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Conventional religious beliefs and practices of the Rajbansis of North Bengal: An overview

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Abstract

The Rajbansis are the major ethnic group of North Bengal. They worship natural power such as the goddess of rivers, goddess of forests etc. They also worship ghost e.g. 'bhuts', 'pettānīs' for their propitiation. The Rajbansi community effected and influenced by Brāhmanical traditions. As a result, they also follow and worship the Brāhmanical gods and goddesses such as Śivā, Nārāyana, Vishnu, Durgā, Kālī, Laxmi, Sarasvati, Manasā etc. Kirtana is the important practices of their religious life. In spite of that, they have some separate gods and goddesses as well as practices like Hudum deo, Bisohori, Gārām, Mecheni Khelā, Bās Khelā, Dharma Thākur, Māsān, Gorakhnāth, Sannyāsi, Tistā Buri, Bhāndāni and Dāngdhorī Māo etc. The Rajbansis display their devotion to these gods and goddesses for saving them from various evils. Now a days, they like more to follow the Bengali culture and western cultures.

Keywords: Rajbansis, worship, bhuts, devotion, Charak , Bengali culture

1. Introduction

There are various opinions regarding the area of Uttarbanga or North Bengal as it is called Greater Uttarbanga, Abibhakta Uttarbanga and Bibhakta Uttarbanga. In general, the northern region of the state of west Bengal is known as North Bengal, which constitutes with seven districts. These are Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar (newly created district), Darjeeling, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur and Malda. The region is separated by the river Ganges from the southern part of West Bengal which is generally referred to as South Bengal. It extends approximately from 24° 04' 20" N to 27° 01' 3" N latitudinal and from 87° 05' 9" E to 89° 05' 3" E longitudinally. The total area of the region is about 21859sq. Km (Karmakar, 2011; 1). The entire North Bengal is bounded by Bangladesh and Assam on the East, Sikkim, and Bhutan on the north, Nepal and Bihar on the west. It is also stated that at the time of un-divided India the North Bengal or un-partitioned Uttarbanga was big in area as Rajsahi, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Bagura, Maymansing and Pabna of present Bangladesh were considered as the part of North Bengal (Choudhury, 2011; 8).

The Rajbansis are the majority of the ethnic groups of North Bengal. Once they were animistic. Even now they worship various gods and goddesses such as the goddess of rivers, goddess of forests etc. They worship ghost e.g. 'bhuts', 'pettānīs' for their propitiation. They are essentially Śaivas but the impact of Śaktism, Vaisnavism, Buddhism, Tāntrism have produced a curious blend in their religious usages. Therefore they have started to worship Lord Śiva, Durgā, Kālī, Laxmi Nārāyana, Vishnu, the sacred basil plant and they take part in 'kirtans'. Nevertheless they have some separate gods and goddesses as well as practices. In this paper, the authors want to highlight their long-established religious beliefs and practices.

Hudum deo

It is stated that Hudum deo is the offspring of Devi Basumati (mother) and Devarāja Indra (father). Once Basumati was suddenly heavy with child by Devarāja Indra. Consequently she was hated by the other goddess. Then she walked road to road and gave birth to a child in the plantain trees. This newly born god is called as Hudum deo. He is also regarded as rain's god. When there is protracted drought, the Rajbansi women of the village go to a distant paddy field in a dark night. They make a small image of the rain's god with plantain leaf stalk and install him on the field. In some places plantain trees are planted. Then the women strip off their clothes, untie the hair of their heads allowing the hair to hang freely on the back. Thus completely nude they dance and sing (mostly obscene songs) abusing the rain's god. Two women knell on the ground like bullock 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 paddies' seedling. Then they put on their clothes, tie their hair, and come back. No men are allowed to go near the dancing place. It is the general belief that rain invariably falls shortly after this celebrate

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(Saha, 2012; 19-34).

Bisohori

Bisohori is the snake goddess. There are two causes for worshipping this deity. One cause is to get blessing from her to the new couple of the *Rajbansis*. Another cause is to get the good glance as of her for the sake of the all members of the family as well as the domestic animals. It means to save the people as well as domestic animals from her bite. Flatten rice, ripe plantain, milk are offered for worshipping this deity. There are two types of *Bisohori*. One is *Kāni-Bisohori*, which is more commonly worshipped. The other is *Gitāli Bisohori*. She is worshipped during a marriage ceremony. The image consists of *Beulāni (Behulā)*, *Bāla (Lacchindar)*, *Godā*, *Godāni*, Washer woman, *Siva*, *Fish*, *Snakes* etc (Roy, 1970; 80-83).

Gārām:

This is the most powerful village god among the *Rajbansi* society. It is a combination of many deities and goddess enshrined in a merge temple erected on the outskirts of a village, usually inside a bamboo grove. Formerly and even now in remote villages, there is no image of any deity or god, only a few earthen mounds represent the goddesses. Sometimes the figure of some goddesses are drawn on sheets of pith and suspended from the roof of the shrine or kept erect on the earth with jute stick props. The god *Gārām* combines with *Tistā Buri* (goddess of river), *Haribola (Vaisnava god)*, *Madar* (Islamic god adopted by the *Rajbansis*), *Sannyāsi (Siva-Śaiva god)*, *Satya peer* (Islamic god adopted by the *Rajbansis*), *Thānkāli*, *Hāowā Kāli* and *Bhadra Kāli (Sāktya deity)*. This deity is worshipped on all ceremonial occasions. It is the belief of the *Rajbansi* villagers that these goddesses can save them from any kind of evil eyes.

Mecheni Khelā

This celebration is started from the first day of *Bāisakh* (First month of Bengali Year) by the *Rajbansi* women. Although the term is used as *khelā* but it is essentially the worshipping of the *Tistā* River, called '*Tistā Buri*' or '*Mecheni*'. Dr. Charu Chandra Sanyal in his "The *Rajbansis* of North Bengal" indicates, "In the village Uttar Phulbari under Dhupguri, P.S. in the district of Jalpaiguri, *Duars*, there was a *Mech* settlement. Siva left Kailas and came there to live with the *Mech* woman. Hearing this, *Pārvati* and *Gangā* the two wives of Siva, disguised a *Mech* woman lived in the same village with Siva. Here *Kārtikeya* and *Ganesa* were born. *Tistā Buri* is said to be the emblem of the said *Pārvati* and *Gangā* and the worship is called '*Meceni Pujā*'. The word '*Pujā*' is sometimes expressed as '*Khelā*' when it is accompanied with dance and Music." (Sanyal, 1965; 137)

It is said that the devotion had its origin from the *Meches* who lived in the part of North Bengal before the '*Rajbansis*' had settled there. The river *Tistā* is held in high esteemed by the local people and is as sacred as *Gangā*. In the month of *Bāisakh* (First month of Bengali Year) when the snows of the hills melt and flow in to the river *Tistā*, the water becomes holy due to admixture with the water of the heavens. This is the times when the monsoon is about to burst and the preceding deity of *Tistā* must be propitiated to save the lands from disastrous flood.

Only women take part in this worship. On the first day of *Bāisakh* (April-May) the women take a bamboo basket, wrap it in red cloth, place it on the crossing of a road under an open umbrella and worship the '*Tistā Buri*' with flowers and

vermilion without any incantation. The basket is then taken to the house of the head of the party (*Māroāni*) and placed in the '*Bāstu Ghar*' or under the basil plant of the house. From the second day the women move from house to house in a party with the bamboo basket holding an umbrella over it. They sing, dance, and collect subscriptions. On the last day of '*Bāisākh*' month they retire to the side of a tank or river and perform the '*Tistā Buri pujā*' with the help of a priest. After the worship the flowers are thrown in to the water, the basket is washed and brought home for the next year. Some say that it is also the worship for preventing the attack of small pox and so the goddess is placed on the first day on the crossing of roads so that the evil spirit causing the disease may not entire the village.

Bās Khelā

In the month of '*Bāisakh*' (April-May) the *Rajbansi* men perform the '*Bās pujā*' or '*Bās Dzāgāo*' on the '*Madan Choturday* day'. This is called '*Madan Kāma pujā*'. A few pieces of bamboo poles are wrapped with coloured cloth and a '*chamor*' (yak's tail); it is tied at the top of each bamboo. Seven bamboos are taken. They are named as i) *Salsiri Maharaja*, ii) *Garam*, iii) *Sannyāsi*, iv) *Kāli*, v) *Tistā Buri*, vi) *Bisohori* and vii) *Mādār peer*. The worshiper is a *Rajbasi 'Deosi'* (priest). He carries an earthen pitcher containing some rice and flowers. The first day of this *pujā (Khelā)* is called '*Bās Dzāgāo day*'.

Some boys dress as girls and some boys take fancy dress sing and dance with music of drum and bell-metal song. When they arrive at the house of a villager they keep aside the bamboos on a piece of cloth and then begin their song and dance. They move from house to house and collect money, rice, and vegetables. In the afternoon they retire to a field and perform the worship of Kali. This is called '*Bosāni Pujā*'. Goats, even castrated goats, pigeons are sacrificed. The number varies according to the donations raised. Puffed rice (*muri*), sweet puffed paddy (*murki*), milks, bananas are distributed to all present. The worship is finished before the sun sets. It is for the welfare of the village as well as to pray for sons and prosperities of families. After worship the cloth covering the bamboos and the yak's tail are taken out and then the bamboo poles are thrown in to the water.

Dharma Thākur

It is the worship of the Sun god and according to some, the worship of Siva. It is also celebrated in the month of *Bāisakh*. It is the '*pujā*' performed by the women. They do not eat fish, meat, eggs in the month of '*Bāisakh*' and do not take any food on the day of celebration until it is finished. Throughout this month the women bath every morning before the sun rises. The adoration is performed on any sun day 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 sun day.

A goat preferably of white colour, is brought to the spot; some vermilion is smeared on its horns. It is then offered to *Dharam Thākur* and let off without killing. Ducks if offered are also similarly let off. Eggs, bananas are also offered.

Dharam Thākur is one of the gods of the '*Nāth*' sect. The reverence is nearly similar to that of the *Nāths*. This shows the influence of *Nāthism* on the *Rajbansis* of North Bengal.

Māsān

Māsān is a folk god of the *Rajbansis* of North Bengal. It is a male spirit and worshiped maximum number in the districts of Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Uttar Dinaspur and Dakhin

Dinajpur. It is the most dangerous and most dreaded of all spirits. Dr. Charu Chandra Sanyal in his “*The Rajbansis of North Bengal*” states that, “*Masan* is the offspring of the union of *Kali* (mother) and *Dharma* (father). Once, mother *Kali* went to bath in a river. She was alone. Suddenly god *Dharma* appeared. They had union and *Masan* was born (Sanyal; 162). On the other hand Dr. Girija Sankar Roy, states “*Masan* is the spirit of Lord *Śiva*” (Roy, 1970; 18 and Roy, 2012; 19-20). It is said that there are sixteen or eighteen types of *Māsāns*. They are *Bārika Māsān*, *Tisilā Māsān*, *Ghāter Māsān*, *Chutsiā Māsān*, *Colār Māsān*, *Bohitā Māsān*, *Kāl Māsān*, *Kuhuliā Māsān*, *Nānghā Māsān*, *Bisuā Māsān*, *Obuā Māsān*, *Suknā Māsān*, *Bhulā Māsān*, *Demsā Māsān*, *Ungiā Māsān*, *Narha Māsān*, *Jāluā Māsān*, *Porā Māsān* etc. The *Māsāns* attack to both male and female at any time of the day or night. The affected person begins to eat the burnt earth of the oven, burnt wood, and charcoal and gradually goes to death. To save the evil attack of the *Masan*, people worship this spirit with burnt earth, charcoal, fries, roasts, and an earthen lamp. They are kept on a plantain leaf. The image of *Māsān* is made with cork resembling a man riding a horse.

Gorakhnāth

This adulation is performed in the Bengali month of *Bhārda* (Aug-Sep) or *Phālgun* (Feb-March). *Gorakhnath* though born in Uttarpradesh came to Bengal and Assam in about 1200 A.D. during the Pal period. He was the disciple of Matsyendra Nath, a Bengali Kaibarta of Siddha sect connected with *Yogini Kula* of *Kamrup*. Although the word ‘*kula*’ in *Brāhmanical Tantras* is synonymous with ‘*Śakti*’; it is undoubtedly related to the five *Kulas* of Buddhist *tantra* representing the five ‘*Dhyāni Buddhas*’. Matsyendra went to Nepal to preach the Siva religion. *Gorakhnāth* was a teacher of the *Nāths*. *Nāthism* is supposed to be a Buddhist Mysticism. In Nepal he was considered as a renegade. *Jalandhar Nāth* alias *Haripa* and the famous *Maynamati* of Bengal were the disciples of *Gorakhnāth*.

In the worship of *Gorakhnāth* only the men take part. This adoration is performed with Sundried rice, *molasses*, and ripe plantains. An *Odhikary* (*Rajbansi* priest) or a *Kamrupi Brāhmana* performs the adulation in the field. There is no image. The worship is done to save the paddy from the ravages of beasts and thieves. This is the worship of *Siva*. The party taking part in the devotion moves from house to house singing songs and collecting subscriptions in the shape of rice fruits and money. There is no instrumental music. Each young man carries a bamboo stick and keeps time in honour of *Gorakhnāth* with the bamboo sticks striking vertically on the earth or by striking against the stick of the other.

Sannyāsi

This god is worshipped in all ceremonial occasions with curd, ripe plantain, flattened rice, *datura* flowers (cannabis) and little hemp (ganja). It is worshipped by huge number of *Rajbansi* people in Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar and Darjeeling. The idol of the *Sannyasi* is looked like Lord *Siva*. The people of the *Rajbansi* community believe that this god can save them from diseases, unfair occurrences.

Tistā Buri

The River *Tistā* is sacred river of North Bengal. It is held in high esteem by the *Rajbansis* and the worship of mother *Tistā* is performed every village. The *Rajbansis* are mainly depended on agriculture. The streams of the *Tista* formed the

main irrigation system of North Bengal and it is probably on this account that the river *Tista* is sacred to this cultivating class.

Dāngdhori Māo

In the Cooch Behar district of North Bengal *Dāngdhori Māo* is worshipped. The *Rajbansi* people worship this deity after bring forth a calf. Once North Bengal was covered with deep forest and various wild beasts were there, who eat the cattle. It was believed to the inhabitants of Cooch Behar that *Dāngdhori Māo* is the goddess of tiger. Naturally they worship this deity to save their domestic animals. After the birth of a calf, the *Rajbansis* of Cooch Behar worship this deity with bitten rice (*chura*), milk, ripe bananas etc. There is also a similarity between *Dāngdhori Māo* and *Devi Durgā* (Roy, 2012; 18 and Roy, 1970; 22).

Bhāndāni

This deity is worshipped in the various parts of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar district particularly in the *Duars* of North Bengal. It is stated that after getting worship from the plains (Himalayan region), *Devi Durgā* set out for Kailas. At that time she had some late in the *Duars* regions. The inhabitants of *Duars* looked her and heard about what she was. Naturally the dwellers prayed her to stay some days and take their worship. From that time this worship was started. Bitten rice, various fruits, milk, banana, flowers are sacrificed to the *Bhāndāni Mata*. Site by site many goats and pigeons are sacrificed to this deity.

Jagannāth

This goddess is associated with *Vaisnavism*. But it is worshipped by the *Rajbansis* also. It is the devotion to *Nārāyana*. Congregational singing or *Kirtan* is the main function of this worship in which the whole village irrespective of faith, takes part.

Jitūā

This is said to be the *pujā* of *Jimutabāhana*, son of *Chitrangada* of Manipur by *Arjuna*. This *pujā* (festival) is done in the month of *Bhādra* (Aug-Sep). It is limited within the area of *Deviganj* (formerly in Jalpaiguri district). It is sometimes called *Ituapujā* (Sanyal, 1965; 140 and Roy, 1970; 58).

In the *Duars* of Jalpaiguri, this *pujā* (worship) is observed in the Bengali month of *Aswin* (Sept-Oct) when there is any trouble of sickness in the family. A good number of green and ripe plantains are placed on a bamboo basket and offered to the deity. Generally no priest is engaged for this *pujā*.

Charak

In the Bengali month of *Chaitra* (March- April) the worship of *Mahādeva* is performed in an open field. ‘*Gamirā*’ songs are sung and subscriptions are raised from every house. Men dressed as *Hara* and *Pārvati* and *Yogini*, side by side sing and dance with the music of ‘*dhol*’ that is drum and ‘*Kānsi*’ that is bell-metal. The old custom of hooking the skin of the back and moving suspended round a bamboo pole is to be found now-a-days. But everywhere it is not mandatory.

Shuvachani

This *pujā* is arranged by the *Rajbansis* of North Bengal before some good occasion like marriage. It is worshipped or celebrated by the women of the village with areca and betel (*Guā-Pān*). All women in the village are gathered in a

particular place on a particular day to worship this deity. After this reverence the women masticate areca and betel.

Buri Thākūr

It is also a deity of the *Rajbansi* of North Bengal. According to their belief that this deity is old aged and associated with white garments and stick in her one hand and white hair. When the people are fallen in to any critical situation regarding their familial life or attacked with any diseases, they worship this deity to save themselves. According to the *Rajbansis* the washing water of the foot of the idol of *Buri Thākūr* will help the persons to be cure from any diseases, if they drink it. Milk, bitten rice, ripe plantains are offered to worship this deity.

Rākhāl Thākūr

After harvesting the crops, the *Rajbansis* of Cooch Behar worship this god. The cattle bearers move house to house and collect rice, money or vegetables as well as fruits. After collecting these, they arrange for worshipping this god. All cattle bearer have to bath their cattle and they bath also. After that they smeared some mustard oil to the horn of the cattle (particularly cow or bullock). Milk, bitten rice and sweet flatten rice are sacrificed for worshipping this god. People worship this god for the sake of prospering the generations of the domestic animals. *Rakhal Thakur* and *Krishna* are regarded as same god. Because of *Krishna* was a cattle bearer (*Rakhal*) once.

Baist Pujā

It is the goddess of a room in the house of the *Rajbansis*. It is very much popular in the Cooch Behar district. The room of this god is regarded as big house or *Bara Ghar*. In Cooch Behar the cultivators put their few crops (*Laxmi*) in this *Bara Ghar* (big house). In a word the big house is considered as sacred house of the home.

A small part of bamboo is rapped by some red cloth, which is imagined as god. *Adhikāri* or Brāhmana set up this *Baist* goddess by the house lord or his eldest son. At first some land are dug in the big house for a hole and some milk as well as dung are poured in to the pit. Side by side a coin is thrown in to the pit. Then the house holder or his eldest son is asked to take up this coin from this pit. If they are able to find out this coin from the pit within first three times, it will be cleared to them for a good sign of their familial life. But failure within first three times, will be regarded as bad signal for their family. After that the priest set this part of bamboo in this room. Then it is worshipped by the priest with milk, bitten rice, ripe plantain, flowers. If this god will happy, the family of the house holder will be peaceful and happy. Many people think that it is actually Lord Siva.

Chilān

The worship of *Mahādeva* or *Mahākāla* is performed throughout the Bengali month of *Māgha* (Jan-Feb). The women have to bath before the sunrise and abstain from meat, fish, and eggs for the whole month. On the *Siva Rātri* day *Mahādeva* or *Mahākāla* is worshipped throughout the whole night. Both Men and women bath four times at night and make offerings after each bath. There is a huge rush of pilgrims at *Jalpeswar* (under Maynaguri P.S., Jalpaiguri), at the caves of *Mahākāla* at Jayanti and Phaskhawa, (Jalpaiguri, Sub-division Alipurduar), at caves of Chamurchi at the border of India and Bhutan, and in Banerwar and Gossanimari in Cooch Behar. *Mahākāla* is symbolized by a stone Lingam.

Rituals

Besides these gods and goddesses there are some rituals among the *Rajbansi* people. These are differences from the rituals of the other communities. The religious practices of the *Rajbansis* are described as below-

Nayā Khoi

On an auspicious day in the Bengali month of *Aghrāyana* (Nov-Dec), some new paddy is husked and the new rice eaten with ceremony. Some rice is boiled with milk and offered to the sacred basil and then all the members of the house as well as invited persons of neighbors eat the new rice like a feast at night. An *Odhikari* is called to act as a priest for the offering.

Bisumā

On the last day of the Bengali month of *Chaitra* (March-April) a spring hunt is arranged by the *Rajbansis*. It is called *Bisuma*. During the whole month of *Chaitra* the *Rajbansis* eat and drink decoction of some, bitters e.g. *Brihati*, *Basak* (*Adhatoda Vasica*) etc. On the last day of *Chaitra* none will eat rice. They eat fries (*Bhāja Bhujā*), this contains fried bitten rice (*chura*), curds and fried *dāla* (lentils). While eating fries it is a custom to spit out the first morsel without swallowing it. This means that the enemies are to be killed. On the day of *Bisumā* all able-bodied *Rajbansi* males go out for a hunt with any weapon he can get hold of e. g. bamboo pole, spear, sword, bow, arrow, gun etc. They must kill an edible animal and eat its meat like a feast in the evening. If they fail to kill an animal, they believe that the coming year would be bad for them. This spring hunt is gradually being abandoned due to restrictions imposed by the Forest Department of Government and also due to the impact of the new civilization. On this day they hang some garlic and onion at the doors of the rooms of their house. There are two causes for observing this folk culture. These are, i) to save from the bad evils of the planets or avoid the evils of family and ii) to draw the attention of the common people on the 'Brātya Kshatriyatya'.

Āmāti

It is a ritual of the *Rajbansis* in North Bengal. Many times a lady is compared with the nature and the nature is also compared with a lady. If we search all the features of a lady into the nature, we can get. So imaging and searching the features of a lady in to the nature and therefore observing some customs, all are associated with *Amati*.

When a girl becomes maid, she is able give birth to a child. Likewise the nature becomes matures for crops. Before the advent of the Rainy Season, the folk culture *Amāti* is observed by the *Rajbansi* people. In this time soil is no dug and plowing on land is stopped. Even some ladies do not touch land. They believe at that time earth (*Basumati*) becomes menstrual (fertile). So *Amati* is observed.

Koinā Gāt

It is observed by the *Rajbansi* people of North Bengal. From the beginning of the bright fortnight in the month of *Bhādra* (Aug-Sep) no one will eat ripe plantain. On the fourteen day, (*Chaturdasi*) they will procure the reeds (*kasia* and *khirol*) for 'Srādha' (funeral) ceremony. On the ninth day of the following dark fortnight, *Koinā Gāt* will start and on that day 'Srādha' for the three ascending generations on the father side (*tin siri*) will have to be performed. The sun dried rice for the 'pinda' (offerings) be made by the girl who

has been married in that year, the 'pinda' is to be consigned in the water. From that day all will eat ripe plantains.

Aksor Hā

This custom is held in the evening on the last day of *Aswin* (Sep-Oct) when the paddy is flowering and head of the corns are out, this is observed in the paddy field (*dhāna bāri*). A small hut about three feet high is erected with jute sticks. Two small earthen balls are placed on the roof. The balls are then worshipped with milk and banana but without incantations. There is no priest. The headman of the field (the owner) takes a powder containing mustard cake (*khoil*) and dried leaves of *pomelo* in a small basket, lights a torch made of dried jute sticks (*sinja*) and then moves about in the paddy field holding up the burning torch and shouting like as, 'Sagāre dhāna tonā monā, mor dhāna pākkā sonā', or 'choto nāgaler bara ish, hāmār dhāner hāl hāla sish).

Gochukunā puja

In the first week of the month of *Jyoistha* (May-June) the cultivators celebrate the first transplantation of paddy if there is sufficient rain for that purpose. Otherwise it is delayed till there is sufficient rain to cover the field with water. This ceremony is called as 'Oā gārā puja' or 'Gochukunā puja' or 'Māodhattir puja'. Probably it is corruption of 'Mā dharitir puja', that is, the worship of the Mother Earth.

The cultivator carries a small plantain tree, five paddy seedlings, and some weeds to the sacred basil plant in the house. Some vermilion is sprinkled on the plants. These are then carried to the field. The five paddy seedlings are planted in the field. The plantain tree is sown in one corner in the plot and weeds are thrown away with the prayer that they should spare the field from their ravages. Prayer is also offered to the plantain tree to be on guard over the land. Then some milk and some bananas are thrown in the field for appeasement of the Mother Earth.

Dhāna Kātā Puja

This is the first paddy cutting ceremony, generally on the first day of *Aghrāyan* (Nov-Dec). When the paddy is ripe in the field, the 'Gitthani' or the senior most wives of the owner of the field, takes an earthenware lamp, a scythe, a little vermilion on a plantain leaf and goes to the field. She cuts a few ears of the paddy, sprinkles some vermilion on them, moves the lamp in front of the cut ears several times and comes back with the paddy branches and fixes them over the doorway of the sleeping hut. After this ceremony regular harvesting of paddy begins.

Tereā Felā

It is a custom of the *Rajbansis* of North Bengal. North Bengal is the downhill of Himalaya. Naturally it is the place for cold and snow. In the winter season (*Aghrāyan*, *Pous*, *Māgh* of Bengali Year) is very measurable not only for human being but also animals. But with the advent of spring the cold begins to disappear and worm gradually arrives. So the thirteen day of the month of *Fālgun* (Bengali month) is regarded as the day of save of animals. In this day the *Rajbansi* people observe the rituals of 'Tereā Felā' for the sake of animals. In this day all the animals are bathed by the men who look after the cattle. Side by side the house of the animals (*goyāl ghar*) is cleaned by the cattle bearer. On the other hand few dung, the broom and some flowers put on a path which are connected by three ways. After that the scion does not look back to this path. He quickly comes back to his house and bath.

Othāi Pāthāi Puja

This simple *puja* is celebrated by the *Rajbansi* women usually by young girl on the day of 'Rathayātra' in the month of *Srāban* (July-Aug).

The real word is 'Rothāi' which is pronounced as 'othāi'. The word *roth* means strength of body. This *puja* is done to acquire sufficient strength of the body and mind by the grace of god so that one can move about on the road (probably over the road of life) without any hindrance. The common village folk think of bodily strength only.

The worship is done on a road. A clump of *binnā* grass is placed under an open umbrella and all other articles are arranged. There is no priest and no incantation (Roy, 1970; 167). A little vermilion is put on the plant, a lamp is lighted, the incense burnt and flowers are showered on the *binnā* and the foods.

Peer

Where god is one, there Peer becomes a folk god among the *Rajbansis* of North Bengal. Peer had a super natural power and become hero. He can relieve the people from any kind of diseases or sad or evils. Peer is regarded as the savior of mankind from many evils. Paradoxically he becomes the vessel of devotion of all kind of inhabitants of North Bengal except Brahmin or some upper caste *Hindus*. *Torsā Peer*, *Pāglā Peer*, *Peer Hujur Sāheb* etc. spiritual personalities have been deeply rooted among the minds of the *Rajbansis* and the *Muslims* of North Bengal. Huge number of people used to go the *Maja* or *Khanka* to pray. Amanath Ullah Khan Choudhury in his 'Cooch Behar Itihas', indicates that this Peer (*Torsā Peer*) stays in the deep water and if King (Raja of Cooch Behar) went to visit him, he hold out his hand from water to give him visit". Whether the example may be true or may not be true but the myth proves that Peer has been able to get the devotion of the *Hindus*.

Like *Torsā Peer*, *Khōjā Peer* was also able to be a successful super natural personality. Many people become devotees of him. Even today, the rituals of *Khōjā Peer* are existed in the various part of North Bengal.

Peer Hujur Sāheb is now most popular folk god in North Bengal. Huge number of people (*Hindus* or *Muslims*) used to go the *mājā* or *Khānkā* for prayer, which is situated at Haldibari in the Cooch Behar district. There has been arranged a fair per year in a particular time. There has been arranged some publicity on behalf of the *Hujur Saheb* every corner of North Bengal. The preachers of *Hujur Sāheb* give various information and way to solve various problems of human being. They also inspire the common people to go the fair of *Hujur Sāheb* and display their devotion to him. It is believed of the common people that the *Peer* can solve any problems like the case of sterility etc. (Interview, Md. Achimuddin, 20/12/2014)¹

Conclusion

In conclusion, we may say that the religious beliefs and practices have a great land mark to bring about the unification among the various communities in North Bengal. Paradoxically, North Bengal is the place of co-existence among various groups of people. Peer is the *sufi saints*, who bring a friendly bondage between the *Hindus* and *Muslims*. The 'Loke Devdebi and Lokachar' (Folk God and Customs) are the scope of devotion. The *Rajbansis* display their devotion to these gods and goddesses for saving them from various evils. Gradually the new generations of this

community is not keen to follow these rituals. Even they like to accept the Bengali culture and western cultures. Nevertheless the old aged people of this community carry on the rituals with their deep attention.

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