CHAPTER : 4

RELIGION AND BELIEF SYSTEM

4.1. Religious and Ritual Belief System of the Koches:

All the communities had their traditional religious rites and rituals but some of these communities have preserved very little of their traditional rites and among the others are found mixture of traditional and Hindu religious rites in different proportions, the proportion of traditional religious rites varying in inverse proportion to the amount of adoption of Hindu rites. The religious practices of the Koches are described below:

(i) Deities responsible for the general well being and which are generally worshiped by individual households, but that is also regarded as an occasion for village community in general. Deities coming under this category are Kali, Kamakhya and Shiva.

(ii) Lesser supernatural beings capable of doing harm
to individuals only. These supernatural beings are not propitiated collectively.

(iii) Clan deities whose action is limited to members of particular clans only.

Among the Koch in general we find a general decay of the last two categories and prominence of the deities of the first category. This is bringing them nearer to Hinduism, because all the deities of the first category are adaptations from Hindu pantheon. There is no priestly caste or professional priest among the Koches. Even for the worship of deities adopted from Hindu Pantheon, the services of the Brahmin priest are not utilized. However, for the worship of some minor Hindu deities and also for ceremonies connected with death, the services of the Brahmin priest are different for different deities. However, for the associated deities is known as deosi. Every deosi has an assistant, who is known as thengdhora deos.

It is clear that some aspects of traditional Hinduism have taken roots in the religious beliefs of the Koches. The most striking aspect of traditional Hinduism which has intruded into
Koch religious beliefs in their taboo of pork, fowl meat and rice. Deer on certain occasion ceremonial uncleanliness is also another aspect of Hinduism which has been adopted. The professional Brahmin priest has also appeared in the scenario though he has yet to dominate the decay of lesser spirits and almost complete decay of old deities. However, the aspects of their old religion to which the Koches still cling show that they are only halfway in the adoption of traditional Hinduism.
4.2. The Koches and their Traditional Religion:

Koch tribes living in and around North-East India are believed to be a faction of a group of great Mongoloid family. This group again classified or sectioned in some sub-caste recorded or known as Chapra, Wanang, Harigya, Tintekiya, and Satparia Koch. Out of these sub-castes, Koches are again in many Nikini (clan). These are Dawa, Dusa, Dasa, Dakhin, Kama, Hari, Maji, Lamok, Nala, Khagra, Simchang, Hasum, Hasam and Langsa etc. Koches are generally theist of pluralist deities. They worship of the nature with profound devotion by offering oblation and sacrifices animals and birds. Their deities are known as wai (God or Goddess) according to their Koch dialect.

We have no precise knowledge about the religion of the Koches of the past except to make vague conjecture about it. Buchanan writes that the Koches worship the sun, the moon, wood, one Rsi and his consort Jaga¹. Pramath Gupta equated

¹ Martin, *Eastern India*, vol. IV, 1976, p. 542
the Rsi with Siva-Durga or Har-Parvati. They also worship Kamakhya. The Koches are also said to have been known as Kiratas. Kakati supposes that the Kiratas were Saivite because, because according to the Kalika Purana (39/28), they were expelled to the eastern sea only with the permission of Sambhu. Folk songs of North-East India both in Assamese and Bengali bear many references to Siva's attachment to the Koch woman. In the Manasa Mangala (in its Assamese and Bengali versions) also we find such allusions depicting Siva's relationship with Koch woman. According to N. N. Basu the Koches were the votaries and the sole priests in Siva worship. P. C. Choudhury notes that the Koches were Saivaties because traces of Saivism are found in them.

All these in our humble opinion indicate that the Koches were Siva worshipers, might be in its crude tribal form. That

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2 Gupta, Pramath; Mukti Yuddhe Adibasi, 1964, p. 15
8 Basu, N. N., Social History of Kamrupa, 1922, Vol. I, p. 190
9 Choudhury, P. C., The History of Civilization of the People of Assam (HCPA), 1960, p. 416
Siva was a non-Aryan tribal god is also admitted by the scholars. Lord Siva's worship was perhaps created on according to the tribal manners. We find its echo in the 18th century *Darang-Raj-Vansvali* where in worship of Siva was ordered to be carried on according to the tribal ritual on the north side of the Gohain Kamala and *Yogini Tantra*, among others, the buffaloes, tortoise, wild pigs, etc\(^{11}\) as items of feast during *sraddha* ceremony.

In the *Kalika Purana* it is said that the kingdom (Pragyotisha) was preserved by Sambhu for his own domain. This clearly shows that the religion of early Kamrupa was Saivism. This is strengthened by epigraphic proof. In eight out of the twelve copperplate charters discovered so far ranging from 7th century A.D. to 12th century A.D. Siva received salutation. In spite of the influence of Vainavism from early period\(^{12}\) and of the *Bhakti* cult from 16th century onwards in Assam and Bengal, the followers of Siva are still large in number and its worship found everywhere. According to the

\(^{11}\) Anderson, J. D., *Introduction to the Kacharis*, 1975, Vol. XVIII

\(^{12}\) Choudhury, P. C., Ibid, p. 409
Kalika Purana, while there are only 5 places sacred to Devi and 5 others to Vishnu, as many as 15 places are sacred to Siva\textsuperscript{13}.

According to a popular legend, Siva worship was introduced in eastern India by one Jalpesa, which is also a name of Siva, with his temple situated at Jalpaiguri, and is said to be from time immemorial in charge of the Koch family; it was they alone who were recognized as his sole priests and votaries\textsuperscript{14}. The \textit{Kalikapurana} connects the votaries of Jalpesa (the Koches) with the \textit{Ksatriyas} persecuted by \textit{Parusurama} (K. P. 7731-33). Perhaps we can extricate the grain of truth of Koch connection with \textit{Jalpesvar Siva} discarding \textit{Parusurama} story and hold that Jalpesa or Siva worship in North Bengal was the absolute business of the Koches\textsuperscript{15}.

The indication of the \textit{Kalikapurana} as stated above and Basu's conjecture seems to have been well supported by the erudite opinion of Bhattacharjee, who, while discussing the history of Bengali's \textit{Mangal Kavya} found that 'prior to the spread of the Aryan civilization (in Bengal) there lived the

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Basu, N. N., \textit{Social History of Kamrupa}, 1922, Vol. I, p. 60
\textsuperscript{15} Koch, S.N., ibid.
Koches in North Bengal.....among them existed a kind of god akin to the god (of fertility). .....It is believed that the popular Saivism was first rooted among the Koch cultivators of North Bengal; because many old Bengali literatures depict Siva's amorous attachment to the Koch woman. It can therefore be presumed that the mythological Siva had his first entry among the Koch cultivator society. And it was here, where Siva developed his popular character out of the Koch elements which was in course of time spread everywhere in Bengal\textsuperscript{16}. If Saivism had spread in the four corners of Bengal from the Koch society, it is believable that in Assam and in other parts of Northeast India, it was the Koches who gave the Siva cult to its inhabitants. This conjecture finds its corroboration from J. D. Anderson who believes that 'the Siva or Sakta of Hinduism' in Assam is 'due to an engrafting of Koch superstitions- on the religious ideas' of Aryans\textsuperscript{17}. These show that Saivism now we find is the refined version of the Koch superstitions current among the Koches in the dim past\textsuperscript{18}.

\textsuperscript{16} Bhattacharjee, A., \textit{Banglar Mangal Kavyer itihas}, 1960, p. 67

\textsuperscript{17} Anderson, J. D., \textit{Introduction to the Kacharis}, 1975, Vol. XVIII

\textsuperscript{18} Koch, S.N., ibid.
We have stated earlier that Siva was originally a non-Aryan god. It appears that the Aryans did not accept him as their god for a long time, the sensitive echo of which aversion or hostility we find in the *Padmapurana* as an injunction to the Aryan Brahmins. B. Kakati while referring to Chapter 80/55-56 of the *Kalikapurana* which informs us that Jalpesa was worshiped secretly and kept him concealed, poses a question: Was the Siva worship tabooed? He also says that it was done under shade, becomes clear from the injunction of the *Padmapurana*. But in the long run, the Mongoloid Koches appear to have come out triumphant. We see in the post-*Padmapurana* era, the Aryans adopted Siva as one of their gods. Here we find a glorious chapter of the Mongoloid Koch-Aryan cultural synthesis.\(^{19}\)

From the facts that (i) the Aryans who could not see eye to eye with the Siva worship accepted Him as one of the Aryan gods, (ii) the inhabitants of the region who were termed as *Kirata* in the Sanskrit literatures were, according to the *Kalikapurana*, all Saivas, (iii) that all the kings right from 7th

\(^{19}\) Koch, S.N., ibid.
century A. D. to 16th century A. D. were the followers of Siva, prove beyond doubt that the Koches, made to fall upon the local people as well upon the Aryan immigrants their tremendous religious influence either by virtue of their numerical strength or political prowess. The Koch connection with Saivism may perhaps be best example by the fact that Viswa Singha the founder of the last Koch dynasty claims his descents from Lord Siva, although such claim has little historical basis20.

20 Koch, S.N., ibid.
4.3. Rituals Related to Folk Religion:

The worship of Hindu deities such as Kali, Durga, Saraswati are of very recent origin among the Koches. But Kamakhya Puja seems to be one of the oldest. They also worship Manasha (or Biswahari) called Walk Rabai. Lesser deity propitiations are done by the Deosis. But Nikini Puja and Rishi Puja are performed by the Ajeng. The Koch festivals are mainly the Katigasa (Kati Bihu in Assamese) and Pushna (Magh Bihu in Assamese), new rice taking etc. The Koches of Garo Hills do not seem to have worshiped Durga Puja earlier but the Dasami is observed with austerity. On that day Bhog is offered by the river side. Another worship practiced by the Koches is Ranthok Puja. It is similar to Lakshmi Puja in the Bengali people. This Puja is performed in a small hut. They also observe Ambubachi as Amatisua and for three days they do not perform any cultivation work or till as they believe that mother earth on menstruation during the period.

One of such ritual function is being performed during last ritual ceremony of a death person, is known as Kama-Mata.
Other is familiar as *Hoko*. On these occasion too, Man and women with their traditional customs dances, beating drums and fluits with merry making which lasted a week long.

Of the animals the Koches treat the dog as most unclean animal. If a dog enters into a Koch house the house is to be purified by mud and cow dung plastering. If it is detected that any family has violated this rule or has taken any eatables without purification of the house, they either to pay fine to the society or to face excommunication.

The Koches had their own *Guru* and the person who becomes Ajeng also acts as Guru. Usually eldest maternal uncle of the senior family of the clan becomes Ajeng and Guru of the clan. A list of last Ajeng is furnished in *Appendix - C*. But from some names of the Ajeng it appears that the *Gabis* i.e. in laws also held the office. According to the Koch custom in laws either son-in-law, father-in-law or daughter-in-law ordinarily are not be addressed by name and if some reasons, names is to be mentioned or he is to be meant, they suffix the word ‘Nok’ with his or name or kinship term such as ‘Ram Nok’, if name is
mentioned and 'Haw Nok' (father-in-law), 'Amai Nok' or 'Nai Nok' (mother-in-law), etc. if addressed by kinship term. In the list of the last Ajengs, it is seen the word Nok is there along with the names which means that they were not maternal uncles but in laws or Gabis.

The Bhakti movement swept greater Assam including present Meghalaya but does not seen to have affected the Koches. The Koches are rich in folklore and folk songs which depict their past life and culture. Among musical instruments, they use flute, clappers and drum. Now-a-days, both rice giving and marriage ceremonies are conducted by Hindu priest in many Koch houses. Previously each clan had its own sacred sources of water, chika. For the performance of death rites, the family member of the deceased would utilize the Chika of their own clan. At present, beliefs and practices related with the chika are going into oblivion.

The Koches as a whole draw a sharp line between the Hindus (with whom they affiliate themselves irrespective of the amount of Sanskritization) and non-Hindu groups like the
Christians and Non-Christian Garos and the Muslims, whom they consider as outside the social sphere. However, among different sections of the Koches a caste like hierarchy has emerged (Burling -1960) depending upon the degree of Sanskritization. The Wanangs have preserved most religious and social organizations while the Chapra have accepted a large number of Hindu elements, including utilizing the services of the Brahmin priests for all religious rites. The Chapra have lost their traditional social organization and they have somewhat merged in the Hindu caste structure, claiming the position of Ksatriyas. Between Wanang and Chapra, in other sections the amount of indication varies from section to section. Among the Koch sections there are very few inter marriages and if marriage takes place between a higher section and a lower section, the person of the lower section has to be adopted formerly in the higher section by a ceremonial feast.
4.4. The Koch Worship of Evil Spirits and Demi Gods:

The Koches are also accustomed to propitiating various evil spirits and Demi Gods. They believe that these spirits cause various diseases and do harm to the people. So, they worship them whenever they think it necessary to do so far pacifying the spirits. Now-a-days, the worship of this type of spirits is on the wane due to the influence of neighbouring high caste people. But the worship of these evil spirits was very widespread and popular even before 1960. The following spirits or Demi Gods are worshiped by the Koches and in some places the worship of these spirits is still in vogue21.

(i) Moila Wai (Deity) Worship:

The Koches believe that this spirit causes weakness in a pregnant woman leading to premature delivery or death of the baby in mother's womb or may lead to sudden death of the child at the age of 7/8 years. The Moila Deity is worshiped to appease its wrath. This spirit is worshiped in the side of a stream. Seven dolls (idols) are made with the help of seven jute

21 From field study, Informant: Sri Upendra Hari Koch.
sticks and they are worshipped by offering rice, banana and sweets. No animals are sacrificed in the process. After completion of the Puja, small pieces are cut from each of the seven jute sticks, make two amulets and tie them in the arms of the child and the mother.

(ii) Halepa Wai (Deity) Worship:

Halepa means Daini. This deity is worshipped in case of delayed delivery or if the new born baby becomes senseless or if the baby does not take mother's breast. To appease the deity, its Puja is performed at the middle of a road in the traditional way. A Pig or goat or sheep or hen or a tortoise is to be sacrificed in this worship. Boiled rice, curry a few chilies and ash are also need to be offered to appease the deity. This deity is termed as Mukrunadhapa wai by the Tintekiya Koches.

(iii) Gongso Wai (Deity) Worship:

The deity is supposed to cause continuous crying of small children. To pacify it, one cock and hen are sacrificed.
The meat of the sacrificed cock and hen is cooked and served to the children present in the worship.

(iv) Petni Wai (Deity) Worship:

The evil spirit also causes continuous crying of the aged male or female persons. Under its influence a person sometimes cries, sometimes laughs and feels itching sensation—just like mad man. The worship of this deity is performed with the desire to cure the ailing person and the worship is performed under a Sewra tree (Tree with small and rough leaves). A bamboo with twigs is erected on the ground on whose twigs old Jakoi and Khaloi (all fishing implements) are hanged and is worshipped. A hen is to be sacrificed in this worship.

(v) Kalpisacsh Wai (Deity) Worship:

This spirit is the cause of the occurrence of sudden senselessness of a person under illness. A doll of the deity is prepared with straw and dressed it with old clothes and then it is placed in the main road of the village. The front place of the
deity is decorated with rice powder. It is customary to offer boiled rice with curry. One black goat is sacrificed in the worship and the meat of the sacrificed goat is cooked without onion and chili.

(vi) **Talai Wai (Deity) Worship:**

This deity causes mental imbalance of a person under illness. Two dolls- one male and one female are prepared with straw and are placed and worshipped in the outskirt of the village in the side of a road under a *Sewra* tree (Tree with small and rough leaves). In front of the deity (dolls) oil lamp (*chaki*) is to be lighted on a lamp stand made of bamboo. Rice powder mixed with small pieces of *Loorie* leaves is used as offering to the deity. A hen is to be sacrificed in this worship.

(vii) **Hudum Worship:**

This spirit causes general debility and pain in various parts of the body. A Hen or a butterfly or a he-goat is to be sacrificed to appease the deity. During the time of draught, Hudum is also worshiped by the women for causing rain. No man is permitted to take part in this worship. Here, a small
banana plant is planted in the main village road and is worshipped. In some region, Haka is worshiped for causing rain.

(viii) Desphura Worship:

This deity is the cause of fever and vomiting. Hence, to get rid of such diseases, Desphura deity is worshiped.

(ix) Phul Wai (Deity) Worship:

It causes excessive vomiting to the babies. To pacify this deity a garland of flowers is to be immersed in a stem.

(x) Nikini Wai (Deity) Worship:

The matrilineal relations are called Nikini. For the well being of the Nikini's or clan relatives, this deity is to be worshiped by sacrificing a tortoise and in some cases with a he-goat.