CHAPTER VIII

FEMALE RITES AND CEREMONIES (I)
Women are believed to be more conservative in comparison to their male counterparts and so rites performed by the women-folk of a locality are apt to retain comparatively more ancient and indigenous aspects of the folk-ways of a community. Numerous rites and ceremonies, performed by the womenfolk of Cachar, are no exception in this regard. Different aspects of some of these rites which bear a typical local flavour and are of representative character, are discussed below.

1. Surjya-vrata

(a)

Any Sunday of the month of Magh (mid-January to mid-February) is prescribed for Surjya-vrata. The ceremony is also known as Thakur-vrata or Kalathakurer-vrata. It is observed in the following manner:

Just before sunrise, the devotee, obviously a woman, takes her bath and draws a small circle in the open courtyard with powdered rice. She never moves from the circle and performs all her services in connection with the vrata scrupulously sitting there. It goes to the credit of the devotee if the circle is the smallest. An ardent devotee would draw the circle as small as possible,
just enough to accommodate her feet and nothing else. The devotee does not take anything till sunset. Fruits and unboiled milk are offered to the Sun-god. A lamp is placed before the offerings and in course of the vrata it is covered with a basket made of cane or bamboo.

When the vrata concludes at sunset, the devotee would leave the circle and take her first meal from the offerings given to the Sun-god. Throughout the day the female inmates of the household and neighbouring houses, would sing and dance around the devotee. They would form a circle placing the devotee and the lamp in the middle and move around while singing and dancing, keeping the circle intact. The local name for this type of singing and dancing is called Dhamail and songs composed specially for Surjya-vrata are called Kalathakurer Gan (Songs of Kalathakur of the Black God.)

Surjya-vrata, it appears, is a magico-religious rite, in which magic dominates over religion. The Sun-god worshipped here is not even a distant relation of the Sun-god of Hindu mythology, who rides a seven-horse chariot and who is being worshipped in Konarak and other centres of sun worship. So, whereas Hindu iconography depicts an elaborate and a definite image of the Sun-god, here a lamp
is used instead of an image. The month of Magh is the coldest month of the year in this region. So the people eagerly long for abundance of sunshine without which neither plant nor man can thrive and the sun is invoked to fulfil this desire. The lamp used in the vrata represents the sun itself and offerings are placed before this lamp. The devotee stays under the sun for the whole day to absorb heat generated by it and it is believed that thereby she attains the supernatural power to influence the environment around her. Circular dance performed on the occasion may be interpreted as a magical imitation of the rotating motion of the sun.

(b)

But why is Surjya-vrata called Kalathakurer vrata (the rite to propitiate the Black God)? Normally, a Sun-god is never described as black, rather amongst a number of communities, both primitive and advanced, he is associated with the white or red colour. Of course, the Sun-god can assume a black complexion if he is conceived of as the god of rain and cloud. The devotees, who perform Surjya-vrata, are not directly aware of a causal relation between the sun and rainfall and they cannot explain why the vrata is named after Kalathakur. Neither

1. A.Bhattacharyya, Bangla Mangal Kavyer Itihas, pp.646-665
they are sure who this deity is, nor what relation he has with the Sun-god.

But notwithstanding these factors, Surjya-vrata bears some elements of rain-charm. Water is sprinkled by the devotee on the offerings and persons around her, which can be taken as an imitation of a downpour. A miniature pond is dug in front of the devotee and is filled with water—which is also suggestive of rain-charm. Moreover, to cover the lamp with a basket is in all probability a magical endeavour to captivate the sun, and thereby to assist rain-bearing clouds to overpower the sun.

It is worth mentioning here that peasants of Cachar pray earnestly for occasional rain in this month. It is believed that a rain in the month of Magh is a good omen for crops. People often quote a proverb attributed to Khana (Khanar bachan)

Jadi barshey magher shesh
Dhanya rajar punya desh

(If it rains by the end of Magh, blessed is the land and blessed the ruler)

Also there is a saying

Maghey meghey deka
Dhan dibey teka.

(If Magh (the month) and magh (cloud, in local usage rain) meet, crops bring money.)
So, it is apparent that in this coldest month of the season, people not only pray for sunshine, but also for rain. And their craving for rain is linked with their material well-being as they believe it to be a good omen for the next crop. Under the circumstances it is only natural that they should invoke their god of cloud, if there is any. Kalathakur perhaps, was originally an indigenous deity who used to govern the clouds and who was invoked by the local peasants in the month of Magh to bring about rain so vital for the growth of their paddy. At this stage, perhaps this deity did not have any relation with the Sun-god and was worshipped independently. At a later date, the cult of Kalathakur might have mingled with Surjya-vrata as both the rites have at least one common objective, i.e., to gain control over the sun for material benefit.

It is doubtful whether a hazy knowledge of the causal relation between the sun and rain had contributed to this fusion. However, as a result of this fusion, Kalathakur was pushed to a secondary position by the dominant Sun-god, but his name survived and some rain-charms associated with his cult were also incorporated within the fold of Surjya-vrata. Hence the latter assumed the form of a composite rite where two divergent motives operate at a time— to
ensure sunshine and heat and to bring about rain. Co-existence of such apparent contradictory motives within a single rite is not altogether unprecedented in folk behaviour. There are some ceremonies prevalent amongst the village communities of Europe and tribal people of Australia, which according to J.G. Frazer, are performed as magical charms to ensure sunshine as well as rain. Surjya-vrata may be regarded as one of such rites.

Surjya, the Sun-god, in spite of his dominance, could not completely overpower the independent entity of Kalathakur, the indigenous black god of the clouds. But at present Kalathakur is facing the challenge of a more powerful adversary, Krishna, the supreme God of the Vaisnavites, is well-known for his black (actually blue-black) complexion. His votaries often call him Kala (the black) in adoration. Vaisnavism is a widely popular cult in this region. The striking resemblance of name and complexion has led the Vaisnavites to identify Kalathakur with Krishna. Though Surjya-vrata does not include any ritual worship of Krishna, the majority of songs sung on the occasion depict life and achievements of Krishna, normally which should not have any relevance to Surjya-vrata. It is not improbable that in the near future

Kalathakur, losing completely his separate identity, may be absorbed in the Krishna cult.

II. Rupasi-vrata

(a)

Rupasi-vrata or worship of Rupasi is observed widely all over the district. The word Rupasi in Sanskrit denotes a beautiful lady, but it is uncertain whether this meaning has any bearing on the naming of this godling. In almost each village there is a sheora tree believed to be the abode of Rupasi. Women worship the deity at the foot of this tree and the place is called Rupasitala. In the urban areas, where a sheora tree is not available, a branch of the tree is brought and placed in a corner of the courtyard and here the worship is performed.

There is no fixed date for the observance of Rupasi-vrata. The godling is worshipped, as a rule, by the mother of a bridegroom before a marriage takes place in a house. After the birth of a child also, her worship is considered obligatory on the part of the mother of the baby. Sometimes she is also worshipped on the occasion of the New Rice ceremony. At least five married women are required to perform the rite. Of course there would be a principal devotee at whose initiative the vrata is
undertaken. Widows are strictly excluded from the ceremony. The devotees take a bath in the morning and clean the place of worship. They do not take any food till the vrata is over. No Brahmin priest is required for the worship of Rupasi. Now-a-days, particularly in urban areas, often a Brahmin attends the ceremony, but his role there is somewhat superfluous. All important services in connection with the rite are performed by the devotees themselves. They place offerings which normally consist of rice, banana and other fruits at the foot of the tree. Then they would place an egg there, on which a human figure with vermilion is drawn. After these preliminaries, the devotees sit together and one of them would narrate a tale emphasising the superior power of the goddess Rupasi. Then the egg would be broken by a devotee and thrown away. With the breaking of the egg, the rite ends. The devotees then break their fast and the offerings are distributed. Like widows, the males are also excluded from the ceremony; they are not even allowed to partake of the offerings.

(b)

More than one fact suggests an aboriginal and sylvan origin of Rupasi-vrata. Aboriginal people attach sacredness to trees for a number of reasons. It is believed

3. J.G. Frazer, The Aftermath, pp. 133, 140, 141, 144
that tree spirits, sometimes glorified as sylvan deities reside in a tree. In some tribal hamlets, a tree or a grove situated in the gateway or centre of the locality, is regarded as the protector of its inhabitants. The latter believe that tree spirits would keep a watchful eye on the well-being of the villagers, if they are properly propitiated. William Crooke informs us that the egg is also held sacred by some primitive people as it is supposed to hold the deity within its shell; also it is regarded as a protector from evil spirits. In Rupasi-vrata we may trace a survival of these primitive beliefs. Here, mention may be made of a very similar rite observed by the Mallers of Chotanagpur in connection with the worship of Dwara Gusain or Lord of the house-door. Whenever some calamity falls upon the household, it is considered necessary to propitiate him. The head of the family cleanses a place in front of his door and sets up a branch of the tree called Mukum, which is held very sacred, and an egg is placed near the branch, a hog is killed and friends feast; when the ceremony is over, the egg is broken and the branch placed on the suppliant's house.

5. Ibid., Vol. I, p. 104
Again, some animistic tribes have a regard for trees as they believe these trees to be inhabited by their ancestors. In Bengal, a godling called Buri (the old lady) is worshipped sporadically by women for protection of children. Like Rupasi, she is also represented by a sheora tree. Some scholars are of the opinion that this Buri is nothing but an ancestress-spirit, represented by a tree. In Cachar, sheora trees are regarded as abodes of female spirits (petni), which may not be altogether unconnected with the ancestress-spirits.

(c) 

Besides absorbing some ingredients from these primitive notions associated with tree-worship, Rupasi-vrata bears some dominant traits of the cult of fertility. That the rite is performed, without fail, before a marriage is materialised and after a child-birth takes place, is a pointer to this direction. Some tribes of Africa believe that tree-spirits possess the power of bestowing fecundity on human beings and cattle. To some other tribes, trees represent a combination of the earth and the forest, thereby to form a single divinity responsible for vegetation and fertility of the soil. Again, the use of eggs

7. N.Choudhury, Cult of the old lady, Man in India, Vol. XX, p. 78
8. J.G. Frazer, Ibid., p. 147
9. Ibid., p. 126
is also significant. In an orthodox Hindu Brahmanical rite the use of an egg is strictly forbidden. But primitive people held an egg as sacred, because "in the religious philosophy of the ancient world, an egg was regarded as not only emblematic of the universe, but as the symbol of fertility and of new life." To an unsophisticated mind, the egg is the most suitable replica for the ovary or foetus. The human figure drawn on the egg-shell represents a child and it is done perhaps to infuse magically the spirit of the future progeny in the ovary. The breaking of the egg symbolises the birth of the child and the entire rite appears to be nothing but an imitative magic to ensure and obtain offspring.

Rupasi is not included in the orthodox Hindu pantheon, but her tremendous popularity led the priestly class to raise her to the status of a full-fledged mother-goddess. This effort has been afoot for quite a long time but with moderate success. She has been glorified as Rupeswari, but this ornate name is not popular. Though now-a-days, a Brahman priest is readily available to officiate at the ceremony, devout females seldom allow him to perform any useful service. Padmanath Vidyavinod identified Rupasi with Banadurga (Durga of the jungle)— a goddess of sylvan

but origin by already recognised in the Hindu pantheon. But this identification appears uncalled for. In this region, Bonadurga is worshipped only by the males and women are forbidden even to witness the worship. On the other hand, Rupasi-vrata is essentially a female rite and the males do not even partake of its oblations. Male dominance in the cult of Banadurga suggests that originally she was perhaps a goddess of the hunters propitiated by them before entering a forest, whereas Rupasi is a deity of fertility and protection, with which women are more concerned.