FOCUS ON SOME POPULAR DEITIES AND THEIR PROPITIATION

I Manasa

While Kali is the greatest goddess standing at the centre of the miniature folk-pantheon peculiar to the district and is regarded with the greatest of reverence and awe, it is Manasa who seems to have woven a more colourful pattern into the socio-religious and cultural fabric of the district. She is not just a divinity who is installed in a shrine and ceremonially offered puja. Some public shrines dedicated exclusively to her do exist and she always has an important place in a community shrine. But with a vast number of people she is a household deity who is kept in the family shrine, and often at the family altar.

Apart from pujas performed on special days of the year Marai Puja, as Manasa Puja is known in the district, is also performed on such auspicious occasions as a marriage or an annaprasanna ceremony. Padmapuran or Marai-gan performances, based on the story of Goddess Manasa and her encounter with the merchant Chando, form one of the most popular and most widely current institutions of folk-entertainment combining singing, dancing and often acting. It is Marai Puja again which has traditionally provided the most enduring inspiration and sustenance to the interesting folk-art of image-making and painting on pith.

---

1. Rajbansis of North Bengal also have this practice. 'In all ceremonies related to marriage, sradh, pregnancy, and childbirth, worship is offered to Bishohori Thakurani in the outward yard of the house with curd, flattened rice and ripe plantain offering' - See C. C. Sanyal, The Rajbansis of North Bengal, p.136.
In Goalpara Manasa is not only the snake deity, although the power to eradicate snake venom is admittedly one of her attributes as one of her names, Bishohori, itself implies. Occasionally in some areas she is also worshipped in times of epidemics like cholera; but in general it is to Kali that people turn in times of such calamity. But in a large part of the district, especially in the west, she is also the goddess of the welfare of the household and of abundance both in grains and in progeny. Thus an element of the concept of fertility has been incorporated into the overall concept of the goddess. So dear is she to the heart of the people in these parts that she is often designated by many people simply as Bhogoboti (the goddess).

As a matter of fact in this district the goddess is known by different names and her worship is performed with different kinds of rites at different levels. It may be pointed out that the name Manasa, though not unknown, is in no way popular among the people here.

The most important form of the worship is Marai Puja which is generally a big affair with big-size images of the goddess (either earthen or made of pith), performance of the scriptural rites by Brahman priests and the elaborate singing of songs of the Beulab legend. The puja may be organised publicly by community effort; or it may be arranged by a particular family, but even then it generally assumes the forms of a public event. The Bodos and Rabhas of the

1. In Bengal also Manasa is worshipped for various purposes — as a fertility goddess, as a rain-giver, as a wealth-giver and also as a curer of diseases etc. — See P. K. Maitry: The Goddess Manasa, pp. 269-275.

In other parts of Assam, it is believed that besides being the presiding deity of epidemic diseases, the goddess can also bless a childless man with children, a blind man with eyesight and
district also call it Marai and perform it in their own manner with rites which includes the performance of dancing and other feats by deodhanis and often the sacrificing of animals. A big number of people in south Goalpara, mostly Rabhas, call it Barmani puja, Barmani being a corruption from Brahmāni, one of the names of Manasa.

In Marāi itself there are different standards depending on the length and grandeur of the performance. The most elaborate performance is known to extend up to four days and nights in some places and three days and three nights in others. In the west, a full-fledged performance is called ser-puja and one which is finished in the course of the day is called ek-mārāi. In the south the former is called gotā-mārāi and the latter phul-mārāi.

Though a Marai may be held at any time of the year and on any auspicious occasion, the rainy season is the most propitious for the puja. In some areas like Salkocha, there are four special times at which the puja is performed, the duration of the performance varying from one to four days as follows:

One day performance - on the day of ceremonial cleaning following the ambubachi ceremony (in Jaistha).

Two-day performance - beginning on the last day of Ashadha.

Three-day performance - beginning on the last day of Shravana.

Four-day performance - beginning on the last day of Bhadra.

The puja is also extensively held on the Nag Panchami day.

1. The Bodos however do not allow their children to look at the goddess as she is believed to be a malevolent power.
The image of the goddess is made of either clay or pith. Besides, there is generally a structure made of pith which contains images and paintings depicting characters and episodes from the Beula legend. This structure is variously called mandishā, mandush, manjush, majush and ma.ju at different places. There is also a smaller temple-like pith structure with the image of the goddess painted on one side and known as phul-hari or tepāri. It is placed on a dāla (round bamboo tray) containing such articles as arum flowers, bamboo leaves, twigs of the siju cactus, fruits like lemon, cucumber and bananas in bunches. A paste made of rice-powder is sprinkled over the articles. The dāla is one of the most important accessories of the worship.

In a full-scale puja all parts of the Padmapurāṇ, including jāgāni and basāni, are recited whereas in a restricted performance only the jāgāni part is sung.

When the puja is performed by women themselves it is generally called Bishohori puja. It is a homely function where offerings are made to the goddess Bishohori in a bamboo tray (dāla dewā) wishing the well-being of the family. No priest is generally employed. There is no Padmapurāṇ performance: The women sing simple songs in praise of the goddess. Sometimes they also dance. Again as Kāni Bishohori the goddess receives puja at the time of the Jāyā Chawā ceremony and when a child gets scared by a snake. After the puja is

1. See Chap. XII, Sec. VI.
2. Siju twigs have been mentioned as an essential article of the puja by Manakar, one of the Manasa-poets of Assam.
3 and 4. Earlier and later parts of the Padmapurāṇa respectively.
over, the puja materials are placed in the water of a river or a pond and allowed to float away.

Another form in which the goddess is sometimes worshipped in some western part of the district is known as anjanger or ajankar, derived obviously from ajagar, the python. In this form, the raised hood of a serpent takes the place of the image of the goddess. Here also the procedure of the puja is simple. Besides, the puja is also sometimes offered by simply installing a pot (ghat) that represented the goddess. This form of puja seems to have been originally prevalent as is evident from the testimony of Manakar describing the puja procedure:

[The goddess] is worshipped in the rainy season with an earthen pot and a cactus twigs.  

It is interesting to note that formerly some Muslims also associated themselves with Marai Puja and there were Muslim parties singing Pādmapuran songs. Again the practice of arranging for Marai on the occasion of a marriage was also followed by some Muslims. But such practices are now fast dying out and are rarely encountered today.

Whatever be the origin of the goddess Manasa and the process of evolution through which her puja has taken the present form, it is agreed that the puja was introduced into Assam from North Bengal.  

1. mātir bhāri sijur dāli puje bārishār kāle
2. Ibid., Introduction, p.10.
And it must have been through the Goalpara region that the puja spread to other parts of lower Assam. It is significant that in Assam Manasa Puja is popular only in the districts of Goalpara and Kamrup and the Mangaldai sub-division of Darrang, roughly covering those areas of Assam in which the Koch Kings were in effective power for an extensive period of time.

The view held by some scholars that the Manasa cult came to Assam during the Muslim invasion has of late been effectively discounted. Again, the association of the cult with a particular class of Muslims called Mariyas also seems to be based on a wrong interpretation of the word māriya or māreyā appearing in some of the songs in the Manasa-Kāvyas. It may be pointed out that in Goalpara there is no such caste called māriya or māreyā. Māreyā in the dialect of west Goalpara means the principal male member of the household in which a function is held. Similarly māreyāni means the principal female member of the household. The terms are not confined to Manasa puja songs alone. Whenever any household arranges a puja or other popular ceremony, the principal male and female members of the household are referred to as māreyā and māreyāni respectively. Take, for example, the following songs, the first a kāti Puja song and the second a boat-race song, in which the terms appear:

(1) Kutti gelu re māreyār māo
     bātul kurāo āsiyā

Where did you go, māreyā's mother?
Come and pick up the arrows.

II Madan-Kam : Bas Puja

A very popular and important ceremony of the district is Bas Puja, literally meaning bamboo worship, which centres round specially decorated bamboo poles and is celebrated with songs, dances and other rituals. In many areas the decorated bamboo is believed to represent god Madan-Kam and the puja which is also called Madan-Kam Puja is held on the Madan Chaturdashi day in the month of Vaisakh. Frequent references to Madan-Kam are to be found in a number of songs sung on the occasion and some songs are in fact composed in his praise. Sometimes, the Krishna legend also unobtrusively creeps into the ceremony, and in some songs the bamboo representing the god is even referred to as Gopal. In some places in the north-eastern parts of the district the Kamsa-Vadh play is enacted on the occasion of Bas Puja.

In some places, the puja is associated with goddess Kali and she is the main deity worshipped on the occasion. In certain areas again, both Kali and Madan-Kam are represented separately by different bamboos called Kalir bās, Madan-Kamer bās, etc.

In the main part of the puja some bamboos decorated with red and white cloths and yalk-tail whisks (chowars) are taken in procession along the streets of the village with songs and dances performed to the accompaniment of drums and pipes (dhol, karkā, shanāi, kāshi),
taken from house to house, each household doing obeisance to them, and finally installed at a public place where some rituals are gone through. A most interesting ritual is that of public divination by specialised deodha (also called dendhas or bhoriyas) who are believed to be possessed by some supernatural power and who make prophecies in a state of semi-consciousness.

This practice is particularly important in the areas in which the bas is the symbol of the goddess Kali and the puja is organized especially at the time of an epidemic which is believed to have been caused by the wrath of the goddess or by one of her many local manifestations like Shyamā-Kali, Bāmākali, Khudikhāi and so on. In Boitamari and Bongaigaon, for example, as puja is offered to the different manifestations of Kali and to some other local gods, the deodha himself is believed to be possessed by the god or goddess in question who speaks through a medium (called pāital or bharāl), answers queries of the votaries and makes pronouncements about the causes of the calamity and the means to avert it.

But there are many more stages in the performance of the ceremony with such varied rites as selecting and cutting the bamboos, cleaning and decorating them, washing them in a river and a pond (jal dewā) etc. In some parts offering of sweet balls mixed with hemp is also an essential rite and is known as lāru sojā. There are songs to accompany each of these rites—songs about the creation of bamboos, about the creation of cotton and the preparation of cloth, about the introduction and consumption of hemp etc. Of these songs, known as jāg gān, some sung at the time of the clothing and washing rituals are patently
ribald and abound in inhibited references to the sex organs and the sex act. Often there is the visual representation of the sex organs and the sex act. Thus, an object representing the human penis and a fishing implement resembling the vagina are often attached to the Madan-Kam bamboo. In some areas again wooden replicas of the male and female sex organs are struck with each other along with the singing of erotic songs. Also, the dances performed in some areas suggest the enactment of the sex act. Because of all this, the participation of women in the ceremony is restricted and altogether prohibited in those parts of the rituals which consist of unrestricted ribaldry.

The form of the deity (the bamboo resembling the erect penis) and the rituals accompanying the puja make it abundantly clear that Bas Puja is based on some primitive fertility rite of worshipping the phallus that symbolizes the male generative power, and this fits nicely with the general picture of preoccupation of the population of the area with the fertility concept. How and when this fertility deity came to be connected with the name of Madana or Kamadeva is not clear. However, Kamadeva being the god of love and passion, the transformation of the primitive erotic deity into the Eros of the Hindu conception was perhaps not difficult.

1. The more ribald of these songs in some areas are called motā jāg and those that are less so mihi jāg. The terms motā payār and mihi payār are also in use. Erotic songs are also sometimes called dhamālī. One kind of such songs are called kānāi dhamālī.

In North Bengal kānāi dhamālī songs, mostly based on the theme of Krishna's love-play with Radha, form the bulk of the jāg songs.—See S. K. Bhattacharyya: Uttar Bangar Sāhitya O Sanskriti, pp.108-116.
Though no temple dedicated to Kamadeva has been found in Goalpara district, at least one is known to have existed in Kamrup. More than one image of the god collected from different parts of Assam is to be seen in the Assam State Museum. The Yogini Tantra refers to the observance of Kāma Troyodashi in the month of Chaitra. All this shows that the worship of Kamadeva must have been prevalent in Assam in the past.

It is found that Bas Puja or Madan-Kām Puja is widely popular in many parts of North Bengal, particularly in the districts of Cooch Behar, and Jalpaiguri. But though Bas Puja as such is not found in other parts of Assam, the popular Kamrup festival of Bhathe-li has so much in common with the former ceremony that the possibility of a connection between them cannot be lightly brushed aside.

1. Only the ruins of the temple are seen. The hillock on which it stands is known as Madan-Kām Parbat, the dead river beside it as Madan-Kuri or Madan-Guri and the hollow in the bed of the dead river as Madan-Kur. — See M. Neog (Ed) : P aviation Asam, p.236. Also see T. K. Sarma : 'Ruins of a Hindu Temple in Kamarupa District' in Journal of Assam Research Society, No.3 and 4, pp.82-83.

2. The Yogini Tantra also mentions a Madanaçhala hill with a Kedar temple on it. — See M. Neog (Ed) : P ativtra Asam, p.236. The Tripurā Buranji, and old Assamese chronicle on Tripura also contains a description of the worship of Madana, the rites of which included the spraying of water and the offering of sweet balls prepared with hemp (bhāṅgar lāru). — See S. K. Bhuyan (Ed) : Tripura Buranji, pp.51-62.

3. The ceremony is performed there with rites which are very much similar to those in Goalpara. — See A. Mitra (Ed) : Pa schim Banger Puja-Pārban 0 Melā. It gives reports about the prevalence of the puja from a very big number of villages. C. C. Sanyal gives a description of the ceremony (Modon Kam : Bas Khela : Bas Puja, Bas Dzagao) as performed by the Rajbansis of North Bengal and it is found that they also worship several local deities including Kāli on this occasion. The Kāli Puja is meant to ward off epidemics. — See C. C. Sanyal : The Rajbansis of North Bengal, p.138.
'In the Rangiya and Malbari tehsils there is a form of sport called Bhatheli, which is continued for some days after the Baisakh Bihu. Each village decorates a long bamboo with flag and streamers. The one that is adjudged the best is called the bridegroom. The others who are termed brides, are then ranged round it in a circle, and a mock marriage ceremony is performed. On the last day of the gathering the villagers dance round the bamboo, brandishing their clubs, and the best bamboo or para, as it is called, is planted in a tank ...

'The chief feature of this fair [Bhatheli] is the planting of two green bamboos in a field in some village. On the fixed date in the morning young men take a purifying bath, and cut two bamboos. These are cleaned and washed, then decorated with coloured cloths and chowries. Then these are ceremonially planted in the midst of a din made by playing of drums and cymbals and blowing of conches ...

Singing of erotic songs by young men also used to be a feature of the festival but the practice is being discontinued.

There are certain variations in the nature of the rites in other parts of the district but the main pattern on the whole remains the same. For example, in south Kamrup, it is called Sori or Swari and takes on certain features of the Holi festival as observed in the Vaishnava establishments of Assam. In the Bajali area the bamboo kept leaning against a banyan tree is actually called Madan-mohan Gosain, a name of Krishna.

Dr B. K. Kakati draws attention to some similarities between the Bhatheli festival and the ancient Indradhwaja festival, originally a fertility festival, later 'converted into a festival in honour of Indra, the sovereign of the clouds and waters which generate the grain. Krishna replaced it by instituting the worship of the Govardhana hill.' The Indradhwaja or Indradhwajotthana festival is described as Śakrotthāna in the Kalika Purana, and it took place around a pole with flags. 'The procedures for the festival as described in the Kalika Purana approximates the preparations to be made for the celebration of Bhatheli of the present days. The two festivals appear to be one except on certain minor details.' Whereas the Śakrotthāna festival took place in autumn Bhatheli is held in spring; and while the pole used in the former festival was made of wood, the Bhatheli pole is a bamboo.

Whatever may be the similarities of Bhatheli with the ancient festivals described in the Puranas and other ancient literature, those between Bhatheli and Gās Puja seem to be more significant:

(1) Both are spring festivals.
(2) Both are folk-festivals. Although the Goalpara festival is called a puja, the assistance of a Brahman priest is not requisitioned.
(3) Both centre round bamboos decorated with coloured cloth, yalk's tail whisk etc.
(4) The singing of erotic song (now going out of use in Bhatheli) features in both the festivals.

And judging from the fact that the worship of Kamadeva was not unknown in Kamrup, the suggestion can be ventured that the Bhatheli was originally the same as, or closely akin to, the Bas Puja or Madan-Kam Puja ceremony of Goalpara and North Bengal, which is in essence a fertility ceremony highlighted by phallus-worship.¹

III Madar and Madarer Bas

A most peculiar and interesting godling, who has evolved through the process of juxtaposition of Hindu and Muslim religious beliefs and practices, is Madar. Madar has a very big number of votaries among people of both the communities. He is regarded with particular reverence by the Muslims of the area. On the other hand a place is always reserved for him in the community Hindu shrine where he is considered to be an attendant of Siva and is represented by a bamboo. Madarer Bas is a ceremony which is observed in the same manner as Bas Puja. Muslims take the initiative in the ceremony but Hindus also freely join. Both Hindus and Muslims often let off goats in the name of Madar and invoke him in some charms, especially in those meant for a woman whose offspring do not survive.

As already mentioned the rites of the Madarer Bas ceremony are similar to those of Bas Puja: decorated bamboo poles are taken in procession with music and dance. There is also a bhoriya or deodhā. There are, however, no songs comparable to jāg gān; but

¹. The opinion that the bamboo of Bhatheli is a symbol of the phallus is held by many. Endle, who gives a description of the Bhatheli festival as observed by the Kacharis with a decorated bamboo called parwa, remarks: 'It is possible that this may be a relic or survival of phallic worship, the parwa taking the place of the lingam or phallus.' - See S. Endle: The Kacharis, p. 54.
dancing has a more prominent place. The day for the ceremony is fixed according to the lunar calendar. The principal pole represents Mādār. Besides there is a number of others representing both Muslim and Hindu deities. Among Muslim deities are Fātemā, Barud or Bārika, Satya Pir, Povāg, etc. The Hindu deities most commonly represented are Kāli and Mahāmāya.

Although Mādār has been generally accepted as a Hindu godling and many Hindu gods and goddesses have their place in a Mādārer Bās ceremony organised by Muslims, the Muslim origin of Mādār cannot be doubted. The nature of Mādār is rather indeterminate but there are reasons to believe that the godling has developed through the deification of the famous Muslim saint Shāh Mādār. The ceremony most probably migrated to Goalpara from those parts of North Bengal in which Mādārer Bās (or Ghāzir Bās) is a very important institution among the Muslims. The Muslim institution itself might have been inspired by the local custom of bamboo worship. Later, in Goalpara (and some parts of North Bengal) it acquired a large following among the Hindus. Mādār got so mixed up with Hindu deities and himself underwent such a metamorphosis that he acquired a place in the local Hindu pantheon.

A similar ceremony (with two bamboo poles dressed as bridegroom and bride) is prevalent among some sections of the Muslims of Kamrup district and it is known as Bāh Biya (marriage of the bamboos). Significantly the ceremony was first introduced in these parts about

1. In North Bengal also Mādār is a deity adopted by the Hindus. See C. C. Sanyal: The Rajbansis of North Bengal, p. 137.
two hundred years ago by a Muslim medicine-man named Ghana Shekh who had migrated to Kamrup from Goalpara.¹

Mohammed Mansuruddin elaborately discusses the Ghazir Bās and Madārer Bās ceremonies of North and East Bengal and their connection with Shāh Madār. His description of the ceremonies show that there is quite a lot of similarity between them and the Madārer Bās and Bās Puja ceremonies of Goalpara as well as the Bhatheli and Bāh Biyā ceremonies of Kamrup.²

IV Dharma

The worship of Dharma has not been unknown in Assam. From the references to the deity in old Assamese works like the Manasā Kavyas, the Katha Guru-Charit³ and also in Assamese mantra literature, believed to be several centuries old, scholars have drawn the conclusion that the Dharma cult had considerable influence in Assam, particularly lower Assam, in the past.⁴ But so far as the worship of Dharma or faith in him in the present day is concerned, scholars seem to be agreed on the opinion that except for certain rites performed in the name of Dharma as an adjunct to Manasā Puja in lower Assam, especially in the Mangaldai area, where Dharma is regarded as a form of Narayana, Dharma is not worshipped in Assam today.⁵

1. H. Bhattacharya : 'Prachin Kamrupar Loukik Utsav' in Asam Sahitya Sabha Patrika, 19th Year, No.3.
3. An old biography of Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and other Vaishnava saints of Assam.
But in Goalpara district the worship of Dharma is not so linked up with that Manasa and the deity has a place in the popular mind in his own right. In fact, Dharma happens to be one of the more popular deities among the region of gods and godlings believed in and propitiated by the people of Goalpara, particularly in the western parts.

Now, from a study of the Dharma cult found in west Bengal and the Bengali Dharma-Managal literature, the view of the scholars seem to hold is that Dharma is the sun-god of aboriginal Austric and Dravidian tribes, later adapted in line with other gods of the Hindu pantheon. In some places he has been identified with Siva and in others with Vishnu. He is also believed to have had crypto-Buddhistic associations.¹

In Goalpara, many people directly worship Dharma as the representation of the sun; for them Dharma worship is nothing but sun worship which brings the blessing of offsprings to those who perform it. People afflicted with eye diseases are also believed to be cured by worshipping Dharma.

The puja takes place early in the morning in the courtyard, the worshipper facing east. There is no image, but a ghat (vessel) full of water takes its place. A priest may or may not be employed.


There are many others who do not hold any formal puja of Dharma but who equally believe in the power of Dharma as a giver of offsprings. People desiring to be blessed with children take make a mental promise before Dharma and when the desired result is obtained, white pigeons are set free in the name of the deity; white he-goats are also often similarly let loose.

People belonging to the Nath community have special faith in Dharma as a kindly household deity. They set apart offerings meant for him whenever there is an illness in the house. White pigeons are let free when the recovery takes place.

Though there is no separate Dharma literature in Goalpara comparable to the Dharma-Mangal literature of Bengal, Dharma is present in an important way in a number of myths connected with some other popular deities. The presence of Dharma in the three Assamese Manasā Kavyas has already been referred to. But what is significant for our purpose is the fact that of the three Manasa poets at least one, Manakar is believed to have belonged to the Goalpara area. Again, according to the ballad of Sonaray, the tiger-deity is the son of Dharma. Dharma is also one of the foremost gods to receive attention whenever there is an occasion for paying respects to various gods in a number of folk-songs.

1. Bharat Chandra Das : Asamiya Sahityar Puranjit— Manasa Sakha, pp.16-17. This belief is strengthened by the expression dhekeriyar nati (grandson of Dhekeriyā) in that part of Manakar's work in which he introduces himself. Dhekeriyā has been interpreted as 'inhabitant of Dhekkari. — See B.K. Barua and S. N. Sarma (Ed) ; Manasā-Kavya, Introduction, p 15. And Dhekkari or Dhekur, as we have pointed out in Chap I, is believed to have included the present Goalpara district. It may further be pointed out that both Kamrup and Dhekur are mentioned in Dharma-Mangal literature. The identity of Dhekur is, however, disputed. Significantly again, there is a close resemblance between the creation stories found in Rāmāi Pandit's Sunya Purāṇa and Manakar's Manasa-Kavya, of which the latter is believed to be the earlier work.
Dharma or Dhorom Thakur, as he is known in North Bengal, is worshipped by the Rajbansis of the districts of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar in the following manner:

'It is the puja of Sun God and according to some, the puja of Siva. It is celebrated in the month of Baisakh. It is the puja performed by women. They do not eat fish, meat or egg in the month of Baisakh and do not take any food on the day of celebration until it is finished. Throughout the month of Baisakh the women bathe every morning before the sun rises. This is called Uchron ( ... ). The puja is performed on a Sunday, as it is considered to be the day of the sun (probably from its name). The votaries must also remain without food on the previous day. The priest is a Deodha or Deödha ... or an Odhikary or a Kamrupi brahman.'

Some relevant information about Dharma and his worship in Rangpur is to be found in the District Gazetteer, 1911: 'The worship of Dharma holds a prominent place in the religious observances of the people. Dharma is the omnipresent and omniscient god of justice and the sun is regarded as his emblem. Sunday is a special day of fasting and is known as God's day (Deobar):'

Although the custom of regarding Sunday as a special day of fasting is not observed in Goalpara, Sunday is called deobar in many

See Dr S. N. Sarma: 'Sunya Puran Āru Manakar' in Assam Sahitya Sabha Patrika, Year 17 No.2.
1. C. C. Sanyal: The Rajbansis of North Bengal, p.139.
interior villages. It is interesting to note that deobar is the popular term for Sunday in most parts of Assam.

Scholars have found that even Charak Puja which in its present form is a Saivite institution was originally an institution of the Dharma cult and the revolving swing of Charak represents the sun's movement in the sky. That Charak Puja is performed by many local people in Goalpara can be taken as a further point indicating the connection of Dharma with this region.

V. Kati

A most popular folk-god venerated and worshipped almost exclusively by the womenfolk of the district is Kati, also called Kati-ka or Katikai. According to the popular myth he is the son of Siva and Chandi, is mounted on a peacock (which in turn is sometimes mounted on an elephant), and carries bows and arrows. All this clearly indicates his connection with the puranic god Karttikeya, or Karttika as he is more popularly known in these parts. The names Kati, Kâtika and Kâtiikâi themselves suggest that they are derived from Karttika and Karttikēya, thus confirming their association with the god with those names. But whatever the outward resemblance of Kati with

1. Karttikeya: 'The god of war and planet Mars, also called Skanda. He is said in the Mahâbhârata and Râmâyana to be the son of Siva or Rudra, and to have been produced without the intervention of a woman. Siva cast his seed into the fire, and it was afterward received by the Ganges: Kartttikeya was the result; hence he is called, Agni-bhū and Gângâ-ja. He was fostered by the Pleiades (Krittika), and hence he has six heads and the name Kartttikeya. His paternity is sometimes assigned to Agni (fire), Gângâ (the Ganges) and Pârvati are variously represented to be his mother. ... He is represented riding on a peacock called Paravani, holding a bow in one hand and an arrow in the other.' — See Dowson: Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology, p.152.
Karttikeya, the folk-god of Goalpara is not the god of war and the planet Mars as conceived in Aryan Hindu mythology. He is rather the god of fertility and human fecundity. He is the giver of sons and crops. As a Kati Puja song says —

'We have got a son in our lap
by the blessing of god Kāti
The crop has come to our home
by the blessing of god Kāti'

In the western parts of the district Kati is worshipped particularly by couples desiring male offspring. In the North-Eastern parts, however, Kātikāi is worshipped by unmarried girls desiring good husbands besides women desiring children. There are no Kati shrines and the god is also not represented in any community shrine.

The actual puja is almost an all-woman affair in which the participation of men is prohibited. Only the drummer (dhākuṭā) and the priest, when there is one, are exempted from the bar. Often the puja is performed by folk rites by the women themselves. But when a priest is employed, he performs certain shastric rites merely as a formality meant to give dignity to the performance.

The vital parts of the puja consists of rites and rituals performed by the women in conformity with traditional customs. Singing, dancing and also mimetic representation of the process of child birth and also farming form the most important of these rites.

Much of the singing dancing and acting is marked by expressions and gestures with sexual overtones which is considered essential for the propitiation of the god.

The last day of the month of Kāti (October-November) is customarily regarded as the most auspicious day for Kati Puja. But the puja can be held on any other day in the following month Aghan, when it is called Na ślā Kāti (late Kāti). The image is generally made of pith. Normally the god is mounted on a peacock with a bow in one hand and an arrow in the other. But when the image is made with a special grand plan, the god is shown as mounting on an elephant—peacock and all. It is then called Hāti-Kāti or Hātir Uprā Kāti (Kāti on elephant). Sometimes a pair of images are installed together and it is then called Jor-Kāti (twin Kāti). The image is placed on a raised platform specially prepared in the customary manner with four banana plants placed on the four corners and an earthen vessel filled with water placed at the foot of each plant. Bunches of āthiyā and momā bananas and artificial pith flowers are hung from strings tied to the plants. On each vessel is placed a small bow. A branch of the mainā (an acid fruit) tree is planted behind the image and a sheaf of rice plants is placed in front of it. There are also other paraphernalia including earthen lamps, incense and eatables placed before the god. The puja itself is accomplished by doing abeisance to the god, with or without the assistance of a priest, with some gestures and movements made to the accompaniment of the beating of the drum.

1. Uddhab Pathak: 'Goālpāriyā Samskritit Kārtik Puja' in Dainik Assam, December 1, 1968. According to the myth current in this area the marriage of Kātikālī with a bride name Ushā Bāli was fixed. But due to a shocking experience received through his mother he cancels the marriage and remains a life-long bachelor.
But after this come the rituals of singing, dancing and mimetic acting without which a Kati Puja is never thought to be complete. The first part of these rituals is known a Kati-sijian (the birth of Kati) which describes the marriage of Siva with Chandi, the consummation of the marriage, the conception, the birth of Kati and the birth-rites. Another part is Kati-ghāma and this part consists of open erotic expressions. The rituals end with āgnewā, strictly the ceremonial reaping of the corn, but in which the whole process of farming from ploughing to harvesting is enacted. It is interesting to note that the worship of Kati in this particular manner is confined to Goalpara and some parts of North Bengal.¹ Except in South India where the cult of Skanda or Murugan is extremely strong—"no deity in the Tamil country claims so many votaries as Murugan"²—the worship of Karttiaka or Karttikeya is not so popular in any other part of India. Murugan of the Tamil country is associated with serpents and hilly regions. 'He was believed to induce violent passions of love in the minds of girls, and was propitiated by magic rites.'³ Singing and dancing seem to have formed an important part of these rites and in the numerous festivals in his honour, 'women danced to the accompaniment of the flute, harp and drum.'⁴

1. Some form of Kartik Puja is known to be observed in East Bengal also.


3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.
Some interesting points of similarity, close or remote, can be observed between the Murugan cult of South India and Kāti Puja of Goalpara.

(1) Like Murugan, Kāti is also most probably an original tribal god elevated to the Hindu pantheon and identified with Karttikeya.

(2) Songs and dances are important rituals in the worship of Kāti as they used to be in that of Murugan in the past.

(3) Though both males and females take part in the worship of Murugan, women used to have some special association with the god, something which is true of Kāti Puja even today.

(4) Kāti is obviously a god of fertility, both human and vegetal, and is worshipped by women with rites which clearly represent magic of the homeopathic nature. Propitiation of Murugan with magic rites and his power of to induce violent passions of love in girls also point to his association with fertility.

(5) Murugan has the elephant as one of his vehicles. The image of Kāti also sometimes has the elephant as a mount.

VI Hudum Deo

Another god of obscure origin, who is worshipped exclusively by women with esoteric rites is the rain god Hudum Deo. Although the participation of men in Kāti Puja proceedings, except for the drummer and the priest, is prohibited, the puja itself is held in the home.

1. Ibid.
with due publicity and is an occasion for general merriment for the women who join in the proceedings. It is not only held with the knowledge and approval of the men-folk but also with behind-the-scene help and cooperation from them. In contrast, the Hudum Deo puja is held in an atmosphere of the strictest secrecy, at the dead of night and at some secluded place away from human habitation. There are no priests and no drummers; in fact, the presence of a male anywhere in the vicinity is strictly guarded against. And the accompanying rituals of songs and dances are marked by such a degree of obscenity by the commonly accepted standards of decency that not only are they not performed in public but the very mention of the puja in a mixed company of men and women is enough to cause embarrassment.

Hudum Deo Puja is a puja only in name; it is in essence an elaborate magical rain charm. There is no fixed day for the puja; it takes place on any day agreed upon by the intending women whenever there is a continued dry spell at that time of the year when the rains are expected but are delayed. There is a common belief that rains come down if the puja is performed.

The performance takes place most frequently in the month of Choit (March-April) when drought conditions generally prevail, or even later in the midst of the rainy season if the rains fail, and there is a threat to the crops. On the appointed date, a group of women under the guidance of an elderly lady gets ready for the puja. As already mentioned the puja takes place late at night by the side of a river or a pond or even in the middle of a lonely field in which case some water is carried to the spot, as water has an important place in the rituals. The materials which the women carry to
the puja spot consist of a banana plant, a vessel filled with water, crops of different kinds (called bāro shash), dhup sticks, areca nuts and betel leaves (guā-pan). They also include such peculiar objects as the nest of a drongo, the bath-water of a woman who is the mother of one child, and strangely the hair of a prostitute. Some of the puja materials are sometimes collected by small girls going from house to house.

The spot is properly cleaned and a pit is dug in the middle of it, in which is placed the bath-water, the drongo nest and the prostitute’s hair. After this the banana plant is erected by planting it in the pit. It is then supposed to represent Hudum Deo. The leader of the group then takes her bath. The water thus used is collected in a bamboo winnowing tray and with it the banana plant is doused. After this the water-filled vessel with the bāro shash and the guā-pan is placed before the plaintain tree and the dhup-sticks are lighted. The formality of the puja is then over.1

Then begins the weird ritualistic singing and dancing. The women strip themselves naked, untie their hair and under the direction of the leader they sing and dance and work themselves up to a frenzy in front of the god. They entreat him, they cajole him and even nag him with the songs and gestures, which have obvious sexual implication, in an endeavour to excite and provoke him into coming down and mating with them.

The magical element of the rituals is too prominent to be lost sight of. Crooke has recorded a number of practices connected

with female nudity meant for inducing rain.

An exactly similar ceremony found in the adjoining districts of Jalpaiguri where it is called Hudum or Huduma and Cooch Behar where it is called Hutum. C. C. Sanyal gives the following description of Hudum Deo puja:

'It is a special puja. When there is protracted drought, the women of the village each with a sharp knife in hand, as a protection against "bhuts", go in dark night, into a distant paddy field. They make a small image of the rain-god with banana leaf stalk and install him on the field. In some places, a banana tree is planted. Then the women strip off their clothes, untie the hair of the head allowing the hair to hang freely on the back. Thus completely nude they dance and sing (mostly obscene songs) abusing the rain-god. The women kneel on the ground like cows and draw a plough to scratch a few feet of the land. Into the furrow thus formed they spread some paddy seeds or plant a few paddy seedlings. They then put on their clothes, tie the hair and come back. It is the general belief that rain invariably falls shortly after this puja is done. No men are allowed to go near the dancing place. If somebody ventures no one will abuse the women if they attack the man with "daos" they possess or even kill him.'

Nobody—not even those who perform the puja—has any definite idea about who Hudum Deo is and how the godling came by his name. For the women performing the ceremony, the rituals are more important than the identity of the god.

1. C. C. Sanyal: The Rajbansis of North Bengal, p.144.
Hudu or hudum in the local dialect means the eared owl, but neither the nature of the god nor that of the rites suggests any connection of the ceremony with the bird. Many people want to identify him with Varuna, others with Indra, because of his association with rain and thunder. But there is little in the rituals to justify such an identification. In all probability he is a god connected with some primitive fertility cult that was once strong in these parts. The secretiveness surrounding the 'puja' suggests that the fertility rites associated with it somehow went underground, most probably with the advent of the more refined standards of Aryan culture in the region.

Although it cannot be asserted with any degree of certainty, there are a few things connected with Hudum Puja which may be said to point, however indirectly, to its having some relation with the sun cult as manifested in Dharma Puja.¹ The following likenesses between a few of the outstanding features of Dharma Puja and some rites of Hudum Puja seem to be significant:

(1) As in case of Dharma, Hudum is worshipped with the prayer for rains in times of drought.

(2) Ceremonial bathing and sprinkling of water form an important part of the rituals in both the pujas.

(3) Singing and dancing which form the core of the rites in Hudum are also performed in connection with Dharma Puja.

¹ Dr Gurudas Bhattacharya is definitely of the view that sun worship has been transformed into Hudum Puja in Cooch Behar. — See Bāngle Kāvye Siva, p.76.
Though female nudity is generally not associated with Dharma Puja as it is with Hudum Puja, in some areas of Bankura and Burdwan, there is a ceremony in which the women worship Dharma Thakur and other gods at night in a field and water is sprayed on a girl lying naked on the field.

Some scholars believe that the term Dharma might be a derivation from Dom, the chief tribe associated with his worship. (Dom > Dom-rāi > Dāmā > Dharma). Curiously, the term Hudum also has a sound that is very close to Dom.

VII Sonāray

Sonāray is also a very interesting godling widely popular in large areas of west Goalpara. His worship is particularly associated with boys and young men. Sonāray is usually described as a tiger deity but it will be more appropriate to call him the god of ferocious wild animals like the tiger and the bear. Shrines dedicated to Sonāray are not found and it is only occasionally that he has a place assigned to him in a community shrine. Sonāray Thākur, as the god is generally referred to, does not seem to evoke much dread or

1. B. K. Kakati : *Visnuite Myths and Legends*, pp.119-120.

2. '... On the particular night the entire women-folk of the village irrespective of caste or creed, go to the field headed by an elderly Brahmin woman ... In the field they worship Suryya, Indra, Sashi, Baruna, Pavana along with Dharma Thakur, Bankura Ray, Vasudeva and Lakshmi by drawing pictures on banana leaves with the help of vermilion ... An immature married girl, whom they call 'virgin widow', lies on the field naked and two others spray water on her thrice with the help of a "siuni".'—See P.K. Bhattacharya: 'Some Rain ceremonies of West Bengal' in *Folklore*, Vol.III, No.11.

3. Ajoy K. Chakrabarty: Sonārayer Gan. The booklet reproduces the ballad of Sonāray as found in west Goalpara. The editor has added a very informative Introduction.

reverence and Sonaray puja as it is performed today, is more an occasion of fun and merrymaking than of holy rituals. Practically Sonaray puja is more or less an adjunct to the festivities of Puṣṭar, the important winter festival of feasts and fire-rites. In fact, the advent of Puṣṭar is heralded by the parties singing Sonāray songs making their rounds from house to house.

Throughout the month of Puṣṭ (November-December) groups of boys and youngmen move from house to house collecting alms which they euphemistically call dokkhina (dakshina). Some have in their hands small sticks of branches of the modhuā plant (modhuār kāṭhi) which they place across their shoulders. From the farther ends of the sticks hang flowers, sometimes real and sometimes artificial, suspended with jute fibres. These sticks are called dars (Skt. danda), and they are considered essential for the ceremony. A few of them carry drums and cymbals to accompany the singing. Sometimes one or two of the boys make themselves up as bears or monkeys and dance with the music much to the enjoyment of the inmates of the houses they visit. Most of the songs they sing are popular rhymes traditionally recited in the course of the alms-collecting rounds. However, the purpose of the most relevant rhymes is to exhort the householders to give handsome contributions for Sonāray in return for which the god will bless the donors with offsprings, cattle, wealth and general prosperity, and also to remind them that refusal to give anything will bring upon them calamities like blindness apart from the misfortune of their cattle being devoured by tigers.

Provisions are thus collected throughout the month of Push and on the Puṣṭna day, which falls on the last day of the month, the
boys go to the river bank or some other suitable spot where the dars are planted and are supposed to represent Sonāray Thākur. The boys perform puja with some informal rites. There are no priests or mantras. The main part of the ceremony is a feast prepared with the materials collected earlier in the month.

This feast is known as rākhal bhog (feast of the cowherds). Incidentally, cowherd boys are listed among the chief votaries of Sonāray and the purpose of worshipping him (and also giving contributions for the worship) is to propitiate him so as to ensure the safety of the cattle which are normally the charge of the cowherd boys.

God Sonāray is anthropomorphic and not zoömorphic. As we have already seen, images of Sonaray are rarely made and the few pith images that are found shows him in human form riding an animal that could be a tiger. The anthropomorphic nature of Sonaray is of course clear from the story of his birth and deeds as found in the ballad-like song of Sonāray. In some areas another name, Rupāray, is heard of along with that of Sonāray but very little is known about him, and the independent worship of Rupāray is not known.

The identity of Sonāray is rather obscure. From what has been said above about the human form of the god, it is apparent that he is not a totemic symbol. Again, from the stories of this exploits, particularly of his victory over a strong Mughal army chief, it would appear that Sonāray was a legendary figure who was later elevated to

1. For the story itself, see chapter VII, Sec. IV.
It is tempting to compare this practice of worshipping a tiger-deity in the neighbouring areas. In many parts of North Bengal (and Murshidabad of central Bengal) a tiger deity, Sonārāy, is worshipped much in the same manner as in Goalpara. A similar ballad of Sonārāy is also current there. The Muslims of these areas regard him as a pir and as the brother of another pir known as Mānik Pir.

In East Bengal again there is the zoomorphic tiger-god Bāghāi who is worshipped with rites, many of which are similar to those of Sonaray Puja. Another unnamed tiger-god is also worshipped in some areas.²

But the tiger cult is most well-developed in South Bengal, especially in the Sunderbans area, where the anthropomorphic tiger-god Dakhin Ray is one of the most popular and powerful deities, particularly with the people of the lower castes. The puja of Dakhin Ray, often performed by a Brahman priest with shastric rites is a major religious ceremony of the area, in which thousands of people of all social strata participate.

A number of eminent scholars have given their opinions on the nature and identity of Dakhin Ray. Most of them are agreed on the point that he was originally a tiger-god of the aboriginal tribes of the area and was later adapted into the Brahmic pantheon through

---

1. Khan Chowdhury Amanatullah Ahmed is of the opinion that Sonārāy and Rupārāy were two religious reformers at the time of the beginning of Muslim rule or even before that. According to him Sonārāy was a devotee of Buddha in the form of Dharma.— See Koch Bihārer Itihās, Part I, p.60.

the usual process of Aryanisation.¹

We may note here the points of similarity and difference between Sonārāy, the tiger-god of Goalpara, and those found in Bengal.

1. It is clear that Sonārāy of North-Bengal is simply a variation of the Goalpara deity of the same name.

2. Sonārāy is anthropomorphic whereas Baghai and the unnamed tiger-god of East Bengal are zoomorphic. But there are close similarities between the rites of the pujas of Sonārāy and Baghai.

3. Dakhin Rāy is, of course, anthropomorphic like Sonārāy and he is represented in his images as a very handsome man carrying some weapon like a sword, bow and arrows, or even a gun. Sonārāy images are rare, and when found, they are in no way handsome.

4. Dakhin Rāy is worshipped with shastric rites including mantras, and the puja is often performed by Brahmans. But Sonārāy of Goalpara still remains essentially a folk-god and there has been no attempt to elevate him to the status of an Aryan Hindu god with Brahmanic sanction.

Perhaps it will be more rewarding to probe into some relevant material nearer home in our attempt to find out the identity of Sonārāy and the significance of the rites connected with his puja.

The practice of worshipping animal deities is found among the Bodos. While some Bodos have a tiger-god called Máusā Rājā or Bāgh Rājā, all Bodos worship two deities Sang Raja and Sang Rani.

husband and wife — who preside over wild animals. Offering of puja to them ensures plenty of game for the hunters and also the protection of the domestic animals from depredation by wild animals.¹

There is a Bodo myth according to which Brāi and Brui, the chief Bodo god and goddess, were once rescued by cowherd boys from a menacing tiger and had made a promise to them of offering puja to the tiger. This myth is represented in one of the dances performed by the deodhani in Kherāi Puja and is called the tiger dance (māusā gelenāi).

Moreover, there is also a Bodo custom according to which cowherd boys go to the household in which a cow has given birth to a calf, recite some verses and ask for alms. The contents of the rhymes are as follows: "We cowherds will keep a guard over the domestic animals so that the wild animals like the tiger cannot harm them. If you give us alms, your domestic animals will increase their numbers."¹

In the light of the above, it would not be too far-fetched to assume that Sonārāy Puja evolved out of the Bodo practices of worshipping animal-deities and the custom of collecting alms by cowherd boys for the protection and well-being of the cattle.

In this context it would be interesting to see if Sonārāy Puja has any connection with the Ori or Buri festival of eastern and southern parts of Goalpara and the Mohoho festival of Kamrup.

Although neither of these festivals is held in winter (the time for both is autumn) and neither is connected with a tiger-god or

¹. Ajoy Chakraborty: Sonārāyer Gān, see Introduction.
a god of animals, the following features of the festivals so clearly recall some of the Sonaray Juja features that the possibilities of some kind of link between them cannot be overlooked.

(1) The festivals primarily belong to cowherd boys.

(2) The boys go from house to house singing rhymes and collecting contributions with which they hold a feast. Some Mohoho rhymes expressly say that the feast is held on the day of Magh-Bihu, the winter festival, which is called Māghar Darāhī or Dahmi in Kamrup and Pushnā in west Goalpara.

(3) The boys carry sticks in their hands (with which, however, they strike on the ground).

(4) Some of the boys are made up as bears and they dance and caper to the amusement of the on-lookers.

(5) A few rhymes sung in these festivals tally with some sonaray rhymes of North and East Bengal.

(6) Many of the rhymes speak of wild animals and the preparations to kill them. Also, the word ori, euri, āuri and arane frequently occurring in the rhymes may have something to do with aranya, the wilderness, which is the abode of the wild animals and near which the cattle are taken for grazing.

However, the Kamrup festival is known as Mohoho or Mahkheda, the latter meaning the chasing of mosquitoes. Some people call it bhāl-bholkā recalling the Mahāla-bhullā festival of some parts of east

1. 'We shall drive away bhāl-bholkā all night long
   We shall collect money by asking for alms
   And with whatever we get
   We shall enjoy a feast in the Māghar Dahmi'

Bengal, which is meant for the ceremonial killing of harmful insects. It is quite possible that in this case two different ceremonies—one connected with wild animals and the other with harmful insects—got mixed up and resulted in the peculiar Mohoho and Ori festivals.

Thus it may be suggested that the Sonāray, Ori and Mohoho festivals are all of the same category in that they are all ceremonies of cowherd boys collecting contributions from householders in return for the promise to keep the domestic animals from being harmed by wild animals. While in Kamrup and (partly in east Goalpara) it has incorporated features of an insect-chasing ceremony, in west Goalpara and North Bengal, a tiger cult has grown around it.

VIII Some Minor Gods and Godlings

Nukā Thākur or Lukā Thākur (the hidden god): Some holy men come to beg in the name of this hidden god whose name is never mentioned. Those of the householders who understand the import of the begging mission give alms freely. To those who do not understand and refuse to give alms the holy men say nothing but take a thatch from a roof or even a straw from the compound and throw it in the field, which is supposed to bring ill-luck to the family.

Nukā Thākur is worshipped on the river bank with puffed rice (muri), sweet balls made with muri and molasses, and rice cooked in milk (pāyas). After the offering is made, the pot in which the pāyas is cooked is sunk in the river water.
Rākhāl Thākur literally means the cowherd-god and is especially associated with cowherd boys. He is practically a folk version of Krishna, the cowherd boy of Vrindavana. Milk is offered in his name over clumps of binna grass.

Rādhika Thākur is a forest deity. Those who go to the forest to fell trees or collect faggots worship him. Even picnickers and hunters offer guā-pān to him. Sometimes the godling is offered puja to get relief from the depredations of harmful pests and monkeys etc. Special services are then arranged. Sometimes hemp is given as an offering.

Bara Gopāli are also twelve godlings of the forest who are offered uncooked rice, milk and banana in twelve separate containers. (Twelve seems to be a mystic number. In some villages the people believe in other godlings and spirits who are referred to in association with that number, e.g. Bara Khetra, Bara Maya).

Gorakhnāth/Gornāth: Some mendicants come to beg in the name of Gorakhnāth (also called Gornāth by some) carrying an image of a human figure in meditation, with a cow and a calf nearby. Nobody seems to know exactly who Gorakhnāth is. At least just now he does not seem to have anything to do with the famous yogin of the Nath cult but is simply a deity connected with the welfare of the cattle. The mendicants who come to beg (called kāwālis) wear saffron turbans and carry bags in which they take the alms, generally given in paddy, as they come after the winter harvest. They ring small bells and sing songs near the cowshed.

If a cow is ill or a calf is lost promises of offering puja to Gorakhnāth are made. If the cow recovers or the lost calf is found,
pāyas is prepared in the cowshed in an earthen pot, some of which is offered to the god on a banana leaf. The rest is distributed among the children and the empty pot is hung from the rafters of the cowshed.

**Bura Thākur**: This is another godling particularly associated with the welfare of cattle, especially young calves. Offerings are made to Bura Thākur after the birth of a calf. When the calf is thirteen days old, the cow is given a bath and milked. The milk is kept in a container till the calf is twenty three days old. On the twenty-fourth day, the curds formed out of the milk is put in five banana-bark containers and placed at the foot of the sacred basil tree along with flattened rice, sugar, molasses, etc. in the form of a naivedya. In some areas there are no elaborate rituals, simply the milk obtained for the first time after the birth of the calf is offered to the godling.

**IX Some Peculiar Pujas**

**Subachani Puja**: Subachani Puja is held in different parts of the district. In the western parts, this is popularly called guā shoja or the offering of areca nuts. This is more of a ritualistic ceremony than a regular puja in the orthodox manner. It is performed by the women-folk before a big auspicious ceremony like a marriage is to take place in the family; or before the head of the family leaves on an auspicious mission, praying for the success of the ceremony or of the mission.

The ceremony is held outside the house in the courtyard in the morning. All the married women of the village, with their husbands
living, are invited. A young unmarried girl takes the leading part in the rituals for which the articles needed are areca nuts and betel leaves (guā-pān), vermillion and mustard oil. The girl takes her bath and places the guā-pān on one banana leaf and the other articles on another. Incense is burnt. The women make the ulu sound. The girl goes inside a house specially cleaned and mopped for the purpose and bolts herself in. When she comes out, water is sprinkled on her. The women then put the vermillion on their foreheads and partake of the guā-pān. Portions are also sent to those who were unable to attend. The story of the miraculous powers of goddess Subachani is then recited by a woman expert in the lore (kāthāti) and it is customary for all others to listen to it.

In Salkocha area a miniature pond is dug in the courtyard and is filled with milk. In the Krishnai area, the local name of the goddess is Subhāsini and the puja is performed especially when there is a pregnancy in the house, and in general, to ward off evil. When the ceremony is arranged on a big scale, a goat or a sheep may be sacrificed and a feast held with the flesh.

Mangal-Chandi Puja: This puja is generally held on a day following the one on which Dharma puja has been held. The rites are more or less similar to those of the Subachani Puja and are performed by women themselves without the help of a Brahman priest.

The main part is taken by four women—two widows and two with their husbands living. They must eat a vegetarian diet on the previous day and fast on the puja day. The only articles needed are ripe bananas and unboiled rice. This puja is also held in the courtyard all over which bananas and rice are placed.
Shitila/Shitli and Mao-Thakurani Puja: Shitila or Shitli is the pox-goddess (Shitala) and she is also called Thakurani or Mao-Thakurani (Mother goddess) or simply Ai (mother). But in the western regions, especially among the Rajbansis, Shitli and Mao Thakurani are two different goddesses, the former associated with small-pox and the latter with other diseases like cholera and diseases of the cattle.

In the eastern regions, when some body has small pox, chicken pox, measles or some other skin rashes. All these are supposed to be caused by the visitation of the goddess who is believed to have seven or nine sisters. Special services in dedication to the goddess are held. The patient's room is kept scrupulously clean and anything considered unclean is not allowed into it. When the disease is at its severest, it is said that the mother has taken possession (Thakurani bhar hoise). No medicines are given: only charmed water, dust or sugar is administered. A puja is offered in the family gosai ghar/gahe ghar.

When the cattle have the disease, the worship is held in the cowshed.

More or less similar rites are gone through in Shitli puja in the western regions also.

In Mao-Thakurani puja of the western region, two boali fish, with vermilion applied on their heads, are offered to the goddess. Bhog is also offered.

A special ceremony connected with Shitli puja, and sometimes with Mao Thakurani puja, in the western regions is bhela bhasa (floating...
of the rafter). After a *baru puja* given in the *dhām*, the offerings placed before *Shitli* (or *Māc-Thākurāni*) are placed in a house-like structure on a rafter made of banana trunks. Four flags are posted on four corners of the rafter. Lighted lamps are placed on it. Sometimes either a goat or a pair of pigeons are also mounted on the rafter. The rafter is then lowered into the water of a river and allowed to drift amidst the beating of drums.

This is clearly an example of public expulsion of evil, the diseases being supposed to be carried away along with the drifting rafter.

**Buri (Kāl-Mātri-Māo) Puja:** This is a ceremony, more commonly performed by the Rajbansis, which is meant for the protection of young girls from the influence of *dāinis* and for keeping their hair free from matting. The ceremony is performed when the girls are between 18 months and three years of age. The rites are performed by elderly widows at some distance from the homestead, generally under a jujube tree. A bundle of uncooked rice and *āthiyā* bananas is hung from a branch of the jujube tree. On a banana leaf, a miniature replicas of a spinning wheel (*charkā*), a spindle (*tākuā*) and a boat (*dingā*)—all made of pith—are placed on the front portion of banana leaf. On another banana leaf powdered rice, milk, molasses, sugar, *monuā* banana etc. are placed as offerings. Tobacco leaf, split areca nuts and betel leaves (*kāṭā guā*) and often a chillum of tobacco are also offered.

There is no priest but a barber is engaged to shave the hair of the girl. He holds a pair of pigeon over the girls head and moves them around above her head before starting to shave. After the shaving the ceremony is over.

This is also known in some areas as *jhāpur namāwa* (burying of hair-matting).
DEITIES AND THEIR ABODES.

A clay image of Kāli

A typical bamboo-and-match structure housing a local shrine.

A Kāli pāt (shrine) with a tin-roofed structure.

The bālū pāt in the courtyard.
The bamboo on the left is Mahādeva bās.

The general view of a community shrine (dāsajātī dham).
The chetal ghar of the shrine with the deori in front.