams. When a member of that particular clan suffers from certain ailments the clan-God is to be propitiated. On the basis of these and other materials, Majumdar comes to the conclusion that Rangdani Rabha being still remains away from the orbit of traditional Hinduism. They also call some of the sacred places *dham*. However, the importance given to *Dodan Mandir* at Baida in Goalpara and *Baikho Mandir* in Nadiapara, Goalpara deserve particular mention which are permanent places of worship for the members of the tribe and even for others. One can find three images of king *Dodan*, captain *Marukhetri* along with saint (*Rishi*) and eleven goddesses, i.e., attendants of *Chari*, consort of *Darmang* are placed respectively (Hakacham 2010: 157-58).

In the Rangdani Rabha society the *Deuri* (priest) is neither hereditary nor the performance of the ritual is taught by anybody. However, any senior Rangdani Rabha who has

learnt the art in dream revelation with a proven record of good temperament is regarded as their *Deuri* (priest) and is highly esteemed by the whole society. He does not do this service for a price, but often an honorarium is readily given to him by the one who requests his magico-religious service at any time of the day or even at night. On some occasions before the major *puja* the *Deuri* is expected to fast even abstaining from drinking water. There are also female *Deuri* who assist the male *Deuri* in preparation of the main festivals like *Baikho*. It was identified that there were eighteen male and nine female *Deuri* during the *Baikho* celebrations. During one of the interviews it was found that those who aspire to become *Deuri* were selected for a period of apprenticeship and that period of time is used to assist the head *Deuri* in preparation for various *puja* and training is also received in uttering various essential *mantras*. Magico-religious ceremonies accompanied by behavioral restrictions binding upon community and/ or individual performed during the year. In addition to these rites, during the study the present researcher has identified a number of very useful herbs which are administered by magico-religious practitioners for the various ailments in the Rangdani Rabha community even today.

During the course of field study it was noticed that among the Rangdani Rabha there was strong belief that from mid March (*Jeth*) to mid August (*Sravan*) are considered to be good for sowing rice (*Bichiphukay*) especially of the *Poromai* variety. Vegetables like *Gika*, bitter guard, pumpkin, long beans, chilly, etc. also are done by them in these months. There are times when agricultural operations are completely suspended because of the significance of the belief system attached to it as well. It is also observed that before the beginning of the agricultural operations some people believed that invoking the name of supreme God (*Rishi*) or *Mama Shibu Darmang* and his wife *Chari*, god of one's garden (*rakshi*), *Garodevta* (*koncho*), *Nangol puja* (*Vishwakarma*), *Bura Lakor-Chota Lakor* (god of cows), etc. brings in abundant crop. The first phase of ploughing is known as *karaykay*. This is an overall ploughing as soon as they perceive indications of good season. Secondly, they plough the field comparatively deeper. This is known as *Chas rakhukay*. The third and last phase of ploughing is known as *Hapchi-rakhukay* thereby land is made leveled and completely fit for the planting of seedlings. Towards the beginning of the harvesting (*Mai-khankay*) season they propitiate *Dhan Kuber*, *Bakra Bai*, *Bai-ma-ba* (in some cases his wife *Dhanketro* also), *Hungry Bai* (also known as *Nakati*) and in the time of pests

in the garden propitiation of *Kusuri* deity is also done by the members of Matia and Majerburi villages.

In case of house construction, for example, building of cowshed, pig house, granary, poultry farm, etc. is said to be determined according to their traditional beliefs. The courtyard is generally made at the southern part of the house. They dig a well on a plot where fire flies frequently fly in groups. The cowshed is supposed to be on the other part of the courtyard. The *Namghar* or the temple is generally located in the eastern part of the household. On the eve of construction of a dwelling house, some raw rice is put on the ground, if the next day if any of the rice grain is lost the ground is considered to be not fit for the construction. They throw some uncooked rice, make a boundary with a thread and set apart the place where the offering has taken place. They observe about 24 hours if they have lost anything from the *puja* ground, if nothing is lost the ground is feasible for construction. All these rituals are undertaken by the house owner and the officiating *Deuri*.

They believe that if they experience a howling sound of an owl in the dream within the vicinity of their house it is really a bad omen Likewise, when one person dreams that he or she is about to undertake a journey and at the very outset if someone seems to ask 'where are you going' then it is believed to be a bad omen. However, while in a dream if a person sees a funeral procession it is considered to be a good omen; so also in a dream someone observes a chirping bird building a nest it is considered to be a promotion to the impending good luck. Anyone who has learnt the art in dream among the Rangdani Rabha is regarded as their priest (*Deuri*) and is highly esteemed by the whole society. But the medicine man (*Ojha*) learns the art from someone else. Among the Rangdani Rabha there is lots of lore regarding the interpretation of their dreams.

In a traditional Rangdani Rabha society religious observations are done especially if they encounter sickness and other difficult situations. There are a number of spirits to be propitiated as the case may be *Kuber*, *Bakra Bai*, *Pisuli Bai*, *Huduma Bai*, *Bai-ma-ba*, *Hungry Bai*, *Tycker Bai*, *Panba Bai* (the biggest spirit) are the major ones to be propitiated in various situations of sorrow and sickness. If in one case chicken is sacrificed, in another case it may be a goat; but

invariably in most of the cases a sacrifice, lighting of the lamp, sprinkling of the blood and chanting of some *mantra* are essential ingredients.

### **6.13 Religious Continuity, Transition and Change**

In the next chapter (Chapter V) we studied on the theme of 'Continuity, Transition and Change in Religion'. The concepts of 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 society 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 we observe closely depict 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 of the Rangdani Rabha of Goalpara district, Assam.

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. 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.

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 religion of the tribal people 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, Rabha groups have lost some of their original worship patterns side by side with their originality in language structure, with special reference to Pati Rabhas. However, the 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 Rangdani 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 Rangdani Rabha community under consideration.

The Rangdani Rabha people traditionally practice a few animistic rituals. They prepare offerings of fruits, betel nut (*kui*), *tamul pan (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 in their traditionally revered sacred ground (*dham*) in ritual practices among forest dwelling Rangdani Rabhas who still live in the forest villages and the Rangdani Rabha who live in the villages as cultivators. 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*, who is a male deity. 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. 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 deities do not have any idols. A red colored earthen pitcher filled with rice represents the deity *Rungtuk*. An egg is kept on the neck of the pitcher. 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 that they bring a small quantity of meat or fruits, food grains and cash for offering to the deities.

Though present day beliefs 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 characterizes the traditional religion of the Rangdani Rabha. They are aware that the spiritual realm of the people is always dominated by a number of spirits either benevolent or malevolent. 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, 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*, *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 honor and valor. Through the study it was possible to observe their affiliation with Christianity as they put up general shops which display photos pertaining to the religion. Now, in the following paragraphs the intercommunity religious perceptions and linkages with special reference to Rangdani Rabha of Matia and Majerburi villages have been assessed.

During earlier days, the Rangdani Rabha staunchly adhered to yearly sacrifice of pig and major feast was arranged for the entire village community during the time of *Baikho* celebrations. 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 bring in good health. The Rangdani Rabha took great pride in making the five large stone erected in the worship place (*dham*). They were representations of *Mama Shibu Darmang* (*Shiva*), *Ayi Jashram* (*Parbati*), *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, however is capable of prosperity in cultivation.

Today, one can see a number of changes taking place because of the contact with Christianity and Hinduism as well. The church is providing 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. 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. In the changing context of Rangdani Rabha community there is a need to negotiate between emerging challenges faced by the Rangdani Rabha community *vis-à-vis* the larger concerns of the various communities living side by side.

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 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. 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, in our study among the Rangdani Rabha it was established without any doubt that religion 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 schooled in present day educational institutions.

We also came to realize that some scholars belonging to Rangdani Rabha believed 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.

## **Final Discussion**

While discussing the major salient feature of the community it is seen from the study that the Rabha, including all its sub-groups as a major community, in terms of their numbers have a major role to play in the making of Assam a vibrant state. Their ingenuity to cross the barriers of economic, political, social and religious underpinnings will pave way for a forward looking journey for the next decade and more. However, in the meantime they have to keep up the enthusiasm in harnessing the inner strength of the community taking other communities especially the ones with whom they are in constant contact with, other competing communities and the state at large will be great and decisive markers. While taking up cash crops they are showing signs of success in economic front, yet, this should not remain in individual concerns of forward movement, but taking community to respond to the emerging needs of their fraternity should become a salient feature of their enthusiasm and agility. Will they rise up to communitarian concerns, and will they see the awakening of the inner genius as vital as their every day care and concern?

In the recent years the Rangdani Rabha community is going through definite movements towards economic betterment. This is perceived in the economic activities undertaken by the people in planting cash crops for e.g.: rubber with great focus. They also see there is possibility of economic advancement of planting rubber saplings in the nursery, which is sold for a handsome market price and they are transported to various parts of the district and even outside the district. This recently added economic persuasion has made them move away from community engagements with special reference to religious rituals up to a certain extent.

In the field of educational advancement is also a clear marker in this community as a number of students are pursuing higher education. There are doctors, professors, engineers, M.B.A, M.A, doctoral scholars, etc. ... who show great talent in terms of their perseverance. This also is a pointer that this community is poised to achieve greater things in society. The one major concern would be to march ahead in the contemporary society without sacrificing time

tested values and morals handed down to them by the elderly members who have lesser social control on the growing younger population, more so with regard to religious observances.

Another important marker is the religious tolerance observed in the community. The well known *Deuris* of the villages accept that there are elements of Christianity, Hinduism and other religious affiliations amidst the Rangdani Rabha brethren. And unlike in some other parts of North East India or elsewhere there are no elite societies who vociferously work against the organized religions which are making their presence felt in a phased manner.

In some instances Rangdani Rabha marriages are becoming more and more inter-community based. This is also due to the inter-community relationship built between the communities for the past two decades and more. In most of the instances marriages are taking place between Bodo and Rangdani Rabha communities; however, Rabha-Rajbongshi and Rabha-Garo marriages too are observed.

The health consciousness in the Rangdani Rabha community proclaims that herbal heritage is very much protected by them and they use it without much fanfare. There are also incidences where in patients are taken to modern medical establishments even though there are practitioners of magico-religious rites are readily available in the nearby vicinity of the village.

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This present thesis is a modest attempt to portray an account of the traditional religion of the Rangdani Rabha as a sub-group of the whole Rabha tribe. However, as we have considered only the people of Matia and Majerburi villages, within the time and resources available to this scholar, he has given a full and final account, as far as practicably possible, taking into account the beliefs, practices and function of Rangdani religion as discerned by them based on the empirical data from the field situations. It is believed that this study has been valuable because today in the changing context of the society at large, the tribal communities of India, most specifically of the studied villages have shown great endurance to their traditional religion; however, adapting to the changing needs of the community at large. This study has also brought

to light the efforts of the community to preserve their identity in the larger context of other neighboring communities as well.

Many young people are growing up without a comprehensive knowledge of the old religious rituals. They were found to be much less aware of the arena of religion compared to the economic and political spheres. Certainly, it has great implications, because while though they adhere to a number of religious tenets which are handed down from generations they are not able to articulate the reasons for their belief. This is important precisely because their belief system has a lot to do with their commitment to other areas of life including individual, communitarian and inter-community ethics which they practice and propagate. My young translator also has reported that he has learnt a great deal from the present study. The communication with Brake Rabha who was 112 years old in the year 2013 and is believed to be the senior most among the Rangdani Rabha deserves special mention since much of his traditional acumen has helped the present researcher to land at the present state of mind while elucidating the final chapter of the thesis.

In this study both empirical and non-empirical issues have been incorporated. The village environment is important as a source of sustenance and also as the abode of spirit beings which have power over the economic resources. People of the villages, especially the elderly have nostalgic memories of their ancestors who lived their life with zest and great joy. This they express while they speak of an endearing social relationship with the recent and the remote past. Consequently, people seek to remember them in their informal sharing and social gatherings.

They sometimes blame sickness, misfortune and death caused by evil spirits, and propitiates them, though not with elaborate rituals, which might otherwise disrupt the society serving as an integrating mechanism where ritual experts express and reaffirm community attitudes. Rangdani Rabha religion not only reinforces the social structure but also contributes to social cohesion and community building based on mutual trust and benevolent give and take. This also instills in them an element of confidence in their day to day transactions.

It is generally observed that a group of families come together in a predetermined house for a chit chat and to share a bit of *chocko* (rice beer). Certainly, this enhances community building and building up of a mutual appreciation. Though many a time these meetings are informal, these gatherings are important to ease out elements of anxiety and build up social cohesion. For the Rangdani Rabha these and similar gatherings are not mere community gatherings, but a means to promote well-being in general which is also a feeling of being at home with the ancestral spirits. The *Deuri* give us an element of community cohesion by rituals undertaken during the annual celebrations with special reference to their local *puja*. This is also an intermingling of traditional Rangdani Rabha tradition with an assimilated intermixture of rituals from neighboring communities.

The present study of religion among a particular ethnic group is a challenging exercise especially because religion mostly comes under the realm of intangible culture. However, the heartening element is that religion intertwines in every aspect of the life of a given community. In the case of Rangdani Rabha it has been found that religion is operating in a subtle way and influences the every sphere of their life in various ways.

Thus, the Rangdani Rabha community deserves our sympathetic understanding most especially they were a community which lived with minimum development interventions of the government. In the recent years, Rangdani Rabhas have gained education through missionaries but have probably moved away from their indigenous culture and beliefs. But in some pockets of Goalpara, Rangdani Rabhas are still trying to preserve their traditional ways of life. It is a struggle to maintain the age-old practices of their forefathers without turning away from the fruits of modernity. Only time can reveal the larger scenario of their all-encompassing life wherein the outcome of this social metamorphosis is taking place in the tribal heartland of Goalpara, bringing in more joy and peace ushering in development in tune with the tribal ethos of the community under study. In any case, Rangdani Rabha, as a community, is going through ferment, a phase of change, reasserting their identity on the one hand, holding fast to their time tested values on the other. In all these endeavors they are valiant, determined and forward looking. Their traditional religious tenets are changing, and will certainly change again. It is the

community that will adhere to a particular religious pattern which could provide them meaning, motivation, security, peace and over all well being for a long time to come.

Despite efforts to group all the sub-communities of Rabha under one fold of Rabha, especially in census records or otherwise, the Rangdani Rabha maintain a distinct identity to safeguard their ethnic position as a distinct community in terms of their ethnicity where religion plays a major role for cohesiveness and corporateness of the community. This is evident from their social customs, organization, rituals and other cultural markers that have been transcended from generation to generation. In the studied villages it has been found that there is a simultaneous presence of traditional Rangdani Rabha religion, Hinduism, and Christianity along with the syncretic form of religious behaviour to stabilize the ethnic identity as well as social position of the community in the larger canvas of tribal North East India in general and Assam in particular.

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