FOLK RELIGION AND MYTHOLOGY OF KOCH COMMUNITY OF ASSAM

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In

Centre for Folk Culture Studies

BY

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June 2019

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A Thesis Submitted during June 2019

To the University of Hyderabad in partial fulfillment of

Doctor of Philosophy

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A. Paper published in the following research journal:

1. "The Supernatural Beings of Water: A Discourse in the Koch Folk Religious Believes", *Lokaratna*, Volume 11, Issue I, 2018, (ISSN: 2347-6427), pp. 110-129.

2. "Representation of Women in Koch Folklore: A Study through the Rajbongshi Proverbs", *International Journal Research in Social Sciences*, Volume 8, Issue 5, May 2018, (ISSN: 2249-2496), pp. 656-670.

B. Papers presented in the following Conferences:

1. "Performing the Identity: A Reflection of the Changing Religious Identity of the Koch Community through Folklore", International Seminar on the Politics difference: (re)Locating Subalternaity/Marginality, Department of History, Assam University-Diphu Campus, Assam, September 22-23, 2017.

2. "Cultural Maintenance and Language: A Study through the Proverbs of Koch Community of Assam", UGC SAP DRS-1 National Seminar on Tribal Languages in India: Structure and Status, Department of Dravidian and Computational Linguistics, Dravidian University, Kuppam, Andhra Pradesh, October 04-05, 2018.

Further, the student has passed the following courses towards fulfilment of coursework requirements for PhD:

Course Code	Course Title	Credit	Pass/Fail
FC 801	Introduction to Folk Culture Studies	4	Pass
FC 802	Theories of Folklore	4	Pass
FC 803	Folk Life and Cultural Performances	4	Pass
FC 804	Folklore-Field Methods	4	Pass

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GLOSSARY

Adhi Diye	: The process of giving land or any property in a lease system.
Aghon	: The eighth month in Assamese lunar calendar.
Agina/Sotal	: Front Courtyard.
Agoron	: Long piece of cloth that is used to wear on the upper part of the body to cover the exposed portion of the body. It is thrown over the shoulders to cover the chest.
Ahar	: An Assamese month. It is a corrupted form of the Sanskrit *Asadha*.
Ahu	: A species of rice that is sown in spring and harvested in the beginning of rainy season.
Ai Naam	: Devotional songs related to deity *Ai*.
Ai	: Mother. Referred to a female deity.
Akha	: Hearth.
Akhoi	: Puffed rice
Akhoi/Khoi	: Popped rice
Akhori daruk	: Ethno-medicine
Amati/Amoti	: A festival. The native version of *Ambubasi* festival.
Anakata kapur	: Single cloth which is waved and used in any auspicious ceremony.
Anja/saak	: Curry.
Aoka suta	: Cotton thread.
Aosa	: Traditional cloth worn by the males.
Ap-jhap	: A kind of bouquet made with wild shrubs and flowers.
Arja	: To earn
Asthi	: Bones
Awa Gakhir	: Unboiled milk
Awa suta	: Cotton thread
Axon	:The space where deities are placed.
Aythali mati	: Alluvial soil
Bagh asura	: A kind of wild creeper with thorns.
Bahomara	: Communal Fishing

Bahor sunga	: Bamboo pipe
Bakhra	: Field
Bamun	: Brahmin priest
Ban	: Charmed arrows.
Bangsa	: Lineage
Banni	: Broom
Bao	: A species of rice that is transplanted in rainy and harvested in the beginning of spring season.
Bar	: It is a Bodo word which means wind.
Bara	: Pig
Baray	: To offer
Baro boini	: Twelve sisters. A name of deity.
Baro sos	: Twelve types of crops
Barowa	: To offer
Bas	: Bamboo.
Basa	: To select
Bash tenga/gaja	: Bamboo shoots
Baska	: A wild shrub which has a bitter taste. The juice is extracted from its leaves and use to drink at the first day of Bisuwa festival.
Basti Mati	: Inhabited land
Basuwa	: Selected young boys who hold the bamboos at the time of *magon maga* ritual which is a part of the Bash puja.
Bel	: Marmelos tree and its fruit.
Bera	: Wall
Betor gaja	: Cane shoots
Bhad	: Fifth month of Assamese calendar that is corrupted form of the Sanskrit term Bhadra.
Bhagi	: Blood lineage
Bhakhri	: Storehouse
Bhakhri	: The storage house; speaks in the eastern part.
Bhandara	: It is a clay pot where holy water is kept along with rice. This is an important part of the Bash puja.

Bhang	: Hemp.
Bhar	: Load
Bhasanni	: Immersion
Bhat mukhat diya	: First rice taking ceremony of a child.
Bhel	: A kind of boat prepared with the banana trunk. Ritually this has a significant part as it is considered as very sacred and used to immerse the sacraments and sacrificial things.
Bherenda	: A wild shrub.
Bhetemali	: A wild flower which is used at the time of Bisuwa.
Bhitabandha	: The process of making house.
Bhitasoba	: The process of making house.
Bhog	: It is the rice pudding that is prepared to offer to the deity Ai.
Bhoy	: Fear
Bhuibari	: Paddy field
Bidaki	: Once the ritual of Ai puja is over, everything including the idol, offerings and all the sacraments are placed over a *sangli* (sieve). This is called *Bidaki*.
Bidhata	: The name of the fortune deity
Bi-dheika	: Fern
Bil	: Natural big pond.
Birina	: A kind of grass.
Bisar Xobha	: Village Council
Boa sunga	: It is the pipe to winding the heddle. Traditionally it is made with bamboo.
Boa	: The heddle.
Bogri	: The Indian jujube (Ziziphus mauritiana).
Boistam	: Vaisnava.
Boli	: Sacrifice
Bor	: Bridegroom
Boray niya	: Welcoming ceremony
Bor-ghor	: The central house
Bot	: The banyan tree

Botla	: Pith; A kind of grass that is used made the idol of a deity. Used in the eastern part of the region.
Bwisag/Bohag	: The first month of the Assamese calendar. It is a corrupted form of the Sanskrit Vaisakha.
Choitali bao	: A kind of disease caused by the evil spirit to the children.
Chok	: Inner courtyard
Chokot	: Traditional rice beer
Choraghor	: Restroom
Chowar	: Yalk-tail whisks
Daha/Dosha	: One of the death ritual
Daidi	: Lineage
Daina	: Male witch.
Daini	: A female witch.
Dala	: Winnowing fan.
Dao	: Assamese sword.
Dar	: A bamboo pole which symbolized the deity. It is a corrupted version of the word danda.
Darrang Rajvansawali	: Chronicle of the Koch dynasty.
Das jania dham	: Communal shrines that are dedicated to several deities.
Dashjon	: Council formed by the member of the head of the family.
Deo	: Deity
Deodha	: The male counterpart of Deodhani.
Deodhani	: A shamanistic female dancer. She is believed to be possessed by the spirits or deities.
Deori	: traditional pries
Deosi	: Traditional priests.
Dewani	: Main member of the Family
Dhai	: The midwife
Dhakua	: Drummer.
Dhara	: Bamboo mat
Dharmasaki	: A big earthen lamp
Dheika	: Fern

Dhip	: Alter.
Dhol	: Musical instrument made with leather.
Dhon Bhorali	: Treasurer
Dhuwa	: Open.
Dibankar	: Sun; Skt. Dibakar.
Dighloti	: A shrub that is considered to have a medicinal values used in the Bisuwa festival.
Dima	: Egg
Dingra	: Banana trunk
Doi	: Curd
Dokhona	: Traditional dress of Bodo Woman
Dokkhin	: South
Dona	: A container made with banana trunk.
Donga	: Container made out of banana bark.
Dor	: Fear
Dubri boon	: Dub grass
Dura	: A species of tortoise.
Dwi	: Bodo word that means water.
Ek haat	: One hand
Ek kushiya saowa	: the parents who gave birth to only one child and the second child has not born yet
Ek mutha	: One bunch
Foi / Senkoi	: A white string dyed yellow with the fresh raw turmeric is tied around one of the hands or legs of the children and young people in the morning of the *Bishua*.
Fool basa	: Process of making the flower design in the clothes while weaving.
Fota	: Another name of *Patani*. A traditional dress.
Gain	: Pastel
Gamsa	: Traditional towel which is woven in yellow colour.
Ganak	: The astrologer
Gao-bhari	: Pregnant
Gao-burha	: Village head.

Gaonia	: Singer
Garam	: Village.
Gari	: It is the roller made with wood and is used in number two. One roller is used to wrap the cloth in front and another one is used to hold the threads.
Garja	: A deity
Ghiu	: Clarified butter
Ghong	: Hayne
Ghot	: Earthen pot.
Ghoti	: Vessel.
Ghotok	: The match maker.
Gilap	: Large cloth
Gobor san diya	: Process of purification with the mixture of cow dung and water.
Golighor	: Cowshed
Gono	: The ritual of awakening the deities
Gore mas	: Snakehead fish
Gori	: Split bamboos that are used to make the bier.
Gorka	: The pedel in the weaving machine.
Goru	: Cow
Goruber	: A wild plant.
Guwa/Tamul	: Areca-nut.
Halmajhi	: Peon
Hamaku	: Tobacco
Hangar	: Wall
Hapa	: A wild animal
Has	: Duck.
Hobis bhat	: The ritual food which is prepared by boiling rice and vegetables without adding any oil, onion, garlic and ginger. This is the food that is taken when there is an impure stage.
Hudu pokhi	: One eared owl.
Hudum	: Deity of rain
Hum Suba	: Yaggya process

Issor	: The supreme being
Jagani	: The ritual of awakening the deities
Jageya Thowa	: The ritual of awakening the deities
Jagrata	: Active
Jaha saul	: A variety of rice.
Jakhe	: A kind of scoop made by bamboo to catch fish.
Jang so	: Lets go
Japurnama	: Hair shaving ritual
Jara-pani	: Charmed water
Jara-phuka	: Practice of magico-religious medicine.
Jara-tel	: Charmed oil.
Jatwk Jwnma	: Birth ritual
Jekni bari	: Bamboo stick
Jinjiri/Jijri	: Sickle
Joba phool	: Jujube flower
Jokh-Jokhini	: Evil spirits.
Jom	: Yama. The god of the death
Jotor	: Spinning wheel.
Joyja	: Twins
Kainha	: A small plant whose flower is used in the Ai puja.
Kakra	: Crab
Kamdhora	: The person who performs the death ritual.
Kan bindha	: Ear piercing ritual
Kanni	: The leage
Kapal	: Forehead
Kasa kol	: Raw banana
Kasa	: Raw.
Kasi	: Sickle
Kasni / Jap	: Charmed cord given by an *Oja*.
Kathi	: Varandah

Kathonda	: Tabernaemontana divaricata Linn. Its flower is used in the Ai puja.
Kathwlisali/sosan	: Cremation ground
Katri	: Chopper
Kesu	: Earth worm
Keturi	: Wild ginger.
Khale	: A small bamboo basket to keep fish in.
Khawa	: To eat
Kheror bhuta	: Straw lighter.
Kheror Puji	: Heap of paddy straw
Khilli pan	: Betel leaf
Khola	: Series
Kholtonga	: Broken piece of clay pot
Khorabar	: Tuesday
Khorka	: Round shape basket made with banana trunk.
Khukhli Beng	: A species of frog.
Khukhri	: A kind of sword.
Khuta	: Pole.
Kodal	: Hand hoe
Kodde	: Star fruit
Kodom phool	: Bur flower (Neolamarckia cadamba)
Koina	: Bride
Koitha	: Paddy seedlings
Kolmou	: Water spinach
Kolor dila	: Banana flower
Kolsi	: Pitcher
Korka	: Musical instrument
Kosu	: Taro leaf
Kuchuni	: Female Koch
Kula/Dala	: Winnowing fan.
Kumra	: Tender

Kuwa/Land	: Well
Laphu	: Mushroom
Lata	: Silkworm
Lokkhi	: Lakshmi.
Lusuni	: Floor cleaning mob
Madda	: Male
Maddi	: Female.
Madli	: Amulets
Magh	: An Assamese month; Skt. Magha.
Magon maga	: The ritual of asking alms
Mahekia	: Menstruation
Maikheti	: Wild shrub used in the Bisuwa festival
Maju	: A pyramid size small hut made of piths or banana stem. Pictures related with the Manasa episodes are drawn on it. The maju represents the deity Manasa.
Maju-Ai	: Medium chicken pox; a deity.
Maku	: The shuttle.
Manohor kol	: A variety of banana.
Mansi	: Human
Mao	: Mother
Mareya	: The organizer or male head of the family.
Mareyani	: Female counterpart of Mareya.
Marimorok	: Epidemic
Masuwani	: A death ritual.
Mati Bhanga	: Process of occupying land in the forest.
Mekhela	: Traditional dress of Assamese woman
Mitha	: Sweet
Moin kata	: A thorny wild shrub.
Morahi	: New moon night.
Morakhapa	: Songs related with the death ceremony; sung on the way to the cremation ground.

Mora-phela gaan	: Songs that are sung while carrying the dead body to the cremation ground
Mou	: Honey
Mukaguni	: The ritual of burning a dead body.
Mukh bashi	: A type of flute.
Mukh dhuwani	: The ritual of washing the face in the death ritual.
Mukti	: Salvation
Muri	: Puffed rice.
Musukha	: Human figure doll made with paddy straw.
Nalish	: Village Council
Namghor	: The Vaisnavite temple
Napham	: Fermented fish
Nasni	: The pulleys.
Nisan	: Mark
Norok	: Hell
Oja	: Male practitioner of ethno medicine.
Ojali	: Exorcism
Ojani	: Female priest.
Ow	: Elephant apple; dillenia indica.
Pahar	: Hill
Paitol	: Helper
Pakghor/Randhonghor	: Kitchen
Pakhri	: Ficus religiosa
Pali	: Helper of *Oja/Ojani*
Pan singa	: The ritual of divorce
Pan	: Betel-leaf
Parasit Hoa	: Purification process
Pari	: Border of the cloth
Paro	: Pigeon
Pas hat dighla	: Five hand in length
Pasi	: Round bamboo basket

Pasila	: Back courtyard
Pasra	: Shawl
Patal	: Underworld
Patani/Bukuni	: Traditional dress of a Koch Woman
Pater sellai	: Jute cord
Peta	: the pirn
Pheskullar bhasa	: Drongo cuckoo's nest
Phoi	: A cotton string died with turmeric and tied down to the children.
Phoring	: Grasshopper
Pira	: Small wooden tool
Pithali	: Rice powder.
Pohila bish	: First labour pain.
Pokhi	: Bird
Pon/Gadhon	: Bride price
Porhori mal	: Property of others. Especially used for the female.
Poriyal	: Family
Possim	: West
Prasad	: A material substance of vegetarian food that is a religious offering
Pub	: East
Punni	: Full moon night.
Purna puja	: Complete ritual
Pusna	: A winter festival observed by the Koches of Assam which is synonym to Bhogali Bihu; observed on the Sankranti day of the month Puh.
Putolbari	: While weaving, this is the temple made with bamboo and tied safety pin or needle at the edges of each two temples with clothing.
Ra	: It is the reed. Traditionally it is made with bamboos, but at the present time, the one that sell in the market is popular.
Raij mel	: Village Council
Ranga	: Red
Rupon Mati	: Cultivated land
Ruwabari	: Paddy field

Sadh Khawa	: A ritual observed at the fifth month of pregnancy.
Sadha	: Tobacco
Sador	: Traditional dress of Assamese woman
Sagi	: Relitives
Sagol	: Goat
Sakha	: Bangles
Saki/Gosa	: Earthen lamp
Sam/Ural	: Mortal
Samo/Samuk	: Snail
Sangi dhora	: Bier carrier
Sangli	: Sieve
Sankranti	: Sankranti is marked as the end of each month and the day following as the beginning of a new month
Saradho	: A death ritual
Sari-ali	: Junction of four roads
Sawa	: Child.
Sedar kata	: Porcupine spines. It is used as an ornament in the head and has a belief that this will protect from the evil spirits.
Seiska	: Thin bamboo cord.
Seka	: Alkaline
Sendoor phwta	: Vermillion mark
Seni	: Sugar
Senkai	: The cotton string. It is also known as foi.
Seora	: A kind of tree; believed as the house of ghosts.
Serki	: Spinning tool.
Sidol	: Fermented fish
Siju	: Cactus; euphorbia splendens.
Sikar	: Hunting
Sinan/Mahika	: Menstruation
Sira	: Flattened rice.
Sita	: Pyre

Sojna	: Drumstick
Sokhabar	: Saturday.
Sola	: Botola. Speaks in the western part of the region.
Somaj	: Society.
Sorey	: Chicken
Sorgo	: Heaven
Sowar	: Yak tail whisk
Sukta	: Dried jute leaves
Sunga	: Pipe
Suwa phela	: Ritual of removing impurity from the house
Suwa	: Impurity
Suwa	: Stage of uncleanliness / impurity.
Suwa-ghor	: The separate room or hut prepared for the delivery purpose.
Suwor	: Pig
Tamar poisa	: Copper coin
Tarangi	: Bier
Tatxaal	: Weaving tool
Tengal	: Split bamboo cords used as a rope for tying.
Tepa-mas	: Golden fish.
Tepari	: Moju. Used in the Marai puja.
Thaga	: A kind of tray with one leg; offerings are placed in the name of a deity on the tray.
Thakur	: Rajbansi word for a male deity.
Thakurani	: Female deity.
Than	: Shrine
Than	: A place to worship deities. Popular in the eastern part of Goalpara region.
Thansali	: The compound of the shrine.
Tiniali	: Junction of three roads
Tita	: Bitter
Tithi	: A lunar day

Tukri/Dukli	: Round shaped basket made with bamboo.
Tulsi	: Basil
Uha/Usa/Usna	: Boiled
Ulu boon	: A kind of wild grass
Usringa	: Cricket
Uttar	: North
Vratakatha	: Tales connected with a vow.
Way	: Koch term to refer a deity.
Xali	: A variety of paddy; western part it is called as Hemoti.
Xanti-pani	: Holy water
Xaon	: An Assamese month; Skt. Sravaṇa.
Xiyal	: Fox
Xoru-Ai	: Small chicken pox; A deity.

Assam Showing the Goalpara Region

Goalpara Region

GOALPARA REGION
(UNDIVIDED GOALPARA DISTRICT)

BHUTAN

WEST BENGAL

CHIRANG DISTRICT

BARPETA

KOKRAJHAR DISTRICT

BONGAIGAON DISTRICT

DHUBRI

BANGLADESH

GOALPARA DISTRICT

MEGHALAYA
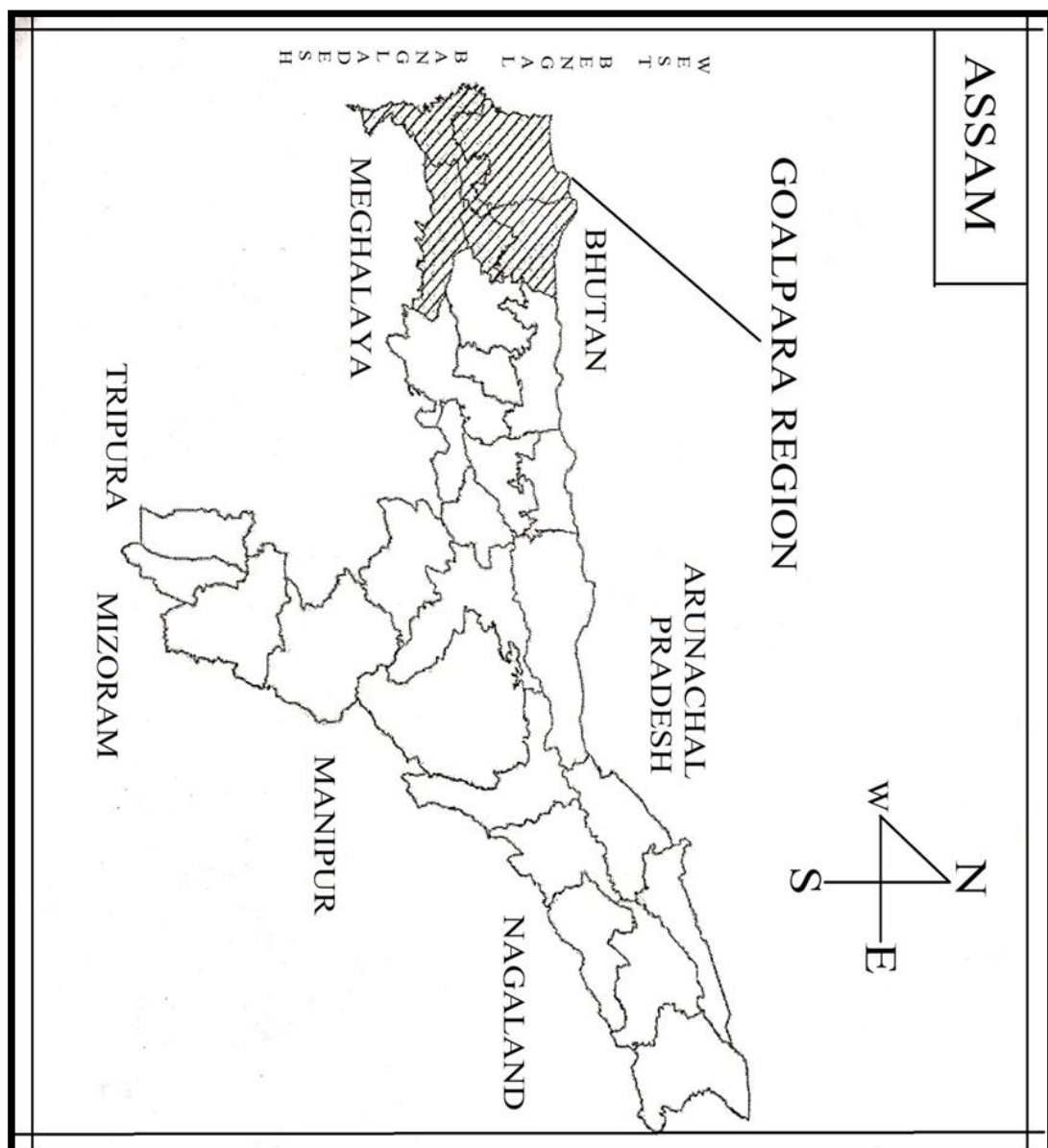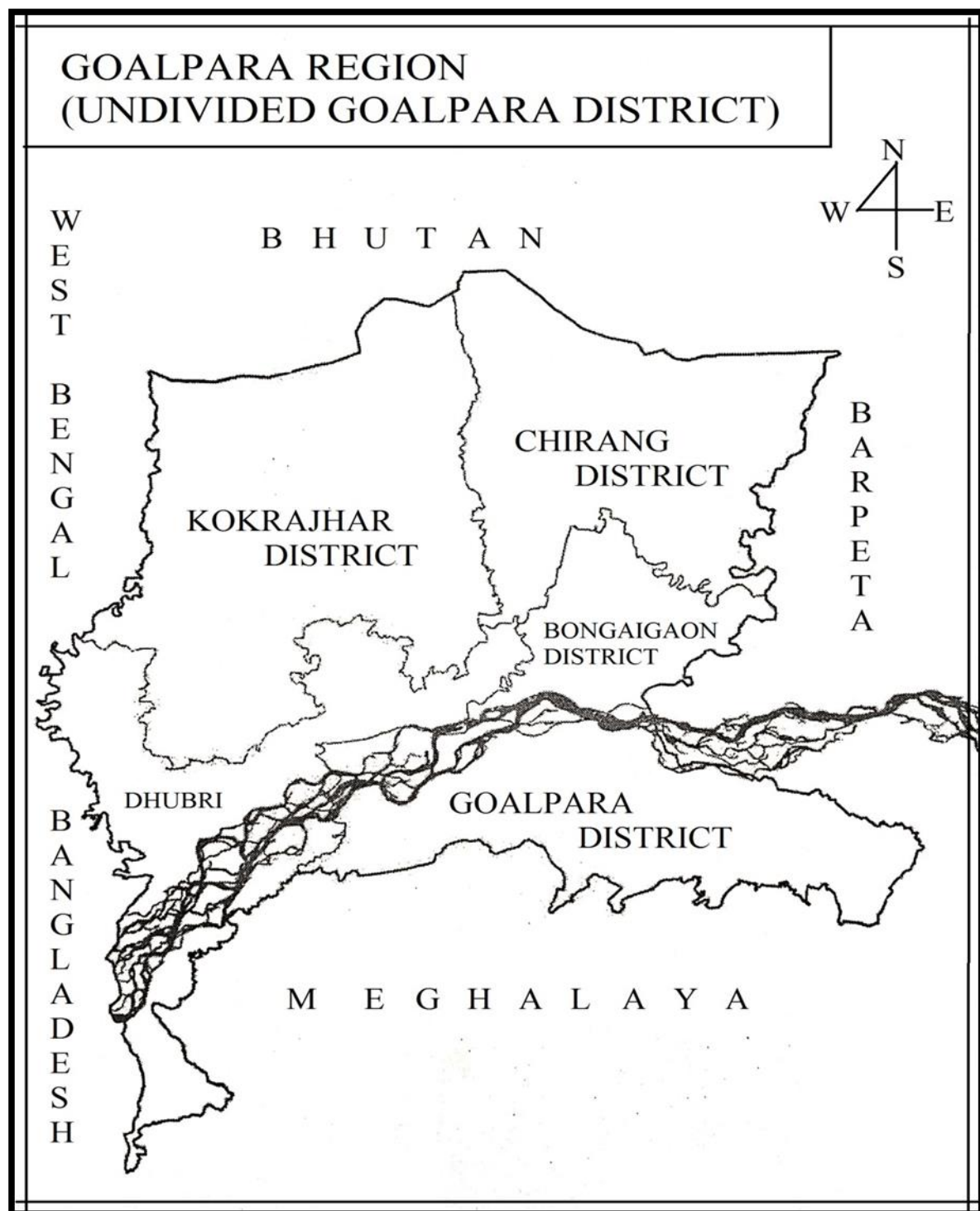
Chapter: 1

INTRODUCTION

Religion, in a very fundamental manner, can be understood as one of the earliest phenomena of social institution. It made possible for mankind to stay peacefully between themselves and the other supremacy that holds the power of cosmos. Folk religion is a part of that social religiosity. It is a kind of invisible reality of human social behaviour that basically serves at our subconscious level.[1] The discipline of folklore studies, as well as many other social sciences, has used the term folk religion to describe the variety of religious beliefs and their practices manifested within everyday lives of folk. Folk religion can broadly be termed as the popular religious faiths, beliefs and practices of a community, ethnicity or society living in a particular environment alongside the mainstream religious forms and practices and outside of the official doctrines. Basically, these kinds of beliefs and faiths have a deep attachment with that particular folk culture and surroundings. Folk religion, as Miyake has pointed out is "unlike the institutional religions, has neither doctrines nor organization; it neither seeks to win converts nor to propagate the faith. It is rather something transmitted as a matter of custom among people bound together by community or kinship ties. Folk religion puts the greatest emphasis not on ideas but on ritual".[2]

In folklore, the understanding of the actual concepts and definitions of folk religion also have its own difficulties. Those difficulties in the conceptual and terminological understanding of the study of folk religion are very much significantly presented by Don Yoder in his work.[3] In Yoder's understanding, folk religion is considered as an unofficial religion different from the official religion with the church and congregations. According to Don Yoder, folk religion can be seen as "the totality of

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[1] H. S. Bhatti, *Folk Religion: Change and Continuity*, Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2000, p. 09.

[2] Satoru Kaneko, "Dimensions of Religiosity among Believers in Japanese Folk Religion", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (March 1990), p. 02.

[3] Don Yoder, "Toward a Definition of Folk Religion", Western Folklore, Vol. 33, No. 1, Symposium on Folk Religion (January 1974), pp. 2-15.

all those views and practices of religion that exists among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion".[4] Generally, the concept of folk religion carries two different subjects that are very much related to each other. Firstly, the folk-cultural dimension of religious dimension and secondly, the study of syncretisms between two diverse forms of religious cultures.[5] But folklorist Leonard Norman Primiano criticises the authenticity of the term and instead of "folk" or "popular" religion, he prefers the term "vernacular religion". He pointed out that since vernacular religion is "religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it and it inherently involved interpretation; therefore it is impossible for the religion of an individual not to be vernacular."[6] His main criticism of the concept of folk religion offered by Yoder was towards his dichotomy of the folk religion as "unofficial" religion from the "official" religion. For Primiano, the term "folk" or "popular" or "official" are used in a derogatory way to indicate the religious people's beliefs in remnants and then juxtaposed it with the "official" religion.[7]

Sonja Hukantaival arguing in the same vein with Primiano about "official" religion portrays it as a perfect type and accepted the reality of "official" religion in society by exploring the interdependence of the "official" form and "folk" form of religion.[8] For Hukantaival, folk religion is the one which is interpreted and reinterpreted by people in their everyday life which is inconsistent.[9] Folk religion is not just about the survival and persistence of pre "official" religions; rather it can be seen as an amalgamation of the mainstream religion on the one hand and the inconsistencies of the

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[4] Don Yoder, "Toward a Definition of Folk Religion", Western Folklore, Vol. 33, No. 1, Symposium on Folk Religion (January 1974), p. 14.

[5] Ibid. p, 02.

[6] Leonard Norman Primiano, "Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife", *Western Folklore*, Vol. 54, No. 1, (January 1995), p., 44.

[7] Ibid. page: 38.

[8] Sonja Hukantaival, "Finding Folk Religion: An Archeology of 'Strange' Behaviour". http://folklore.eelfolklore/vol55/hukuntaival.pdf. Accessed on 12.09.2015, pp, 103-4.

[9] Ibid, p. 115.

folk religion itself. One has to marry both these two aspects to understand the folk religion of the Koches.

1.1: Significance of the Study

So far as the researches are done on Koch community, they have focused mainly on the political and socio-cultural histories of the community. Such works highlighted the establishment of a political dynasty, struggling for an identity and the social set up of the community. The works on rituals, rites and other belief systems with regard to folk religion are very much less. Though most of the Koch people are the followers of Hinduism, they still practice their age-old belief systems. In mundane life, they have to acclimatize to the locality in which they survive in the course of which they get mixed up with Hinduism to their old religious practices and thus emerged their "folk Hinduism". It embodies the ritual practices and other forms of folklore, verbal and non-verbal behaviour like narratives, songs, riddles, proverbs etc. The religious belief that is in practice occurs in orality transmitted orally from one generation to the other. Thus, practices of the folk religion of the Koch community are not taken into consideration to understand their social lives. In light of the above discussion, the existing works are highlighting the socio-historical life of the Koch community and hence the studies are lopsided. For having a holistic perspective, folklore as an ongoing cultural process of the community has to be given emphasis. Because, folklore is a tradition based creation of the folk, by the folk and for the folk whose mode of transmission is oral which includes the process of changes that occur over a period of time and space.

The folk religious life of the Koch community in Assam is not much studied. The works done so far are mostly simple collection and compilation of the folksongs, folktales, descriptions of rituals. These were not analysed and interpreted from the perspective of the folk religion and various social practices that are being observed in the mundane life of the Koch population. The study of the folk religion of the Koch community is very much important because following Hinduism as their official religion and practicing it in their everyday life along with their traditional beliefs makes their religious status more complex and dynamic. Interestingly, in the Goalpara region, most of the genres of their folklife of the Koch community reflect the influence of the other local

practices from the neighbouring communities. Several practices from the *Bathou religion*[10] of the Bodo community as well as the folk religion of the Rabha community were incorporated into the extra ritual practices in the rites of passage and rituals like marriage, puberty, death etc. But in that process also the Koches never forget their identity, religious ideology and live as a distinct social community.

In their religious lives, they have constructed various genres of folklore like: narratives, rituals, proverbs, beliefs, songs, dances, foods etc. Among them various narratives like myth, folktales and legends were constructed depending upon gods, goddesses, natural forces, ancestors ought to have special attention, because narratives are the stories by which the community can attach themselves with that of the supreme-being and associated belief systems in the form of stories. The interactions with the miracles of the deities articulated with the personal spiritual experiences are always getting reflected in the form of narratives. Moreover, the geographical vastness of the region itself makes the culture and identity of the same community into a different and interesting sphere of study. The terminological difference of the community is very much noticeable in the region.

In the light of the above discussion, it is very essential to study the religious aspects and activities of the Koch community in everyday life that are reflected in their expressive behaviours like worshipping of folk deities, various communal, personal and religious rituals and the attachment of folk beliefs to it. Therefore, the present study focuses to understand their religion and beliefs related to the various aspects of their folk

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[10] *Bathou* is the traditional religion of the Bodo community of Assam. In *Bathou* religion, *Bathoubwrai* or *Sibwrai* is considered as the supreme god. Because of the religion is mainly centered around and linked up with its supreme deity i.e. *Bathoubwrai*, the religion is called *Bathou* religion. In this religion, *Sijou* tree (Euphorbia Splendens) is worshipped as the living symbol of *Bathoubwrai*. In Bodo language, the name *Bathou* is the combination of two words i.e. '*Ba*' which means five and '*thou*' that means 'deep philosophical thought'. Therefore, it is said that *Bathou* religion is based on the philosophy of five. The religion is related to five elements of cosmos and they are- *Bar* (Air), *San* (Sun), *Ha* (Earth), *Or* (Fire) and *Okhrang* (Sky). *Bathou* religion is correlated with the life of the Bodo people. On the other hand, the word *Bwrai* signifies the oldest or most elderly man in power and knowledge or the supreme in all respects. Therefore, he exclusively represents the supreme soul, *poromatma*, who is omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. Fire can't burn him, water can't moisten, air can't dry him and spear can't pierce him. He is the illuminator of all earthly objects; he is the source of all knowledge and lights. – See Faguna Barmahalia, "Revivalism of Bathousim Among the Bodos", *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, Vol. 1, No. 5, (September- October 2012), pp, 42-45.

life where the society existed in an incorporative and integrative nature. The significance of the study lies in identifying the actual religious status of the Koch community leaving out of the official religion on one hand and to understand the socio-religious life of the community through narratives on the other.

To define the religion of the Koch community at the very beginning of the study is extremely difficult. As Max Weber also commented that a definition of religion "can be attempted, if at all, only at the conclusion of the study."[11] The aim of this study is also not to define the religion of Koch community but to identify the nature of it. As Clifford Geertz has mentioned that "the aim of the systematic study of religion is, or anyway ought to be, not just to describe ideas, acts, institutions, but to determine just how and in what way particular ideas, acts, and institutions sustain, fail to sustain, or even inhibit religious faith-that is to say, steadfast attachment to some transtemporal conception of reality".[12] Therefore, with regards to the study of the religion of the Koch community, it is very much important to understand how and in what way it does exist. Thus, the present work aims to study the folk religious life of the Koch community of the Goalpara region of Assam from a folklore perspective.

1.2: Nature and Scope of the Study in Relation to Folk Religion

In the light of the above discussion, the present research topic *"Folk Religion and Mythology of the Koch community of Assam"* intends to study the folk religious position of Koch community in the Goalpara region and how they are expressed and get reflected in various genres of Koch folklore in different ways. As an important fundamental genre, myth or mythology provides different perspectives to understand various practices that are associated with the community and its everyday functions. Myths are the narratives that have a sacred nature on it and often unite with some rituals. These narratives are intertwined with the religious practices of Koch community. These oral narratives are considered to be factual from the perspective of the community members and understood

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[11] Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, London: Social Science Paperback, 1966, p, 01.

[12] Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia*, Chicago & London: University Of Chicago Press, 1968; Phoenix Edition, 1971, p, 02.

metaphorically as well as literally. It is the belief system connected with the gods, spirits or supernatural beings reflects the main character of the myths. It has been a part of their everyday life. However, for the Koches, this character connection is found not only in the forms of myth, but it is prevalent in the forms of tales, experience stories and dream narratives. In this context one can question that, can we consider myths as a separate genre ignoring the other narrative forms in order to understand the Koch folk religious life. If this is peculiar to the Koches, can these narrative forms be included in the same genre as myths? How to classify a Koch myth from its other narrative forms?

While academic scholars understood the difference between genres like myth, legend or tale, the distinction may not be the same for the folks. The concept of an analytical category is basically to arrive on a definitive result of analysis and classification of folklore which is a part of the general classification. However regional classification is applicable to the different groups of a specific region. For this reason, the genre of myth for the Koches may not appear as same as understood by the western scholars. Lauri Honko discussed that since any area in the world has its own cultural individuality, the definition of a genre will not be universally applicable.[13] This has emerged in this study of Koch religious beliefs. So, in order to keep away from confusion, a new type of definition should be established where the scholarly ideas of classification should be mixed with folk. Dan Ben-Amos has critically analysed that "any classification system should correspond to the actual traditional form".[14] The genre can be considered to be applicable only to native or ethnic genre. In such a case myth, rituals, experience stories related to deities, and beliefs related to that will be genres in order to study Koch folk religion. In an analytical classification, they become myths. In order to consider a folklore form as genre, different factors like thought, structure, function, form, and manner have to be considered. In Assam where different cultures get assimilated with each other, generic definitions should be given importance along with the way of defining folklore forms into myth, beliefs, experience stories and tales become

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[13] Peter J Claus & Frank J. Korom, *Folkloristics and Indian Folklore,* Udupi: Regional Resource Centre, 1991, p. 170.

[14] Dan Ben-Aoms (Ed.), *Folklore Genres,* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976, p. xv.

the help in the analysis. The grouping into myth, tale, experience stories, proverbs, rituals, and beliefs is a part of such a classification. To a certain extent, this classification is based on forms and structures.

Genres are permanent forms.[15] As per the changes in the folk, folklore can change but genres will remain constant. Though the modern man is far away from tribes in many respects both use proverbs. According to Tylor, the importance of proverbs varies according to the position in culture and society. It can be seen that the position of centralised genres shifts towards the edge.[16] However new genres gradually come into being in harmony with the changes in life to fulfil the function. The functions of old genres may be shared or genres may lose their position. As a result, it cannot be fully believed that genres are constant. The occurrence of proverbs decreases but the genre does not disappear.

Different from the concept of Tylor, Grimm Brothers and later the evolutionists brought forward their theories. Grimm Brothers argue that it is the Pagan Myths which later become fairy tales, proverbs and riddles. There is an opinion that genres are not lost, but they only move from the centre to margin. An example of what is centralized receding to the margin is found in the human sacrifice which is central becoming the nursery rhyme related to the London Bridge. This is actually the change of genres, though the idea is one and the same. Taking the example of *PaaDdana* in Tulu culture, Claus and Korom, make clear that the change as above happens in the case of genres.[17] It is clear that nursery rhyme and rite do not belong to the same genre. Later, they affirmed that due to the cultural and historical differences the same subject can be expressed through different genres. They exemplify that if the belief behind a myth is lost, it changes into a fairy tale. So, one has to think about the factor, which sets apart one genre from the others. This shows that the facts which are different from the oral version and external work behind to establish a genre.

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[15] Dan Ben-Aoms (Ed.), *Folklore Genres,* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976, p xx-xxvii.

[16] Dan Ben-Aoms (Ed.), *Folklore Genres,* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976, p. xx.

[17] Peter J Claus & Frank, J. Korom, *Folkloristics and Indian Folklore,* Udupi: Regional Resource Centre, 1991, pp.171-172.

However, Alan Dundes opines a different aspect by saying "An immediate aim of structural analysis in folklore is to define the genres of folklore. Once these genres have been defined in terms of internal morphological characteristics, one will be better able to proceed to the interesting problems of the function of Folkloristics forms in particular cultures".[18] The immediate aim of structural analysis itself is the definition of the genre. Structural Analysis of Propp and Levi Strauss and Oral-formulaic theory of Milman Parry arrive at the structure of a genre. The genre can be arrived at by finding out the structure. From Propp's theory, the genre fairy tales can be distinguished from others. Similarly, the peculiar structure of myth and ballad can be studied through Levi Straussian analysis and Oral-formulaic theory respectively. But it is not only a structure that determines genres. For example, myth and fairy tales are different more in external factors than in the internal structures. The structure is only one among the many factors like context, styles and performance. Based on the above discussion, the following diagram has been prepared to represent genre continuum of Koch myths.

Diagram 1.1: Myth as a Genre Continuum.

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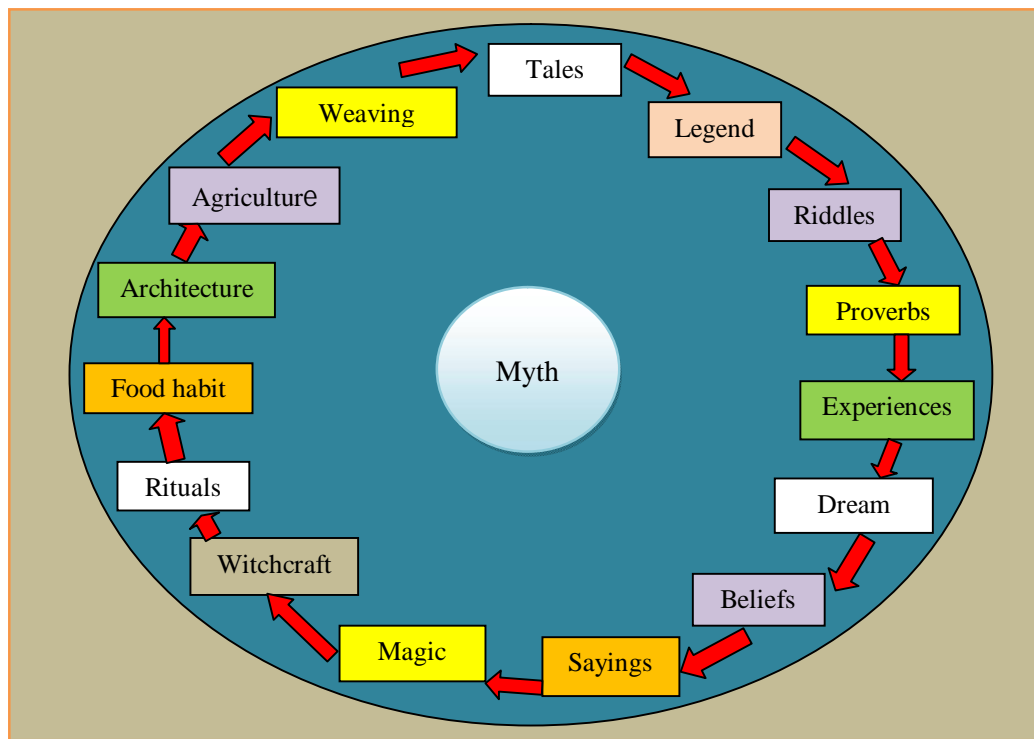
[18] Robert A Georges and Alan Dundes, "Towards a structural Definition of the Riddles", *Journal of American Folklore,* Vol. 76, 1963, p. 111

Thus, the nature of the present study is to understand the folk religious life of the Koches in Assam through not only the myths but also from the experiences, tales, rituals as well as beliefs related to the supernatural beings. The main component of the religion is beliefs in supernatural beings which later transfer into the objects and finally gets into the sacred and profane world. Myths help us to understand the religiosity as it is connected with the beliefs system that is expressed through the narratives. For the Koches, these myths, beliefs, rituals, narratives, practices are interwoven in such a way that one has to look at all these components in order to understand their religious identity. Therefore, the present study "*Folk Religion and Mythology of Koch Community of Assam*" has not included any separate chapter on mythology, but takes all these aspects together and incorporated in all chapters.

1.3: Area of the Study

The present study mainly concentrates on the folk religious life of Koch community of the Goalpara region of Assam. The term "Goalpara Region", here, represents the erstwhile Goalpara district which does no longer exist as a political entity. But the region "Goalpara" is still able to continue its distinctive homogenous cultural pattern of the then geographical area of the undivided district. The term "Goalpara" or "Goalpariya"[19] is still deeply ensconced in the minds and discourse of the people of Assam. Especially in various cultural contexts, the people of this area try to associate themselves with the language, culture and old heritage of an "undivided" Goalpara region. Goalpara district was made up of three sub-divisions viz. Gaolpara, Dhubri and Kokrajhar. But in the year 1983, it was split up for a better administrative reason. These three sub-divisions were recognized as three districts with the same name. Later, in the year 1989, again a new district was carved out from Kokrajhar and Goalpara district and named it as Bongaigaon. Recently, in 2004, Chirang district was carved out of the districts of Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon under the provision of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. It is one of the district of Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD) under

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[19] In this work, the term 'Goalpara' and 'Goalpara Region' stands as the whole area of the then Goalpara district and the term *Goalpariya* is continue to mean the 'cultural region' of erstwhile Goalpara district.

the Govt. of Assam.[20] Presently, Goalpara region consists of five districts, namely Gaolpara, Bongaigaon, Chirang, Dhubri and Kokrajhar districts.[21]

Before the breakdown into many districts, Goalpara was the westernmost district of Assam in the Brahmaputra valley. In the north, it was bounded by the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan, on the east it was undivided Kamrup district which is presently divided into the districts of Barpeta, Nalbari, Baksa, Kamrup (Rural) and Kamrup (Metro). On the south, it was Garo Hill district of Meghalaya and on the west, it was Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri of West Bengal and Rangpur of Bangladesh. Geographically, the erstwhile Goalpara district is situated in between latitudes 25º28´ and 26º54´ north and longitudes 89º42´ and 90º54´ east. Although the central position of the area witnesses many small ranges of hills near the Brahmaputra river, but the western and the northern parts are mostly plain. The hilly ranges of Bhutan can be easily visible in the north and the out ranges of the Garo hills of Meghalaya can also be noticeable in the west. The main river of Goalpara region is the Brahmaputra. The availability of rivers, lakes, swamps allows various kinds of animals and birds to inhabit in this area. The area is famous for the availability of Golden Languor. The environment is also suitable for people to live in. It is neither too hot in summer nor too cold in winter. Generally, the climate of Goalpara region is cold in winter time and warm in the summertime with high humidity.

Historically it is said that the Koch community is one of the earliest Hinduised community among the Mongoloid groups of the Brahmaputra valley and closely related with the Bodo and Rabha community, therefore, the cultural syncretism and influence is very much reflected through their various folk behaviours like beliefs, rituals, rites etc. Therefore, the present study will try to look at various folk practices and religious rituals of the community using folklore genres in order to understand its folk religious life. As such the scope of folk religion is very much broad; therefore, the study focuses on collection and analysis of the rituals, rites, beliefs, myths, experiences narratives related with various folk deities that construct Koch's religious worldview.

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[20] http://chirang.gov.in/ accessed on 13th January 2015.

[21] For more detail information about the districts, see appendix, pp. 362-363.

1.4: Survey of Previous Literature

For good research, it is very important for a researcher to have a clear idea of what actually the topic is going to cover and for that library is the perfect guide. As a part of the secondary literature in this present study, various works shape to understand the concept of religion in general and folk religion in particular. The whole secondary sources are classified into the following manner:

I. Literature related to the theoretical and conceptual framework for the present work.

II. The literature on other aspects related to religion and folk religion.

III. Literature related to the various aspects of Koch and other communities of Goalpara region of Assam. This part includes both English works as well as vernacular works.

IV. Literature related to the books on research methodology.

1.4.1: Literature Related to Theoretical and Conceptual Frame

The first part will discuss the conceptual and theoretical frame related to religion and culture. As the topic of the present work goes with the folk religion and belief system of the Koch community, the researcher is trying to investigate systematically the nature of the religion of the Koch community with the aim of formulating a more thorough understanding of the religion, folk belief systems and practices. The present theoretical framework that has employed is to pursue the aim and outline of the design of the research itself. Given the wideness of the concepts and theories, the present framework is interdisciplinary, borrowing the paradigms from folklore, cultural studies, anthropology, sociology and ritual studies.

1.4.1.1: The Evolutionary Approach

As religion can be said as a tradition which follows certain authoritative doctrines, institutional systems, leaders, and behavioural guidelines[22], the very first

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[22] Wai Yip Wong, "Defining Chinese Folk Religion: A Methodological Interpretation", *Asian Philosophy*, Vol. 21, Issue 2, 2011, p. 134.

attempt to separate the idea of "religion" from day to day human life was initiated by the western scholars. The western Anthropologists, Sociologists, intellectualists had tried to define a minimal classification of religion, which can be seen as an attempt to draw a line between the religious and non-religious elements of culture and also a trial to merge the idea of religion with some kind of beliefs in supernatural creature which has its own criticism not only in the East but also in the West. The concern of the anthropologists towards the various aspects of non-western societies led them to discover the fact that in having a basic belief in something that is superior to the human being is existed among many pre-literate or non-industrialized societies. The evolutionary theorists try to find out the origins, demarcate the stages and finally try to formulate the laws of the evolution. It was Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, known as the Father of Social Anthropologist, who first tried to give a rudimentary definition of religion in his classic work, *Primitive Culture.* In animism, Taylor finds the earliest and simplest form of religion and provides an intellectualist explanation of its evolution. The evolutionists' beliefs that mankind has progressed from animism to polytheism to monotheism or from magic to religion to science.

As a preliminary definition, Tylor defined religion as a belief system in spiritual being, which exists in almost every human society. Apparently, the existence of belief in a spiritual being is noticeable through various forms like Animism, Totemism, Polytheism, Monotheism etc. which are accompanied practically with different forms like myth, sacrifices, rituals, rites of passage, symbols etc.[23] In Tylor's 'Animistic Theory of Religion', the term 'Animism' used to designate the belief system in the supernatural being that is reflected through not only human but also through the non-human being also. Tylor's hypothesis on the double existence of human souls later transformed themselves into the spirits and then came forward with the idea of their continuation as gods among the primitive people. The emergence of the belief in gods through inanimate beings, for Tylor, formed the idea of religion through some ideological contents like rituals, worships, beliefs, practices etc. In this regard, Evans-Pritchard writes "Primitive

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[23] Subhadra M Channa, *International Encyclopaedia of Tribal Religions*, Vol. I, New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 2000, p, ii.

man then transferred this idea of soul to other creatures in some way like himself, and even to inanimate objects which aroused his interest."[24] It was the failure of human intelligence to transfigure the exact position of human experiences like dreams, vision, life and death which manifested the idea of soul to the spirit and finally to god. James George Frazer, on the other hand, defined religion as the stage towards rationality from irrationality in human intellectual development. Frazer is another evolutionary theorist who was very much influenced by Tylor. Frazer's theory of religion is actually an elaborated version of the idea of magic presented by Tylor.[25]

Tylor symbolized magic as a form of the religious phenomenon and accepted the fact that it is pretty much older than religion. For Tylor, magic is the mystical link between observation and further classification of similarities.[26] But for Frazer, the intellectual error led people towards magic and religion. According to Frazer, chronologically, the intellectual evolution of the human mind carries three stages: magic, religion and science. These are the stages which carry human thought from illusion to a stage of truth. The failure of magic developed the reliance towards a higher power: towards the birth of religion with the increasing beliefs in spirits and the practices to achieve their blessings. At the highest stage of human intellectual development, which is the stage of science, human tries to find the truth rejecting the stage religion as an illusion.

1.4.1.2: The Structural and Functional Approach

The structural and functional theories try to relate the religion to the needs of human or social organisms or else to the process of thought. As a social functionalist, Emily Durkheim offered a most brilliant and important theory of religion which is known as the sociological theory of religion. This theory is fully developed in his last major

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[24] E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965, p. 25.

[25] See- J. G Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, London: The Macmillan Press, 1974.

[26] Ibid. p. 26

work[27]. For Durkheim, religious ritual is an occasion for the expressive and reconstitution of the collective conscience. Durkheim was very much influenced by W. Robertson-Smith and his theory of sacrifice. For Robertson-Smith, a sacrifice was goaded by the wish for unity between members of the primitive group and their members[28]. He says that the rights, rituals or the activities of the religion whether those are ethical activities or ritual activities- all of those are religious. This is because of the object towards their orientation with a class of objects which are sacred. According to Durkheim, the sacred is the soul of religion that unites all religions. He writes, "religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community called the church, all those who adhere to them." Talking about sacred Durkheim said that religion is about sacred and a sacred is a system of beliefs and practices that deals with the sacred things. He further asserts that our day to day life is divided into two categories i.e. sacred and profane. Sacred is the distinction and the classification into the world sacred and to the profane. The distinction from profane marks the path of sacred. But Durkheim did not talk much about the nature of the sacred itself.

On the other hand, according to Bronislaw Malinowski religion and magic arise to meet the symbolic – integrative needs of man and society. Basically, the theories that have been given by Malinowski concentrates on the ethnographic data collection on the Trobriand Islanders of the South Pacific and his most important writings on religion are compiled in his work.[29] According to the general theory of culture given by Malinowski culture is considered as a network of institutions that arise to satisfy the biological as well as the derived needs of the human being. He further said that magic, science and religion constitute complementary and indispensable cultural apparatus for man's self and social preservation. For Evans-Pritchard, the explanation of magic and religion that has been given by Malinowski offers an emotionalist interpretation. He writes, "magic and religion

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[27] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, New York: The Free Press, 1995.

[28] W. Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, London: Continuum International Publishing Group, (1889). 2009 (reprint).

[29] Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, Illinois: The Free Press, 1948.

are thus both reduced to psychological status: tensions, frustrations, and emotions and sentiments and complexes and delusions of one sort or another."[30] Following Malinowski, E. E. Evans Pritchard[31] and A. R. Redcliffe-Brown[32] also applied the functional approach to describe religion, ritual and myth.

In the field of religious study, the structural approach of Claude Levi-Strauss is one of the leading figures. By using the structuralist methodology, Levi-Strauss has brought a new light in many conventional anthropological studies particularly in the field of religion such as myths, rituals and so on. In shaping the idea of structuralism, Levi-Strauss has influenced by many structural linguistics as well as the anthropological tradition of Durkheim. Among his works Structural Anthropology[33], The Savage Mind[34], Totemism[35] are among some of the major works written by Levi-Strauss that concerns with various aspects of primitive religion and magic. According to Levi-Strauss, primitive religion has a two-fold character. On the surface level, religion is concerned with something that is sacred and supernatural and on the other hand at the deeper level, it performs an intellectual function of providing conceptual categories of classification. For example, on the surface level totemism can be seen as a cult or religion, but for Levi-Strauss, it is a natural distinction created by man to make some social distinctions and to communicate certain messages. Therefore it is a language which has to decode in order to understand. For him, myths and rituals also have the same view. He says that myths are nothing but some objectified thoughts.

Another formalist-structuralist method that is very much important in order to analyse the tales especially the fairy tales is proposed by the Russian formalist Vladimir

[30] E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1965, p, 43.

[31] E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956.

[32] A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, *The Andaman Islanders*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922.

[33] Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, New York: Basic Books, 1976.

[34] Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966.

[35] Claude Levi-Strauss, *Totemism*, London: Merlin Press, 1991.

Propp. With his famous book "Morphology of Folktales"[36], Propp syntagmatically applies the literary analysis into the collections of Russian fairytales by *Afanasyev*. In the study of the Russian fairytales, his main concept is the function of the motif, which according to him repeatedly appears in the same sequence and therefore he believes that the fairy tales have the same structural feature.

1.4.1.3: The Performance Approach

Richard Bauman in his classic work[37] defines performance as "a unifying thread tying together the marked, segregated aesthetic genres and other spheres of verbal behaviour into a general unified conception of verbal art as a way of speaking"[38]. For him, verbal communication carries an aesthetic aspect that is connected to the specific setting and culture of those participating in the act of communication. The performances are very much culture specific and the performances are dependent on the context and the folk group among which the performance is performed. They carried certain reasons that have its own meaning can be understood by the members of the community itself. For Bauman, performance grows to be the constitutive realm of verbal art such as myths, stories, songs etc. as spoken communication.

Victor Turner in his book[39] mentioned that culture is most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their rituals and performances. For him, rituals are mostly depended upon the context and carried by the conscious and unconscious agreements taken by the members of the community. After doing an intense study on the *Ndembu* tribe of Zambia, Turner has brought the concept of luminal status and beliefs that this will help to create social bondage between the members of the community. For Turner, rituals are like a performance that has its own structure and continuity. There are various kinds of rituals such as to mark passage of time (harvest festival, birthday), to transform social status (wedding, puberty) and to ensure good fortune (prayers). Turner

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[36] Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of Folktale*, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1990.

[37] Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance,* Illinois: Waveland Press, 1984.

[38] Ibid, p, 05

[39] Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967.

has borrowed and developed his concept of liminality from the actual theories of rites of passage given by Van Gennep. Van Gennep describes the rites of passage as the rites that accompany every alteration of place, state, social position and age. According to him, all these rites of passage are marked by three different stages which are pre-liminal or separation, liminal or transition and post-liminal or incorporation. Here the separation phase signifies the detachment of the individual or group from an earlier fixed social structure or a cultural situation. In the second period i.e. the liminal period the novice passes through a cultural realm. Liminality or the last phase comes from the word '*limen*' which means "on the threshold" where one experiences a luminal position or space, one is the edge of something new, a transitional place. In the incorporation phase, the subject is accomplished. In the liminal phase, the subject is between the positions assigned and arranged by custom. In reincorporation when a person who has gone through a ritual return to society with a new status.[40]

1.4.2: Literature Related to Religion and Folk religion.

There are various works that have been extensively worked in religion and folk religion and tried to define their definitions. Many theories have been discussed in order to study religion properly. This segment deals with the books brings various ideas of folklore such as folk-narratives, proverbs, riddles, rituals, cultural performances, the material culture that are related to folk religion.

Alan Dundes in his edited book on sacred narrative[41] has mentioned the myth as the sacred narrative that explains how the world and humanity have evolved in their present form. He further said that what made the myth different from the folktale is its sacred nature. Through this work, the author has brought together the classics statements on the theory of myth by various authors from such as William Bascom, Lauri Hanko, Jan de Vries, James G. Frazer, G. S. Kirk, Claude Levi-Strauss, C. G. Jung, Mircea

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[40] Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, London: Routledge, (1960) 2004.

[41] Alan Dundes, *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth* (edited), New York: California University Publication, 1984.

Eliade and others. According to the author, the sacrality of the myth is reflected in the attitude of the storyteller and audience towards the form and content of the narratives.

Brian Morris discussed some of the major theories of the religion of different thinkers related to anthropology and sociology with his volume on religion[42]. As an introductory text of religion, Morris tried to explain different theories in a very simplified manner which is generally a little bit tough to understand. The best thing of this book is that it not only explains the theories but also gave an introductory paragraph of the theorists as well as their earlier works which helps the reader in understanding the theory in full. The main purpose of this study is to explore the basic arguments of the anthropological study of religious beliefs and institutions that have been developed within academia.

Claude Levi-Strauss's small work[43] which is originally a compilation of his five serial lectures prepared for Canadian Radio, in which, the author expresses that ever since the rise of science and the scientific method in the seventeenth century, mythology is seen as the product of superstitious and primitive minds and hence rejected. But due to the advances in the anthropological and sociological studies in the nineteenth and twentieth century, the relevance of myth in studying and understanding the human culture is given prominence. The lectures start with a discussion of the historical opening between science and mythology. It talks about the data that the understanding of the mythic levels are being reintegrated in our approach to facts. In addition to this theme, Strauss examines what generally assume "primitive thinking" and talks some of the common features about mythology. The concluding two lectures draw round the functional relationship between mythology and history as well as the structural relationship between music and mythology.

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[42] Brian Morris, *Anthropological Studies of Religion: An Introductory Text*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

[43] Claude Levi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning*, London & New York: Routledge Classics, 2001 (Reprint 2010).

C. J. Fuller's book[44] is a mixer of Hindu and non-Hindu facets which gives the shape of popular religion in India. His idea about popular Hinduism is based on the field experiences that are gained from Shri Minakshi-Sundareshwara temple of Madurai as well as among some non-Brahmins of Kerala. The main objective of this book is to give an understanding idea about Hinduism and India through a wider anthropological framework. Also, he tried to counterbalance the philosophical biases done by other general books on Hinduism. He wants to go beyond the traditional "orientalist" misconstruction of indigenous Hindu culture. Mainly concentrating on the popular theistic Hinduism, Fuller's deviated from the "textual Hinduism" and concentrates on the synchronic, structural, ethnographically base analysis. Through the whole book, Fuller makes a good attempt to construct a link in between the relationship among the deities and the Hindu people and their beliefs and that is reflected in the second chapter "*Gods and Goddesses*" too. In this chapter, he discussed Hindu polytheism and the nature of Hindu gods and goddesses. In Hindu polytheism, fluidity is an important characteristic which can be reflected in the concept of deity also. Fuller says, "one deity can become many and many deities can become one"[45]. He further says that there is only one god and various deities and gods are the different forms and deviation of that one God because "there is no clear-cut separation between great and little deities".[46]

Clifford Geertz's work[47] is basically a descriptive ethnographic report based on the direct observation from the field. The perceptive sensitivity of meaning and the theoretical explanation can be said as the strong point of this book. The whole book is divided into four parts, in which the first three-part deals with the three major variants of the Javanese religious system. Geertz very distinctively identifies as he manifested in Modjokuto, the mentality, beliefs and social settings of the "three main cultural types

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[44] C. J. Fuller, *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India,* Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004.

[45] Ibid, P. 30.

[46] Ibid, p. 55.

[47] Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java,* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960.

which reflect the moral organization of Javanese culture"[48]-*abangan, santri* and *prijaji*. According to Greetz, in present-day Javanese society, these three religious variants mainly associated with "three main social structural nuclei"[49]; the *abangan* with the village, the *santri* with the market and *prijaji* with the government bureaucracy. The main aim of this book is to examine the variations in ritual, the contrast in belief, and conflict in values lie although it is known that approx 90 per cent of Moslem lived in Java. Through the three different headings, Geertz actually tried to answer the question of the relations of their ideas of behaviour and also tried to conceptualize the legitimacy and significance of the Javanese religious situation on the basis of these three aspects. Geertz makes a clear distinction of Javanese religious life taking Robert Redfield's concept of the Great Tradition and Little tradition as the *prijaji* and the *abangan* variant which blends different aspects of Hindu and animistic beliefs along with the orthodox Islamic tradition the *santri* in it. More generally, the whole variant can be simplified as the Javanese or lower class (*abangan*), Islamic or middle class (*santri*) and Hindu or upper class (*prijaji*). The data that are collected on the *santri* variant are mainly sociological and political. On the other hand, in the case of *abangan* and *prijaji* they are purely ethnographic.

In his one of the work,[50] **David Kinsley** has preferred ten most celebrated goddesses from distinct traditions, epochs and who are known for their specific qualities like Durga, Sita, Inanna and Aphrodite, Mary and Athena, Laksmi, Kuan-yin and tries to search for the divine in feminine form. Each discussion includes history, myths, iconography and their various worshipping methods and festivals. Further, the author presents each goddess separately and draws their detail portrait situating them in their cultural context. He with his another book[51] has tried to categorise some of the important

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[48] Ibid. p. 4.

[49] Ibid. p. 5.

[50] David Kinsley, *The Goddesses Mirror: Visions of the Divine from East and West*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989.

[51] David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987.

goddesses in the Hindu religious tradition and describes the main appearances and roles of those goddesses in society. The author tries to provide to give an introduction to the most prominent female deities of the Hindu religion along with some of the important myths that are existed around them. Apart from that, he also explains the importance of each individual goddess within Hinduism and tries to show how she comes to represent important truths within the Hindu tradition. All the goddess is dealt with as an autonomous deity with their supporting rational myths, theology and in some cases, the cult of her own.

Don Yoder's article on folk religion[52] the whole article is divided into three parts. The first part deals with the development of the concept of folk religion through two dimensions. One is the German idea of "religious volkskunde" and another one is the synchronization of the main religion with the local forms and its anthropological study. The second part deals with the problems that the author faced in defining the concept of folk religion and the third part deals with authors own to try to give a definition of folk religion. Through this article, Don Yoder tried to define folk religion through various perspectives including both the simpler and the broader way. Studying the earlier works that have been done on folk religion, he tried to give his own definition of folk religion and focuses on the main problems in defining it.

Henry Whitehead's study on the South Indian village deities[53] confines on the description rather than the theory and he listed out ninety female deities and eighteen male deities of the region. The author argued that before the Aryan invasion in Southern India it was the Dravidians who established the tradition of the village god worship in the southern part of India and that is too a long time ago. He describes the origin of the worship of village pantheon, rituals, festivals animal sacrifices conducted in Tamil Nadu, Andhra and Karnataka states. He describes the nature and functions of village gods and goddesses in the society. He further put to discourse the social, moral and religious influence of the worship on the people's life. With this work, the author has tried to show

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[52] Don Yoder, "Towards a Definition of Folk Religion", *Western Folklore*, Vol. 33, No. 1, (January 1974).

[53] Henry Whitehead, *The Village Gods of South India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1916.

how the village deities represent the scenario of village life. Furthermore, he presented the hypothesis that their worshipping method i.e. animal sacrifice is nothing but the survival of the existence of the totemism that is used to practice in their nomadic lives.

Ichiro Hori, Joseph M. Kitagawa & Alan L. Miller's article[54] is based on the Haskell Lectures on History of Religion which is given by the author Ichiro Hori in 1965 at the University of Chicago. This book is written on the basis of that lectures given by the author and in the compilation of that lectures in the form of a book he tried to keep the same notes, bibliography and glossaries as it was in the oral form as much as possible. The main aim of this book is to give an outline of the main features and characteristics of the folk religion of Japan, which has been transmitted from the early phase of Japanese history. Like other parts of the world Japanese folk religion also has also many similarities with the archaic and primitive religion. According to Hori, Japanese folk religion has the unique feature of the blending of the written alien religion with the local indigenous elements by which the present form is based. Also, Buddhism and religious Taoism have a great impact in forming the Japanese religion. According to Hori, historically Japanese folk religion has greatly conditioned the political, economic, and cultural developments. Explaining the religion of Japan in the 'folk' level, Hori argues that various features of the religious systems such as Buddhism, religious Taoism, Yin-Yang school, Confucianism, Christianity etc were blended to meet the spiritual need of the common people. His main aim is not to give a description of Shinto and Buddhism, rather these religious ideas were discussed is only to extend the contribution in the development of the folk religious tradition of Japan and the perspectives of folk religion.

Max Weber's famous book on the religion[55] discussed religion from its basic animistic beginnings to the development of priesthoods. He analyzed the world's most of the major religious traditions and their social consequences throughout history. He discussed three main themes in his book and they are the effect of religious ideas on economic activities, the relation between social stratification and religious ideas and the

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[54] Ichiro Hori, Joseph M. Kitagawa & Alan L. Miller, *Folk Religion in Japan: Continuity and Change,* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968.

[55] Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, London: Social Science Paperback, 1966.

third one is the distinguishable characteristics of western civilization. Weber basically tried to understand the relationship between society and religion and society and culture in general from the comparative and evolutionary approach.

Mircea Eliade's with his study[56] represents his understanding of the methods and data relating to the history of religion. The main theme of this book is that Eliade's observation about the contemporary people who believe that the world is entirely profane or secular, but at the same time they also find themselves connected unconsciously to the memory of something called sacred. He actually tries to describe the various experiences of sacred collected by different religious people. Mircea Eliade starts his discussion by positioning his study with Rudolf Otto's idea of 'The Sacred', he points out that the religious experience of sacred that Otto has discussed is irrational. But Eliade's concern with what he describes the sacred in its entirety[57]. Further trying to give a possible definition of the sacred, Eliade defines sacred as something which is opposite to the profane. It is the manifestation of the reality which is not a part of the profane world and is comparable to power.

1.4.3: Literature related to Koch and other communities of Assam.

This part analyses the books written on various aspects of the Koch community and its neighbouring communities that share various common routine life in their daily cultural settings. That is the books that deal with the expressive behaviour of the Koches, Bodos and Rabhas and their history, folk-narratives, proverbs, riddles, rituals, cultural performances, and material culture.

In this regard, **Birendranath Datta's** study on the Goalpara Region of Assa*m*[58] is important work to understand the socio-cultural life of the communities living in the Goalpara region. In this book, the author has described almost all aspects of folk cultural life including customs, oral literature, art and crafts, the language of the Goalpara region.

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[56] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion,* New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1987.

[57] Ibid. p. 10

[58] Birendranath Data, *A Study of the Folk Culture of the Goalpara Region*, Guwahati: University Publication Department, Gauhati University, 1995.

Here he included information with examples from various communities inhabited in that region and examples are discussed from tribal and non-tribal communities of the region and "since Rajbansis form the bulk of the population of the region"[59]; the author has given more information about the Koch (Rajbansi) community while he was describing the rituals and customs of the Goalpara region. But, because the book is based on the folk culture of the Goalpara region, the concern towards the individual description about a single community is absent. **Dwijen Nath's** book[60] written in the Assamese language also focuses on the folklife of the Goalpara region including the region- its geography and history and its various folk narrative forms. Most of the articles have been dedicated to the folk songs of the region and discussed primarily on various motifs reflected in those folk songs popular in the region. On the other hand**, Dhiren Das'** "*Goalparia Loka Xongskriti Aru Loka Geet"*[61] is another vernacular work based on the Goalpara region. It concentrates on the collection and description of various folk culture and folk songs of the region. It is a documentation of the folklife of the people that live in the region and most of the examples and descriptions that have been included in this work are basically from the Koch-Rajbansi community. The author has not included the cultural examples from Bodo, Rabha, Garo or Santhal community who has also inhabitants in the region.

D. Nath[62] discusses the history of the Koches-their racial affinity and original homeland, the foundation of the Koch kingdom by Biswasingha to the climax of the power. This book also gives light on the cultural changes and development of the people during the Koch reign when Neo-Vaisnavite movement was launched by Sankardeva and Madhavdeva and they received active patronage from the Koch kings. On the other hand, **Rup Kumar Barman**[63] focused very briefly about the state formation by the Koches from early fifteen century. He provides very new insights into the role of warfare in the

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[59] Ibid. p. 12

[60] Dwijen Nath, *Goalparia Loka Xongskriti*, Guwahati: Banalata, 2008.

[61] Dhiren Das, *Goalparaia Loka Xongskriti Aru Loka Geet,* Guwahati: Chandra Prakash, 1994.

[62] D. Nath, *History of the Koch Kingdom (c 1515-1615)*, New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1989.

[63] Rup Kumar Barman, *From Tribalism to State: Reflections on the Emergence of the Koch Kingdom (Early Fifteenth Century to 1773*, Delhi: Abhijeet Publications, 2007.

state formation, centralization of the political power, exploitation of surplus by the state, monetization of the economy and correlations between the legitimization of power and the cultural change of the subjects.

Ambika Choran Choudhury's vernacular work[64] gives an introductory light to the history and cultural life of the Koch-Rajbongshi people of greater Assam from pre-Vedic age to 1956 A.D. The present work gives a very good resume of all the facts that have been recorded both in the written literature like the Puranas and other oral traditional literature. By this book, the author has made a quite important contribution to the study of the historical and cultural aspects of the community. **Dwijendra Nath Bhakat's** work[65] written in the Assamese language discussed the socio-economic and cultural life of the Koch-Rajbongshi community living in the western part of Assam. Here, although the author deals with the life of the Koch-Rajbongshi of the western Assam (by western Assam, the author actually means with the undivided Goalpara district), he also includes information about the Koches of another part of Assam as well as from North Bengal. **Dwijendra Nath Bhakat's** other vernacular work[66] is a collection of the Rajbansi folk literature collected and compiled by the author in the Assamese language. By the title "Rajbanshi Loka-Sahitya" the author means the folk literature that exists in Rajbongshi language among the Rajbongshi spoken people. In this book, the author has collected and classified various folk literature of Rajbongshi language including proverbs, phrases, lullaby, riddles etc. On the other hand **Sivendra Narayan Koch's** book[67] is a critical analysis on the Koch tribe of Assam and North East region. It is written in the Assamese language comprising eighteen short articles. With these articles, the author has tried to discuss various aspects related to the Koch community starting from origin to its migration, its history, debate regarding its Kachari origin and so

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[64] Ambika Choran Choudhury, *Koch-Rajbongshi Jono Gosthir Itihax Aru Xonskriti,* Bongaigaon: Unique Printers, 2011, 3rd edition.

[65] Dwijendra Nath Bhakat, *Axomor Koch-Rajbongshi Jonojati*, Dhubri: Ms Ananya Bhakat, 2008.

[66] Dwijendra Nath Bhakat, *Rajbansi Loka Sahitya,* Dhubri: Centre for Ethnic Studies and Research, 2013.

[67] Sivendra Narayan Koch, *Koch Janagosthir Atit Sandhanat Ati Khoj,* Tura: Meghalaya Koch Sanmilan, 2012.

on. Although we cannot blindly accept all the arguments made by the author, we have to agree that the author has made a very good attempt to understand and to analyse his arguments. Moreover, his arguments led us to think for at least once not to blindly believe the entire hypothesis made by the missionaries and other intellectualists. While other authors have been using the Rajbansi term with the 'Koch', the author has completely rejected the term Rajbansi and said all Rajbansis are not Koch. **Sudipta Dutta's** thesis work[68] submitted to the Department of Folklore, Gauhati University under the guidance of Dr Anil Bodo throws light on the social folk customs of the Koch community of the West Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. The whole thesis is divided into ten chapters including one for the introduction and one for the summary and conclusion. Starting from a general introduction of the community and their population and inhabitants in Garo Hills gives a chapter to the social folk custom (chapter-3), religion and belief system (chapter-4), festivals and celebrations (chapter-5), traditional dress, songs, dances and musical instruments (chapter-6), recreation and games (chapter-7), folk medicine (chapter-8) and finally gives an idea on the modernization and changing lifestyle of the Koches (chapter-9). Although the author is not clearly making any division between the Koch community of Meghalaya and the Koch community of Assam, the author has made a point by saying that "the Koches of Garo Hills are much different from Koch caste of the Brahmaputra valley. The Koches of the Garo Hills claim themselves as an independent community"[69]. Regarding the social folk custom of the Koches, the author has mentioned that they propitiate the supernatural powers for the acquisition of the things or objects they desire and their religious beliefs are very influenced by Hinduism.

Bodos are another community who has a great population in the Goalpara region who has a close affinity with Koches culturally. **Bhabendra Narzi's** vernacular book[70] written in the Assamese language looks on the various aspects of Bodo society and

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[68] Sudipta Dutta (Bhowmik), *Social Folk Custom of the Koches in West Garo Hills*, Guwahati: Department of Folklore, Gauhati University, 2008 (Unpublished).

[69]Ibid. p. 177.

[70] Bhabendra Narzi, *Bodo-Kacharir Xomaj Aru Xonskriti*, Guwahati: Bina Library, 2000.

culture in an Indo-Mongoloid background based on actual field material gathered by the writer. The book has been divided into seven parts and the very outset the author deals with the origin of the Mongoloids (Kiratas) in the Indian background and talks about their spreads in northeast India. He gives very interesting information from various legends of creation supported by literary texts and folk beliefs. Bodo culture is a part and parcel of Indo-Mongoloid culture. The Mongoloid Bodo culture of Assam has to some extent influenced the Indo-Aryan Assamese culture and vice versa. The book overall discusses various aspects of the Bodo cultural life in general and its relationship with Assamese culture. On the other hand, **Anil Boro's** book[71] is a descriptive and analytical study that explored the domain of folklore and literature of the Bodo community from structuralist and folkloric perspectives. He mentioned that the oral lore or literature of the Bodos will help the readers to understand the inside of the folk and their oral history. Here, the author has tried to cover almost all aspects of folk literature including songs related with religious context and seasonal festivals, songs associated with rites of passage, prose narratives as well as the social function and aesthetic aspects of Bodo community. Moreover, he classified the Bodo folk literature into different genres on the basis of their function and structure. **Kameswar Brahma**[72] has described the socio-religious aspects of the Bodo community of Assam. The book describes the social customs and traditions of the Bodos relating to the birth, puberty, death, marriage, religious beliefs and practices. This book is a part of his research work[73] submitted in Gauhati University under the guidance of Dr Birendranath Datta. The work has a total of eleven chapters including the introduction and conclusion chapter. In this thesis, the author has tried to look on the socio-religious beliefs, practices, festivals and ceremonies of the Bodo community with the special reference to the Bodo people of Kokrajhar district. The author has very well described the preservation of their age social customs, beliefs and practices by the Bodo people and he makes a point by saying that there are many common things in the social customs, beliefs and practices can be seen among the non-Bodo Hindu neighbours too.

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[71] Anil Boro, *Folk Literature of the Bodos,* Guwahati: N. L. Publications, 2014.

[72] K. Brahma, *Aspects of Social Customs of the Bodos*, Guwahati: Bina Library, 2008.

[73] Kameswar Brahma, *A Study of Socio-Religious Beliefs, Practices and Ceremonies of the Bodos,* Guwahati: Department of Folklore, Gauhati University, 1987 (Unpublished).

He says, "many things are found common and it may be possible due to the acculturation"[74].

While the Koches of Assam has shared a close cultural affinity with the Bodos, it is the Rabha community who has also a close tie with the Koches not only culturally but linguistically too in both Assam and Meghalaya. **Upen Rabha Hakacham's** book on Rabha community[75] is a collection of some selected articles based on Rabha culture and society written in the Assamese language. This book is a compilation of twenty-two articles that throws light on various aspects of the Rabha culture and society including festivals, marriage systems, the origin of the community and its name to its transition of culture at present time. The seventh article of this book basically talks about the folk religion of the Rabhas and their religious beliefs. The author has mentioned that the Rabha community does not have one authorized religion that they can demand as their own[76]. The influence of animism, naturism, taboo, totemism can be seen more or less among their traditional religious beliefs and practices. On the other hand, **Rajen Rabha** with his work[77] discussed the socio-cultural life of the Rabha community. The book is divided into six parts. The first part deals with the origin and demographic settlement of the Rabhas in Assam, second part talks about social life and material culture of the Rabhas and the third part deals with the social custom of the Rabhas. The fourth part which basically deals with the religion of the Rabhas talks about their beliefs on cosmology, reincarnation, spiritualism, animism and gives a detail description of the folk deities and ghosts. The fifth part deals with folk songs and the last part talks about their language.

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[74] Ibid. p. 317.

[75] Upen Rabha Hakacham, *Rabha Xomaj Aru Xonskriti*, Guwahati: N. L. Publications, 2010.

[76] Ibid. p. 81.

[77] Rajen Rabha, *Rabha Janajati*, Guwahati: Bina Library, 1994.

1.4.4: Literature related to the books on research methodology.

To carry out the work on the folk religion of the Koch community requires the collection of various secondary source material and thick data from the field study. The work needs a comprehensive understanding of various methodologies and its applications. In order to do that the work has referred to some selective methodological works that are mentioned below.

B. L. Kothari[78] discusses the main research methods employed in Social Sciences and other disciplines and their characteristics. These methods are sampling, comparative, historical and survey method. These methods are very prominent in Social Science research to collect and interpret the data gathered from the field.

Jerry Wellington and Marcin Szczerbinski's work[79] explains that in Social Sciences research methods are not a simplistic method, but instead, it has its nature, value, uses and limitations. Further, he gives detail information about the differences between various methods that are basically used in Social Sciences research like experimental, practitioner and action research. Moreover, the author highlights the advantages of some of the methods like observation and focus group discussion.

John D Brewer[80] explains various issues in social science research and how to carry out social science research. He also discussed the implementation of certain techniques in the research. He exemplifies some of the major features of ethnographic research. By defining what ethnography is, the author has mentioned that it is one of the most important research methods in the social sciences. Further, he discussed the research process in ethnography, the data collection technique, analyse and interpretation of those ethnographic data and how to present them. He also discussed the postmodern approaches to ethnography.

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[78] B. L. Kothari, *Research Methodology: Tools and Training*, Jaipur: ABD Publishers, 2007.

[79] Jerry Wellington and Marcin Szczerbinski, *Research Methods for the Social Sciences,* New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007.

[80] John. D. Brewer, *Ethnography,* Jaipur*:* Rawat Publications, 2010.

Kenneth S. Goldstein[81] has suggested the ethnography approach is best in doing fieldwork in folklore and although it depends upon the fieldworker's capability on using the tools and techniques. The book also discussed various methods and techniques including observation and interview. Further, he claimed that in folklore the fieldwork can be said as a personal relationship between the informant and the collector and the sensitivity of the collector towards the human value and personality is very much essential in the field. Before entering into the field, the collector should have enough to knowledge about the field- its people, culture, religion and its environment.

Ram Ahuja[82] gives information about the concepts and theoretical knowledge that is used in Social Science research and Behavioral Sciences studies. The book has been divided into six parts and each chapter is discussed from the viewpoint of various writers and scholars as well as the author himself with a number of examples. In Social Science, the qualitative and quantitative methods are considered as the main methods and these two methods are very important in the research field. Under the quantitative method, the survey method can be used for the comprehensive study of a particular community as a whole. It also can be used in the descriptive analysis of a particular community.

1.5: Lacunae in Previous Works

After reviewing the existing literature so far, it is clear that the independent works on Koch community are available only in terms of historical consequences and ongoing ethnic movements. A general introduction to the community is also available in vernacular works. Moreover, other aspects like festival, rituals, religion etc. are discussed mostly under the theme of *Goalporiya* culture. Although few vernacular works pen down the rich and colourful oral tradition of the Koches, these works are mostly descriptive. Here, the content is given significance rather than their cultural context. Various folklore genres are also not systematically collected, evaluated and interpreted from the viewpoint of the community. Most of the works are based on political, administrative, missionaries'

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[81] Kenneth S. Goldstein, *A Guide for Fieldworkers in Folklore.* Hatboro, Pa.: Folklore Associates, 1964.

[82] Ram Ahuja, *Research Methods*, Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2001.

field report and other similar works that lack to reveal the soul of their mundane life. The oral religious tradition that brings the richness to the religious life the community and its associated ritual behaviours like festivities, ritual performances, narratives across the community member was not appropriated as source material. The description of various rituals is not analysed and interpreted from the perspective of religious importance and ritual theories.

The deities, the belief system, ritual performances, worldview were not constituted thick corpus data in the previous works. The schism of its traditional religion which constructed its own identity by showing deviations from official Hinduism was not being understood as to how incorporative the religion is. The folklore genres like beliefs, narratives, ritual festivities, both communal and personal as customary and obligatory- which are the manifestations of people's worldview and expressions of the Koch identity, were not paid much attention in those studies.

1.5: Hypothesis

From the above discussion, it is hypothesis that:

➢ The religion of the Koch community, whether it is Hinduism or any other mainstream religion, the folk religious beliefs are still alive among their traditional beliefs and practices. The Koch community of Assam has constructed their own religious identity by showing deviations of their folk religion from mainstream Hinduism and reflected the incorporative nature of religion.

➢ The traditional Koch culture is very much introvert in nature and come under the external demands due to its historical contacts and cultural domination of great Indian tradition and therefore could not remain immune to those external forces. Folk religious practices are inherited by the Koch community in a way of hybridization and kept its hybridity by adaptation from its surrounding environment and cultures. In a way, the folk religion of the Koches is more and more a synchronized form of religion.

➤ The folk religious life is manifested in the folklore and folklife of the Koch community in the form of folk-narratives, proverbs, songs, speech, idioms, beliefs, and rituals (personal and communal) which get reflected in their worldview.

➤ Narratives are constructed by the people of the community in regard to the experiences on the miracles of the deities and the natural forces to keep regulating the life of the people. Since narratives are the cultural constructs and metaphors of the cultural life of the people, narratives are the most important oral documents in order to understand the socio-cultural-religious life of the people.

➤ The idea of images as well the allocation and construction of specific space in the worship and the belief systems related to the deities in different circumstances give a new dimension in the study of cultural symbolism. The images that are used to reflect the deities can be said as the cultural metaphors that existed in their different social systems. Therefore, the existence of cultural symbolism is clearly visible in the sacred spaces that are used to worship.

1.7: Aims and Objectives

Keeping in view the above hypothesis, the aims and objectives of the present study are framed. They are:

➤ To look at the relationship between the religious and social behaviour of the community.

➤ To look at the role of folk religious beliefs and practices in the ritual life of the community and its interrelationship with the other greater religions and how far folk religion constructed its own Koch identity.

➤ To identify and classify the folk deities of the Koch community with the symbolic and semiotic values and connects the relationship between the images of the deities and their cultural practices and beliefs.

➤ To understand their concept of supernatural beings and their connection with cosmos, the human being that forms their Koch religious identity. In other

words, the present thesis will try to understand their religious worldview that will mirror their social structures and hierarchies.

1.8: Methodological Framework

In studying a definite subject matter systematically and in gaining knowledge regarding the topic, a research methodology is necessary. A methodology is a scientific approach designed to carry out research work keeping in view the nature of the subject under study. Every method has a fixed outlay and follows certain scheduled steps. There are two types of data collection sources i.e. primary sources and secondary sources. The present work entitles *"Folk Religion and Mythology of Koch Community of Assam"* deals with the day to day socio-religious life and practices of the Koch community. The present study is an outcome of both primary and secondary sources.

1.8.1: Primary sources:

Since the area of the topic is on the folk religion and mythology of the Koch community, the primary sources of the study includes folklore of the community both verbal and non-verbal genres of expressions like myths, legends, songs, tales, beliefs, proverbs, riddles, ritual performances, material culture associated with the gods and goddesses along with the cultural life of the community. Folklore of the community both verbal and non-verbal will be collected from the community.

1.8.2: Secondary sources

The secondary sources comprise historical and literary works. The historical sources include official records, gazetteers, chronicles etc. The literary sources consist of works so far done or studied connected to the subject under study like books, articles, dissertations, journals, newspaper articles etc.

1.9: Methods

In the study of the present topic, both qualitative and quantitative methods are being used.

1.9.1: Quantitative Methods

Quantitative method is the study of a particular phenomenon based on the collection of numerical data. The term quantitative research refers to approaches to empirical inquiry that collect, analyze, and display data in numerical rather than narrative form.[83] The collection of quantitative data includes survey method and questionnaire that is structured with the closed answers. The data is used to generalize and applied to a large population.

1.9.1.1: Survey method

Survey method is considered as one of the most common methodologies in social sciences. Survey research is referred to the set of methods used to assemble the data in a systematic way from a variety of individuals, organizations, or other units of interest. Precise methods may comprise questionnaires (on paper or online), interviews that are conducted by any method; e.g. individual interviews were done face to face or via telephone, focus groups or observation such as structured observations of people using internet access stations at a public library. This kind of entry focuses on methods most usually associated with survey research such as questionnaires as well as in interviews.[84] The present study uses a survey method to identify the Koch population who lives in the Goalpara region with the other community members. This helps to identify the influences and regional variations in the narratives and also by using this method, the differences in the rituals and rites associated with the community people of different geographical locations can be drawn.

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[83] Lisa M. Given, *The Sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods*, Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2008, p, 713.

[84] Lisa M. Given, *The Sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods*, Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2008, p. 846.

1.9.2: Qualitative Methods

Qualitative research is an umbrella term for the approach or process through which a researcher collects data 'in the form of words or pictures'.[85] It is the method that is used in all Social Science research to study the things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

1.9.2.1: Observation method

Observation method is a method in which the researcher observed and understands the field and the scene from outside in its natural form and describes as he/she sees it. A researcher here becomes "… an instrument that absorbs all sources of information"[86].This approach is essential to observe the ritual practices of the community on festivals and ceremonies etc. It helps to understand the community and their culture in context.

1.9.2.2: Participant observation method

In this method, a researcher himself becomes the participant and involved in the field with the people and observes the community's culture and the field. This will help the researcher to get close and intimate with the community and gives the researcher to gain familiarity with a group of individuals.

1.9.2.3: Non-participant observation method

This particular method is the opposite of the participant observation method. In this method, the researcher would not engage directly with the participants. The researcher observes the particular field without their knowledge that they are being observed. In this way, without any interaction, he/she observe, listen, note and record the field. Electrical instruments like cameras and tape recorders are very much useful to

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[85] W Lawrence Neuman, *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches,* Allyn and Bacon: London, 1997, p, 30.

[86] Ibid. p, 361

record the audio-visual aspects of the events. This method is used to observe the rituals ceremonies and prayers and sacrificial ceremonies.

1.9.2.4: Ethnographic method

Ethnography is the systematic study of people and cultures. It is designed to study culture as phenomena where the researcher observes society from the perspective of the community or people in it. Ethnography is a graphic description of the people/culture or processes. It helps in comprehending a culture in its own existing form without disturbing it. It involves observation and interaction with the participants and sometimes allows a researcher to participate in their practices as well. It tries to bring out the meaning from day to day cultural life of the people under study[87]. Interestingly in ethnographic researcher, the researcher has many roles to play; they are complete participant, complete observer, participant as observer and observer as participant. By taking different roles in field research the folklore researcher may collect information from different perspectives[88]. It is because fieldwork is the process by which folklorists apply their concepts and put their theories of the discipline to the test.

1.10: Techniques

In this research, the most popularly used techniques are given below:

1.10.1: Interview

An interview is a conversation between two or more people where questions are asked by the interviewer to elicit facts or statements from the interviewee. It is a technique to draw information directly from the community members that a researcher could not get through the observation methods, which are essentially non-verbal in nature.

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[87] Roderick Nixon, "Ethnography". www.rhetcomp.gsu.edu/efolio/USERS/r012671/Ethnography.doc

[88] S. Kenneth Goldstein, *A Guide for Fieldworkers in Folklore,* Hatboro, Pa.: Folklore Associates, 1964.

1.10.2: Unstructured questionnaire

A research questionnaire is a research instrument consisting of a series of questions to procure the relevant information from the respondents. The questionnaire can be classified into two types: structured and unstructured. In the structured questionnaire, the researcher set the questions in advance. On the other hand, in the unstructured questionnaire, the questions and the sequence in which they are asked are not precisely determined in advance. Because the questions that are asked are open, it is also known as open-ended questionnaire and the data that are collected under this category is of qualitative in nature.

With the help of the above mentioned methods and techniques, data will be collected from the field and the same will be substantiated with the available literature to draw out scientific and logical conclusions.

1.11: Scheme of Chapters

The scheme of chapters for the present study is:

Chapter I: Introduction deals with the background of the study and gives a brief account of the land, the Koch community and religion. It also talks about the significance of the study, scope and nature of the study, the survey of previous literature, lacunae in previous literature, hypothesis, aims and objectives, methodology, and the gist of the chapters in the thesis.

Chapter II: Folk-Life of Koch Community: An Overview gives a brief overview of the folk-life of the Koch in order to understand their uniqueness hidden in their expressive behaviours. The present chapter discusses various aspects of the folk-life of the Koches in various segments. These segments include a brief understanding of their religious associations reflected in various folk genres, social and political life, economic activities, a variety of social folk customs, rituals, religion, material culture etc. In this way, the chapter introduces the nuances of folklife of Koches which centers around their religiosity.

Chapter III: Life Cycle Rituals: The Religiosity of Koches throws a light on various life cycle rituals that are celebrated by Koches in their socio-cultural context. These life cycle rituals are an integral part of their social life that stands as the symbol for their folk religiosity at the personal level as well as carries their communal identity. For that, the selected life cycle ritual is discussed in this chapter. Further, theoretical facets related to ritual (in general) and life cycle ritual (in particular) is also conferred here. Different ritual phases in the selected Koch life cycle rituals- birth, marriage and death are also interpreted and analysed considering the community's viewpoint. These rituals are considered to explain how much the religiosity of the Koch folk life is reflected through these rituals. Additionally, indigenous models of Koch life cycle ritual have also been developed in the chapter to show the distinctiveness from the models that have been developed in the west.

Chapter IV: Calendrical Rituals as the Metaphor of Koch Folk Religious Life focuses mainly on various calendrical rituals. These calendrical rituals carry the sign of the socialisation process representing the Koch identity. For that, the calendrical rituals are discussed in two broad categories i.e. **Category I:** Communal rituals and **Category II:** Agricultural Rituals. In the **Category: I,** some selected communal rituals which are mostly religious in nature are discussed and analysed. On the other hand, in **Category II**, the agricultural rituals that are based on the agricultural calendar have been discussed. The engagement of various religious aspects is also discussed and analysed here. Further, indigenous ritual models of each communal ritual which are different from the familial ritual are also developed.

Chapter V: Folk Deities of Koch Community: A Typological study is dedicated to a typological study of the folk deities of the Koch community. Folk deities are an integral part of their religious beliefs and practices of Koch community. The folk deities act as a unifying factor in social life. Therefore, the folk deities of the Koch community have been studied based on various classifications. These classifications include geographical distribution, spatial dimension, functions, worship patterns, visualization of deities etc. As most of the deities have not been represented by an idol, the symbolic representation of the deities becomes the central key in worshipping them.

Therefore, the present chapter will also try to look at the symbolic - semiotic relationship between the images of the deity and their cultural products. This will also look at the influences and impact of Hinduism among the deities and their worshipping methods.

Chapter VI: Koch Worldview in Religious Life and Mythology discusses the religious worldview reflected in their mundane life as well as in the myths and narratives. For that, the chapter was divided into two parts. First part will talk about the definition, history and theoretical analysis of worldview and the second part will look at the Koch understanding of the world. The analysis and interpretation of Koch understanding of cosmology and cosmogony and how these have been reflected in their socio-cultural life and in the narrative tradition is the prime concern of this chapter.

Chapter VII: Conclusion will bring out the conclusion about the study along with the findings and suggestions for further research.

Chapter: 2

FOLKLIFE OF KOCH COMMUNITY: AN OVERVIEW

2.1: Introduction

The term folklife represents the everyday mundane traditional knowledge that encompasses the very essence of the cultural representation of a particular group. The community congregates their age-old experiences from observations, practices and participation and shares that lore by means of conversation, reproduction and practices. These are the living traditions that deeply ingrained into the cultural life of the members of the community that shares a common concept of religion, language, ethnic origin, occupation etc. The folklife of a community reflects the traditional expressive culture that is shared by the people inside a variety of groups of the society such as ethnic, familial, religious, regional, and occupational. The expressive traditions embraces a thick variety of creative and symbolic forms like language, belief, ritual, custom, technical skills, art, architecture, music, dance, drama, pageantry and handicraft allocated within the various groups of society.[1] It is the living tradition that carries the very essence of life and value of that community that is expressed in their numerous day to day interactions through orality, practice or observation. The vast paradigms of history, environment, geography, economy, society, religion, folklore etc. influence the life of the community in such a manner that it becomes so much important to understand all these different aspects to establish the archetype of a community's identity.

The study of the folklore or folklife of a particular community or group will enhance our understanding of that particular group's life pattern, the way of life and their difference from another group, with its own specific identity. These varied folk systems bind the community to have a homogenous character through its common factors that are hidden in their folklife. In this regard, a brief overview of various aspects of Koch folklife is given to understand the Koch identity.

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[1] https://www.loc.gov/folklife/public_law.html, 18th May 2017.

2.2: Racial Origin and Affinity of Koch

The Koches are popularly believed to be the people of Mongoloid origin of the great Bodo race who migrated from the hilly terrain of Tibet. But as they do not have any recorded documents about their origin, it is very much tough to say about their migration and how they have settled down at the present land. It is always a matter of controversy regarding the migration and origin of the Koches. But presently most of the scholars and oral narratives pointed them to be originally belonging from the Himalayan region, most probably the Tibet. Though the study has been done by many contemporary anthropologists and sociologists about the Koches but Britishers are the pioneers to have encountered the community and conduct the study on them.

Regarding the origin of the name 'Koch', many scholars viewed that the terms i.e. *Kuvaca* and *Kuvacaka* that are used by the *Yogini Tantra* and *Padma Purana* respectively are actually means to the Koches. Gait also commented that the Koches were "frequently referred as Kuvacha in the *Puranas* and *Tantras*".[2] S. K. Chatterji also beliefs that the term *Kuvaca* referred by *Yogini Tantra* and *Padma Purana* as *Kuvacaka* are actually the Koches who used to speak evil language and have some kind of dirty food habits.[3] Discussing about these terms D. Nath says "it is possible that because of their difference particularly in food habits and speeches the Aryan scholars used to call them as such or sometimes as Mleccha" and beliefs that the term *Mleccha*, as K. L. Baruah suggested that might be a Sanskritised form of the term Mech.[4] Regarding the relation between Koch and Mech, Gait as well as S. K. Chatterji beliefs that they are belong to the same family. Even Darrang Raj Vamsavali also did not make any differentiation between the Koches and the Meches. S. K. Chatterji, further mentioned that the term Koc or rather Komc comes "from a Middle Indo-Aryan source from Kawōmca written Kamōca, which could

[2] Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, Guwahati: LBS Publications, 2005 (reprint), p. 43

[3] Suniti Kumar Chatterji, *Kirāta-Jana-Kriti*, Kolkata: The Asiatic Society, 2011 (third reprint), p.113.

[4] D. Nath, *History of the Koch Kingdom (c. 1515-1615)*, Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1989, p. 7.

be properly Sanskritised as Kambōja…"[5] and said that these Kambojas of Bengal are seems to be the ancestors of the Koch people of North Bengal.[6]

In terms of their racial origin, Colonel Dalton considered the Koch belonging to the Dravidian stock because their appearance displayed "the thick protuberant lips and maxillaries of the Negro".[7] Further, to support his own claim, he forwarded the opinion of a resident of Koch Behar, who used to be a medical officer described Koches as having "face flat…. Eyes black and oblique; hair black and straight, in some curling; nose flat and short; cheek bones prominent; beard and whisker rather deficient; ….colour of skin in most instances black; side of head rather flattened; forehead retreating".[8] Oldham also accepted them as Dravidian origin and says "the most conspicuously Dravidian race in Bengal".[9] On the contrary, Risley while accepting the Koches unquestionably a 'non-Aryan and non-Hindu' community, mentioned the Koches as a Mongolo-Dravidian origin and said that they are "a large Dravidian tribe of North - Eastern and Eastern Bengal, among whom there are grounds for suspecting some admixture of Mongolian blood".[10] B. C. Allen also accepted the mix lineages of Koches; he argues "they appear to be of mixed lineage. On the west their affinities are with the Dravidian stock, on the east with the Mongolian".[11]

Gait observed those arguments and admitted the existence of some uncertainty regarding its racial affinity. Considering the views of Dalton, Oldham, Risley; he gives his own conclusion "there seems, however, to be no doubt that the true Koches were mongoloid race very closely allied to the Meches and Garos; and we find that in

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[5] Suniti Kumar Chatterji, *Kirata-Jana-Kriti*, Kolkata: The Asiatic Society, 2011 (third reprint), p. 113.

[6] D. Nath, *History of the Koch Kingdom (c. 1515-1615)*, Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1989, p. 7.

[7] Edward Tuite Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1872, p. 90.

[8] Ibid.

[9] H. H. Risley, *Tribes and Castes in Bengal, Vol. I*, Calcutta: Firma Mukhopadhyay, 1981, p.491.

[10] Ibid.

[11] B. C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers, Volume III: Goalpara*, Calcutta: The City Press, 1905, p. 51.

Jalpaiguri, Koch Behar and Goalpara, the persons now known as Rajbansi are either pure Koches who, though dark have a distinctly Mongoloid Physiognomy, or else a mixed breed, in which the Mongoloid element usually preponderates".[12] Grierson also accepted the Koches as the Mongolian group in origin, but at the same time he also acknowledged the possibility of interaction with the other Dravidian communities. Refereeing to the Report of the Census of Assam for 1891, he commented, "In Bengal they have intermingled with the surrounding aboriginal tribes and have acquired a caste of feature which is partly Dravidian, while in Assam they have preserved their original Mongolian type".[13] Hodgson also commented that they represent a "distinctly marked type of the Mongolian family" very much similar to the Bodos and the Dhimals.[14] Buchanon and Dacca Blue book also classified them with Bodo and Dhimal.[15] S. K. Chatterji also agrees that the Koches have the Mongoloid origin and accepted them as Indo-Mongoloid Bodo people.[16]

In regard to the Koches, the differences of opinion do exist among the scholars and some opinions are region specific. Talking about the Koches of the Garo Hills, Colonel Delton sees the Koches of Garo Hills representing different features from the rest of the Koches. He in his book "Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal" mentioned the color and physical characteristics clearly separates the Koches from the Bodo group, but the Pani Koch is doubtless belong to the Bodo family and they are much mixed up with that people and the Rabha.[17] According to Hodgson, Pani Koches are the primitive Koches who lived amidst the woods and often change their dwelling in order to grow land

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[12]Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, Guwahati: LBS Publications, 2005 (reprint), pp. 43-44.

[13] G. A. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India, Vol. 3 (Part 2): Tibeto-Burman Family*, Delhi: Low Price Publications, p. 95.

[14] B. H. Hodgson, *Essay the First; On the Kocch, Bodo and Dhimal Tribes,* Calcutta: Baptist Mission press, 1847, p. ix.

[15]Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, Guwahati: LBS Publications, 2005 (reprint), p. 43.

[16] Suniti Kumar Chatterji, *Kirāta-Jana-Kriti*, Kolkata: The Asiatic Society, 2011 (third reprint), p. 111.

[17] Edward Tuite Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1872, pp. 90-91.

enriched by a fallow.[18] Mentioning the comment made by Hodgson saying the Pani Koches as the primitive Koch group and closely related with the Garos, Delton says to be a mistake to regard them as the primitive type of the people called Koch. He further says that probably the reason to take that name for the community is to claim themselves to the members of the community when the real Koches were dominant to conciliate the ruling power.[19]

Many social scientists as well as historians, in some point, are also similar in arguing that Koches are akin to the Bodos. In most of Assam, the plain Bodos are designated as Kachari.[20] J. D. Anderson in the introductory note of the book 'The Kacharis' written by Sidney Endle, mentioned "among the Northern branch of the race is embedded the tribe of the Koch, whose name is pronounced locally as if it were Koss".[21] Endle divided the whole Kachari race of Assam into two groups; the Northern and the Southern group and listed out the tribes under these two groups. Here is the list classified by Endle:[22]

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[18] Brian Houghton Hodgson, *Miscellaneous Essays Relating to Indian Subjects, Vol-1,* London: Trubner & Co, Ludgate Hill, 1880, p. 110.

[19] Edward Tuite Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1872, pp. 92.

[20] Banikanta Kakati says, "the Bodo people who live to the west of the present Kamrup district are called Mec by their Hindu neighbors. Those of them who live in and to the east of the district of Kamrup are called Kāchāri or Kachāri." – See Banikanta Kakati, *Assamese: Its Formation and Development*, Gauhati: The Government of Assam in the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, 1941, p. 47.

Birendranath Datta also says, "…. Mech and Kachari are not two different 'aboriginal tribes'. The same people, the plains Bodos, are called Kachari in most parts of Assam including the southern part of Goalpara but are called Mech in the northern parts of Goalpara and in whole of North Bengal." – see Birendranath Datta, *A Study of the Folk Culture of the Goalpara Region*, Guwahati: University Publication Department, Gauhati University, 1995, p. 10.

[21]R. Sidney Endle, *The Kacharis*, New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House, 2010 (Indian Reprint), p. xv.

[22] R. Sidney Endle, *The Kacharis*, New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House, 2010 (Indian Reprint), p. 5

Table: 2.1: Branches of Kachari Group

1. Northern Group.

Sl. No.	Name	Approximate Number	Chief Habitat
1	Boro (Kachari)	272,500	Western Darrang, Kachari Duars, and in North Kamrup
2	Rabha (Totla)	31,370	Gaolpara
3	Mech (Mes)	93,900	Do
4	Dhimal	(See Brian Hodgson)	North East Bengal
5	Koch	10,300	On Northern frontier from Jalpaiguri to North – west Darrang
6	Solanimiyas	15-18 families only	Only in Mangaldai Sub-division
7	Mahaliyas Phulgariyas Saraniyas	…….	Western Darrang. All slightly Hinduised Kachari

2. Southern Group.

Sl. No.	Name	Approximate Number	Chief Habitat
1	Di-ma-sa "big water folk"	15,931	North Cachar Hills.
2	Hojais	2,750	Do and Nowgong.
3	Lalungs	40,160	South-west Nowgong and adjoining districts
4	Garos	150,000	On Garo Hills and at foot at same
5	Haijongs	8,766	On plains adjoining southern slope of the Garo Hills
6	Hill Tippera (Tripura) people	105,850	Hill Tippera, &c.

So in the above classification Endle clearly categorized the Koch group with other Mongolian groups like Boro, Dimasa, Lalung, Rabha, Dhimal etc and accepted them as the Northern branch of the Kachari groups together with Boro, Rabha, Mech, Dhimal etc. But, J. D. Anderson in the introduction part of his book conferred his opinion that the term Kachari is a version of the term *Kossari (koss + ari),* where Koss refers to Koches and Ari means branch. So, *Kossari* is a branch of the Koches.[23] Even Grierson also pointed out that the relation of the Koches with Kachari and stated that "it has been suggested that the word *Kos-ari* means the *Kos – arui*, the sons of the *Kos*, and that

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[23] R. Sidney Endle, *The Kacharis*, New Delhi: Akansha Publishing House, 2010 (Indian Reprint), p.5.

Hodgson might have called them, what some of the family call themselves, namely, *Koch* or *Kos*".[24] But at the same time, he called it a mere hypothesis and mentioned that the use of the word *Koch* to describe the *Bara* race is however, open to the objection because the term *Koch* has acquired a specific use, namely to describe a Bara who has become converted to Hinduism and his descendants. In fact, the Koch is already a recognized and important Hindu caste in Assam.[25]

Talking about the Bodo groups in Assam, scholar Birinchi Kumar Barua agrees that Koch community belong to a group of Bodo race and says, "The Bodo group of tribes includes the Koc, the Kachari, the Lalung, the Dimacha, the Garo, the Rabha, the Tipura, the Chutiya and the Maran" and "... build strong kingdoms and with various fortunes and under various tribal names – the Chutia, the Kachari, the Koc, etc...".[26] Among many Historians and Social Scientists, P. C. Bhattacharya also accepted the Bodo – Kacharies involvement, exercising and maneuvering royalty under various names in Assam and thus commented "the Bodo people including their western and the eastern branch had royal glories as we gather from the records of history. The western section of the old Bodos (Kacharis) occupied the thrones of Koch-Behar, Bijni, Darrang and Beltola. An eastern branch in the name of Chutia as also established a powerful kingdom with its capital near Sadiya….."[27] Although, Bhattacharya didn't clearly mentioned the name of the western section of the Bodo group who occupied the throne of Koch-Behar, Bijni and Darrang, but from the historical data it can clearly believe that those areas are under the Great Koch kingdom where Koch royalties shows their power. So, P. C Bhattacharya also accepted the Koch tribe as a section of the Bodo-Kachari group who are Mongolian in origin.

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[24] G. A. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India, Vol. 3 (Part 2): Tibeto-Burman Family*, Delhi: Low Price Publications, p. 1.

[25] Ibid, p.95.

[26] Birinchi Kumar Barua, *A Cultural History of Assam*, Vol-I, Guwahati: K. K. Barooh, 1951, pp.6-7.

[27] P. C. Bhattacharya, *A Descriptive Analysis of the Boro Language*, p. 16.

But the problem arises when Koches are said to be the converters to Hinduism from their tribal religion. Even Gait also accepted this and commented, "in Assam proper it has become the name of a Hindu caste, into which are received the converts to Hinduism from the ranks of the Kachari, Lalung, Mikir and other tribes".[28] He further said that the population number of the Koches are increasing rapidly because of the process of conversion is still continuing; which is very much doubtful. Scholars like S. K. Chatterji described Koch as "Hinduised or Semi Hinduised Bodo people who have abandoned their original Tibeto-Burman speech and have adopted the Northern dialect of Bengali (which has a close affinity with Assamese)".[29] Grierson also commented "the name 'Koch', in fact, everywhere connotes a Hinduised Bodo who has abandoned his religion for Hinduism and the ancestral Bodo language for Bengali or Assamese".[30] But, it is also very difficult to belief that all Koches are the Hinduised Bodo or Rabha and the original Koch are the descendants of the Bodos. The traditional origin story of the Koch royalties from two Koch mother and a Mech father also make the point to say that Koch and Mech or Boro-Kachari are not the same group of tribe; rather they may be are the different sub-groups of same tribe. Although in some point the conversion from the other tribal groups into Koches is acceptable, but it is also seems to be a kind of error to say that all Hindu converted and Assamese speaking Bodo, Rabha etc tribal groups are necessarily turned into the Koches; because present time majority of tribal groups including Bodo, Lalung, Karbi, Missing, Rabha etc. follows Hinduism along with their tribal religion. Also, there is a big number of Hinduised Rabhas lived in present Goalpara, Darrang, Baksa, Kamrup district who speaks Assamese. Those Rabha sub groups are the Pati Rabha, Dahori Rabha, Bitoliya Rabha, Totla Rabha and Hana Rabha who left their tribal religion and language completely and follows Hinduism and speaks Assamese are still count as a part of Rabha group; they are not recognized as Koch.

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[28] Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, Guwahati: LBS Publications, 2005 (reprint), p. 43.

[29] Suniti Kumar Chatterji, *Kirāta-Jana-Kriti*, Kolkata: The Asiatic Society, 2011 (third reprint), p. 112.

[30] G. A. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India, Vol. 3 (Part 2): Tibeto-Burman Family*, Delhi: Low Price Publications, p. 95.

From the above discussion it can be said that the Koches are originally belong to the Mongoloid race that have a close affinity with the other Mongoloid communities like Bodo, Mech, Rabha, Garo etc. But the possibility of mixing up with the Dravidian communities in some region and areas are also not negligible. Moreover, the process of intermixing with other racial communities like marriage they gave birth to a mixed Mongoloid – Dravidian race, but still be in the majority they carries their Mongoloid characters. In this regard, the conclusion made by D. Nath is important. According to him, "the Kambojas were but Koches who migrated to India from Tibet, settled first in the north and north-eastern Bengal and then extended towards western part of Assam. Gradually they occupied large areas as far as south and West Bengal where they came into contact with diverse racial elements including the Dravidians."[31] It is also acceptable that they have a close link with the Meches. Moreover, may be they are the first to adopt Hinduism, but the all converted tribal communities into Hinduism and introducing them as Koches are nothing but mere hypothesis. Before Hinduism entered in this region the existence of Koch community and their beliefs towards animistic practices can today also be seen among the Koches lived in Assam. Although the possibility of the Koches belonging to the great Kachari group of Boro race can't be neglected; but it is true that they are as a community is as old as the Kachari group and they migrated also at the same time when the Mech or Bodo-Kachari migrated to this region; their origin stories definitely prove that.

2.3: Geographical Distribution of Koch People

Koches have their inhabitants not only in Assam, but also in Garo Hills of Meghalaya, North Bengal, Nepal, Bihar and in Rangpur of Bangladesh. In Assam, this community is densely populated in undivided Goalpara district, undivided Kamrup district and Darrang district, but they have settled in other districts like Sonitpur, Sibasagar, Nogaon, Lakhimpur districts also. Regarding their settlements, Dalton commented that "Kocch Behar must be regarded as the present nucleus of the race, but they are still numerous in the old Kamrup and the ancient Matsiya-desh, that is, in

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[31] D. Nath, *History of the Koch Kingdom*, Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1989, p.11.

Rangpur and Lower Asam, and Purniah…"[32] The Koch community have the second biggest inhabitants in Assam with an estimate population of over 65 lakh.[33]

According to the census report from 1872 to 1901, the populations of Koch and Kachari people are as follows[34]:

Table 2.2: Population list of Koch and Kachari Population

Year	Koch Population	Kachari Population
1872	313,000	219,000
1881	250,000	286,000
1891	261,000	243,000
1901	223,000	240,000

The census report here reveals one important aspect of both of the community and that is the decreasing number in their population. As it has said by many scholars that the Hinduised Bodos converted them to the Koches, than in that ratio the number of the Koch community should be increased. But in the census report we couldn't find that. Moreover, by referring the term 'Koch', the author included only those people who introduced themselves as only Koch but not as Rajbongshi at the time of the census.[35] According to Sibendra Narayan Koch, only the Koch people of Goalpara region introduced them as Rajbongshi and the number of Rajbongshi people are as follows:[36]

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[32] Edward Tuite Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1872, p. 89.

[33] The Asian Age. April 21, 2014. http://archive.asianage.com/india/koch-rajbongshi-holds-trump-card-assam-696, access on 22nd April, 2014.

[34] Dwijendra Nath Bhakat, *Axomor Koch Rajbongshi Janajati*, Dhuburi: Ms. Ananya Bhakat, 2008, p. 48.

[35] Ibid. p. 48.

[36] Ibid. p. 49.

Table No. 2.3: Year wise Population of the Koches

Year	Population
1872	2,400
1881	106,000
1891	124,000
1901	120,000

On the basis of Koch dialect speaking population, Grierson make a list of the Koch population including the region of Dacca, the Garo Hills, and Goalpara. According to the list the Koch speaking people are:[37]

Table No. 2.4: Koch Dialect Speaking Population.

1. BENGAL –

    Dacca…………………………………. 4,500

    Total for Bengal…………………4,500

2. ASSAM -

    Garo Hills (Now in Meghalaya) –

    Harigaya…………………………..... 1,100

    Satpariya………………….…………1,100

    Dasgaya or Banai…………………….1,100

    Wanang………………….…..……….1,100

    Tintekiya………………….…………1,100

    Total………………..5,500

    Goalpara –

    Tintekiya…………………………….300

    Total for Assam…………………………5,800

    GRAND TOTAL……………………10,300

[3737] G. A. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India, Vol. 3 (Part 2): Tibeto-Burman Family*, Delhi: Low Price Publications, pp. 95-96.

Along with the Koch population, Grierson also included the population of Rajbongshi dialect speaking population. The list is like this:[38]

Table No. 2.5: Rajbongshi Dialect Speaking Population

Name of Districts	Number of Speakers
Jalpaiguri…...	568,976
Rangpur……………………………………………....	2,037,460
Cooch Behar (Native State)…………………………………	562,500
Darjeeling (Bahe sub-dialect)………………………………..	47,435
Total for Bengal…	3,216,371
Goalpara…………………………………………………...	292,800
Total for Assam…	292,800
GRAND TOTAL…………….....	3,509,171

By using the term as Koch speakers, it can be assumed that Grierson referred the non-Aryan or Indo-Mongoloid speaking Koch population and by Rajbongshi speakers, he means the Indo-Aryan speaking Rajbongshi people. The Koch people, at that time, who change their name towards Rajbongshi after converting to Hinduism, are used to speak Rajbongshi language. According to D. N. Bhakat, the 1961 Census Report of India excluded the Koch population of Assam and the Rabha people and the communities who introduced them as Koch in Meghalaya.[39]

2.4: Origin and Migration of Koch in Folklore

It is a well known phenomenon that folk lore mirrors the culture of a particular community. The oral tradition of the Koch opens up the hint about their migration and origin. Although, the tradition of oral narratives among the Koch community generally speaks about the establishment of the Royal Koch dynasty and their relation to the heaven or gods, the oral narratives about their origin and migration are very less in number.

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[38] G. A. Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India, Vol. 5 (Part 1): Indo-Aryan Family*, Delhi: Low Price Publications, p. 163

[39] Dwijendra Nath Bhakat, *Axomor Koch Rajbongshi Janajati*, Dhuburi: Ms. Ananya Bhakat, 2008, p.50.

These oral narratives basically talks about how the Supreme Being created the world, human being, food for living and so on. It is already discussed that the origin regarding the term 'Koch' and their migration is still in an uncertain position and is basically based on speculation. Further, regarding the origin and migration of Koch people to the present habitat, an obscurity is still there because of the lack of documentation.

The historical records about Koch community are started to pen down after Biswa Singha established the Koch dynasty in the western of part of the present day state of Assam. These records are basically the monographs of their political, administrative and economic establishment and victories. Usually Koch people relate their relationship with Biswa Singha and Chila Rai, who once established the Koch dynasty in west Assam. The origin story of Biswa Singha can be said as a very humble and simple one. His father was the only *Mandal* or headman of the village whose name was Haria Mech, also known as Haria Mandal. The village was consisted with twelve other Koch families named *Panbar, Phedela, Phedphedo, Barihana, Kathia, Guabar, Megha, Baisagu, Jagai, Gurikata, Jugbar* and *Dakharu*. Haria married to the two daughters of Haju, named Hira and Jira. Bishu was the son of Haria Mech and Hira Koch and Sishu was the son of Jira Koch. But later on becoming king, Bishu was called Lord Kamata or Kamateswar and from then he accepted the name Biswa Singha. According to K. L. Barua, Brahman courtiers now thronged round him and extolled him as a Kshtriya and created a strong Kshtriya origin story for Biswa Singha.[40] The Royal chronicles of the Koch dynasty known as the *Darrang Raj Vamsavali* offered a story of the origin of Biswa Singha. According to that story: "Once Sahasrarujan the king of the Chandra dynasty went for a hunting tour in the jungle and spend the night in the hermitage (*asrama*) of Parasurama's father Jamadagni. There king Sahasrarjuna witnessed the extraordinary power of the magical cow called *Kamadhenu* and he was amazed by the cow. So he forcefully took the cow from Jamadagni in the absence of Parasurama. As soon as he returned to the hermitage, he came to know the story. So with anger he killed Sahasrarjuna and recovered the *Kamadhenu*. But again one day the sons of Sahasrarjua took the advantage of the absence

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[40] Rai Bahadur K. L. Barua, *Early History of Kamarupa: From the Earliest Times to the End of the Sixteenth Century*, Guwahati: LBS Publication, 2008(reprint), p. 191.

of Parasurama and killed Jamadagni and stole the *Kamadhenu* again. This incident highly enraged Parasurama and then he made a vow to kill all the sons of Sahasrarjuna and to clear the earth from the Kshatriyas. As he started to kill Kshatriyas one by one, twelve princes disguised and hide them in the Chikana hill to escape from the wrath of Parasurama. There, to hide their original identity they married Mech women and introduced them as Mech."[41] Among these twelve family of Meches, Haria Mandal was the head who married Hira Koch and from them Bishu was born. But after the establishment of the Kshatriya origin of Biswa Singa, the birth of Bishu was from Siva was invented and gave the story divinity. The story goes like this: [42]

Narrative 2.1: Birth Story of King Biswa Singha.

> **One day, while Haria Mandal was working in a field, his wife Hira was carrying food from him. Siva, enamored of her beauty, then took the form of her husband and had sexual intercourse with her. As a result of this union Bishu was born who later established the great Koch kingdom.**

As we have seen that the above myths basically conveys the idea of Kshatriya origin of the Koch and their connection with divinity once Biswa Singha had eastablished the Koch kingdom. But regarding the origin of the community the mystery is still unsolved, although there are some oral narratives do exist about their migration. Generally, the Koches are believed to have migrated from the Tibet region to the present states. Few oral narratives can be considered as some sort of history for their origin and migration. The stories regarding their migration are still existed among the Koch people that relate their name with some geographic regions. These stories are given below:

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[41] Darrang Rajvamsavali. See also Kamrupar Buranji and History of the Koch Kingdom by D. Nath.

[42] Rai Bahadur K. L. Barua, *Early History of Kamarupa: From the Earliest Times to the End of the Sixteenth Century,* Guwahati: LBS Publication, 2008(reprint), p.192.

Narrative 2.2: Migration Myth of Koches (1). [43]

> "There was a group used to inhabit at the highlands of the Himalaya. Once, one of the progenitors of that group decided to move from hilly tracts to plains with other people of that group. So, when they were migrated towards the plain areas crossing Nepal, in one place the group split out into two sub-groups. One group settled down near by the river *Kosi* and one group settled down near the river *Mesi* in Nepal. The group, who settled near the *Kosi*, came to known as Koch and the other group came to known as Mech."

Narrative 2.3: Migration Myth of Koches (2). [44]

> "The original home of the Koches was in a place called *Rasan Mukprak Tari* (the hill where the sun rises) or Udaigiri which is probably the sanskritised form of the Koch term. Thence they migrated to Kamrup and reach Hajo. But from Hajo also they had to migrate for the fear of Parasurama. The Koches originated from two sisters, Mukdi and Kundi, who were daughters of Sun. Mukdi was married to Haju, who after Mukdi's death married Kundi. In their migration from Hajo, they reached Sonapur and thence they went to a place described as *Titili Hacheng* (sand grains as big as tamarind seeds) and stayed therer for some time. From there they migrated to a place called Kusumbala, which was near the land of the Khasis. From there they entered Garo Hills and reached a place called Rongjeng. From Rongjeng they continued their journey towards south-west where they reached the Simsang River and followed its downward course. They crossed the river in a very difficult place. Twelve household failed to cross the river and they were left behind. These twelve households intermarried with the Garos and started to take beef. However, afterwards when the Koches established a kingdom in south west Garo Hills, the descendents of these twelve households were invited to come and settle in the new Koch kingdom, but they refused on the ground that they had taken beef. The Atongs are the descendents of these twelve households. The other branch of the Koches followed the course of the Simsang River and ultimately in the plain areas in the south western portion of Garo Hills they

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[43] A similar story also exists among the Limbu community. According to the Limbu legend, "when three brothers, their ancestors, were first dropped by the gods from Heaven they fell in Benares, whence they wandered northward, seeking the place appointed for them to dwell in. So they came to the *Khachar,* or mule-country, as the Nepalese call the tract at the foot of the hills between the Brahmaputra and Kosi rivers. There the youngest brother determined to settle, and become the father of the Kocch, Dhimal and Mech." – see. H. H. Risley, The Tribes and Castes of Bengal, Volume II, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1892, p. 87.

[44] D. N. Majumdar, "An Account of the Hinduized Communities of Western Meghalaya", *Garo Hills: Land & People,* Gauhati/New Delhi: Omsons Publication, 1984, pp. 161-162.

found a kingdom under a powerful chief named Suryanarayan. After him Mahendranarayan became the chief and during his time the Koch kingdom was annexed to the British Empire."

The above oral narratives existed among the Koches basically talks about their migration and origin in the Himalayan ranges or in Tibet crossing various corridors and rivers. From there, they have migrated to Nepal and then crossing the Northern part of Bengal they have finally entered into Kamrup region or present day Assam and then Garo Hills of Meghalaya. Moreover, these stories talks about their migration from the Himalaya region and their affinities with the Mech community. Many local scholars also say that name of Koch, actually referred to the people who came from *Koch-bodd* region. *Bodd* is a place that is exists in the west of China and the north of Himalaya. There are various parts in the *Bodd* country viz. *Koch-bodd*, *Mech-bodd* etc. The people, who migrated to India from the *Koch-bodd*, are known as Koch and the people *Mech-bodd* are known as Mech.[45] Most probably by the term *Bodd* the authors are referring to the Tibet region which is pronounced as *Tibbod* in Assamese.

Other than the myths the migration of the Koch can also be traced in their folk songs. The mourning at the time of migration from the north eastern region of old Kamrup carried by the Koches is reflected in one of the folk songs among Koch. The first few lines of one of the songs are like this:

> **"*Hulun Lunga Hasong*
> *Samdong Bamdong*
> *Kocha Miyao Siyao*
> *Kocha Amai Namprangou…..*"**[46]

Explaining this folk song, Ambikacharan Choudhuri argued that *hulun lunga* is the place name near Mongolia region of China where the *hasong* means the people lived in the hilly areas. *Samdong* and *Bamdong* are also the name of two places, situated in the north of Tinsukia town and around 525 km distance of Sadiya of Tinsukia district of

[45] Ambika Choran Choudhury, *Koch-Rajbongshi Jono Gosthir Itihas Aru Sanskriti,* Bongaigaon: Unique Printers, 2011, p. 38.

[46] Ambika Choran Choudhury, *Koch-Rajbongshi Jono Gosthir Itihas Aru Sanskriti*, Bongaigaon: Unique Printers, 2011, pp. 39-40.

Assam. He again said that *Samdong* is the place nearby Mekong river and presently it is known as Samdo and present Bomdila town of Arunachal Pradesh is their *Bamdong*.[47] So, if we connect his observation and explain it as a story, we can assume that the Koches are originally people lived in the hilly areas of Himalayan ranges, who faces several crisis and natural calamities from nature as well as their rivalries or other communities and engaged in various warfare with them. But in the battle field the '*Kocha miyao siyao*' means male Koches are killed by their opponents. Therefore, the '*Kocha amai* or the female (*amai*) members of Koches are in dilemma and became *namprangou* or flustered. The song actually explains the painful situation of Koches, in which the challenge of their opponents forced them to migrate to the plains.

Thus from the above discussion about the origin and dispersal of the Koch people in the present inhabited region can be said is very obscure in nature. But almost all these stories carry the one commonality and that is their dispersal from either the Tibet region or somewhere from the Himalayan ranges. Moreover, the possibility of their migration to Assam through Nepal and North Bengal are very high as these two places also have a good number of Koch population. After entering from this route, the Koch people might have settled down and spread in the Assam region. As D. Nath has observed, "it may be safely presumed that the Kambojas were but Koches who migrated to India from Tibet, settled first in the north and north-eastern Bengal and then extended towards western part of Assam."[48]

2.5: Social Life of Koch People

The social life of the Koch people starts and gyrates around the village. Generally, the villages of the Koches are very much similar to the villages of the other parts of the region of Assam. But as an agricultural community, the Koch people preferred to have built their home in an open area near their agricultural field rather than in the middle of the hill or inside the deep jungle. The houses are also built on each person's land, so there is no special kind of planning to construct the village. It depends upon the feasibility and

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[47] Ibid.

[48] D. Nath, History of the Koch Kingdom (c. 1515-1615), Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1989, p.11.

availability of the property. Moreover, the boundary of one's village area is also not well marked. So the confusion to mark the start and end of a village area always exists. But the villagers have an idea about their village boundaries marked with some kind of imaginary lines by some big trees or by *ali*[49]. Also, the fixed number of families live in a village is very much hard to predict. It depends upon the village to village dynamics and characteristics.

The village with their community members, lineage, and family forms the social life, and are the fundamental concern of Koch people that build their social relationship. It is the highest forms of their social organization that bears the security with commonness in culture, practice, and beliefs. It holds the political power within the village boundary sharing a common culture and keeps the community united. The identity of an individual is always connected with its village, lineage and family and the role of the individual is very much important to protect the solidarity of the community as well as the village. Duties and responsibilities of the individuals towards the village, community, lineage and family are also cultivated through the group activities, social interactions and social value and norms. Within the village, these rules and regulations are strictly followed in order to maintain the peace, unity and solidarity of the family, lineage, and village as well as among the fellow community members.

2.5.1: Family

In any given society, a family is the basic unit of social organisation that helps the society to achieve its best possible goals. It is the residential unit by collective relations and common economic resources where the members share their food in the common kitchen. The roles of the members of the family depend upon the belief and norms of the society as well as the family itself. The sizes of a family are often varied depending upon the biological attributes and psychological satisfaction of the couple and their ages. Furthermore, the sizes of the family sometime fluctuate from joint to single due to the wish to establish their own conjugal unit especially by the children or quarrel or conflicts regarding property or sometimes by mutual separation from the joint family.

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[49] *Ali* is the embankments on the land. In some region, it is also called as *ail*.

Like any other social group in Assam, family is the most central part for the Koches. The native term for a family in Rajbongshi language is said as *ghor* or *poriyal*. The term *ghor* or *poriyal* also includes the meaning of residential compound or homestead under its fold. These *ghor* or *poriyal* (family) comes under the larger group called *bangsha*. This *bangsha* is created or constructed either by blood relationship/biologically (birth) or by conducting marriage alliance between the bride and bride-groom belonging from two different *bangsha* of the same community.

The Koch society follows the patriarchal norms where father plays an important role. He is considered as the head of the family and children carry their respective father's family name. After marriage, the girl is accepted as a new member of the husband's family after going some ritual and the couple starts their new life in a separate house but in the same homestead. In the case of a joint family, the couple stays with husband's parents, his brother and brother in laws and sisters under the same roof. But if the couple wants to start their life with their own and establish their new household they can go but that is after two or three years. Except for the regular economic activities, after the separation also all family members try to co-operate in all matters with each other.

Generally, the reason for separation from a family depends upon family to family. Usually, the son requests separation from his paternal family at the time of marriage or before the marriage. If the father does not allow this separation there is a great chance for the boy to stay with his paternal family. For that, the family provides the necessary materials for construction and a site to build a new household. But still, the kitchen should be the same for all. In the Koch society, kitchen signifies a very important factor to reflect unity. If the couple starts a new kitchen in their newly built house that means that they are separated from their paternal family and they are no longer part of one family.

After marriage, the most common and general reason for a separation from a family is the conflict and quarrel between the in laws and the economic conflict between the brothers for their contribution to the family income. However, separation or conflict does not mean the complete end of their relationship. The conflicts and negotiations are common things in a family. After two or three years later, it has been seen the

relationship become pleasant. For any feasts or festivals, they often come all together and they always consult with their parents or the elder brothers regarding certain problems. Moreover, they all come together and unite in terms of festivals and ceremonies connected with the crisis of life, birth, marriage and death.

Since a Koch family follows the patriarchy system, therefore in terms of family inheritance, male members of the family hold the property line. Although polygamy is not popular among the Koch family but in terms of the property sons from different mothers have the same legal property right and got the equal portion from the father's property. As the Koches are basically an agricultural community, the properties are fundamentally limited to the lands which are both by the ancestral and self-acquired property. The father has the supreme authority over the family property and his sons and grandsons have no authority to claim or divide the property until and unless the father gives his consent. But if the father dies the authority of the family property will transfer to his wife legally. Soon after the death of the father the properties are generally divided and the authority of the mother over the property will stay until the distribution of the property among the sons. Sometimes shares are also given to the daughters. Only if there is no son in the family then the whole property is divided among the daughters of the family and the authority is ultimately transferred to the husbands of the daughters.

2.5.1.1: Division of Labour

In the domestic sphere, one of the main functions of the family is its division of labour among its members and this division among themselves marks the health of that family. In Koch society, this type of pleasant understanding can be seen in their domestic life. Traditionally, the reputation of the family depends upon the agricultural skill of the man and with that skill, he is considered as the eligible person to take care of the family. Further, the required tools for agriculture are also manufactured by males. On the other hand, the female has engaged always with the weaving. The eligibility for a good wife is considered and reflected at the weaving skills of a woman. The various weaving and spinning equipment is prepared mostly by the male. Although, female are basically engaged with weaving and child-rearing, as agriculture is the main occupation of Koch people women also play a major role in various agricultural processes. While a male

generally controls the social and communal level resources and contribute in the family economy, females are also seen to help in the economy of the family with cattle rearing, fishing or selling vegetables at the market. But the woman is exclusively engaged with the weaving production.

2.5.1.2: Status of Woman

Regarding the status of woman, Dhanalaxmi Dash mentioned that "the status of women in any society is the index of its social organisation. Standard of society rises and falls in terms of the status of women".[50] The Koch community follows patriarchal as well as the patrilineal structure. The dominance of the patriarchal structure of the community affected the Koch women's participation and decision making authority in the social affairs; ownership, control over and access to land. The role of women in the decision-making process is also very less and their participation at the '*nalish*' or 'village council' are also negligible. The norms related to inheritance rights in every aspect including land and other forms of property do not allow women to have ownership. However, it would be wrong to say that women are completely denied the landed property. Instances of giving land to daughters do exist, but it is either in the case of the girl being the single child or as a gift at the time of her marriage or after marriage. If the son-in-law owns little land as compared to the considerable land the girl's family has, a share is given to their daughter. Moreover, the property such as gold ornaments, household equipment like weaving tools, brass metal, gold ornaments etc. which are under the control of the mother is transferred to the daughters of the family.

A daughter among the Koches is always seen as an outsider who goes to a different house after her marriage. Therefore, the term '*porhori mal*' which means 'property of others' is always associated with them which in a way become a basis for social discrimination. Nevertheless, although the birth of a daughter is not so much favoured as compared to sons in the community, in terms of labour they are also considered as a property to the family. The preference for son is because he is the one

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[50] Dhanalaxmi Dash, *Women, Enviornment and Health*, New Delhi: Mangla Deep Publications, 2005, p.103.

who forwards the lineage of the family and also the inheritor of familial property. The existence of the tradition of '*pon*' or '*gadhan*' (bride price) at the time of marriage, where if any Koch man wants to marry he has to pay the half or complete amount of the cost necessary for the marriage for both side. This relieves the girl's parent from the social pressure of marriage and places the bride in a good position. But at present, it is seen that the practices of the 'bride price' is becoming less and the dowry system can be seen at some point. Moreover, it is seen that the position of the widow and separated woman are also degraded. In this regard, Dwijendra Nath Bhakat pointed out that the impact of Hinduisation process that occurred among the community is one of the factors for the degradation of the position of woman in society.[51]

In the case of a separated woman or a widow, the women can go for remarriage and that is accepted by society. But, in terms of property, it is the village authority that decides whether she will receive something on her separation from the husband. It must be noted that the community follows customary norms in terms of the divorce as well and women have the authority to go for a divorce. The woman will not receive any property if it is her fault for the divorce. If the husband is responsible and they have a child, he needs to give a share of the property to her, specifically land. But how much it would be given depends on him.

2.5.2: Kinship among Koches

Kinship is one of the most important parts of any social organization that forms the web of social relations in the lives of human. It represents the socio-culturally accepted relationships that are constructed either through marriage, breeding or by adoption. The Koch people follow the patrilineal system of descent where the affiliation of an individual comes through the father's side. The *bhagi* and *gotra* are the two oldest and inseparable social units that determine the social organisation of the Koch community. The socio religious life of the Koches is very much determined by the *bangsha* and *bhagi* in order to distinguish their identity. Kinship which is locally termed as *bhagi-bangsha* or *Daidi* is socially as well as the culturally recognised relationship that

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[51] Dwijendra Nath Bhakat, *Axamar Koch-Rājbangshi Janajāti*, Dhubri: Ms Ananya Bhakat, 2008, p.78.

is constructed by the way of marriage, adoption or by breeding. It covers the kins alive or dead, close or remote with whom the blood relationship is assumed to be traceable on both maternal and paternal sides. Among the Koches, *bangsha* determines various aspects of socio religious life, marriage, rituals of birth and death, property inheritance, family etc. Koch community is a unilineal descent group, who believed to have originated from one common ancestor, but the society is divided into two descent groups on the basis of blood lineage; the mothers and the fathers. Depending upon this blood lineage, marriage is conducted to the opposite moieties outside the mother's and father's bloodline.

In any kind of life cycle ceremonies or rituals, the members of the *bangsha/bhagi* should observe and go through the same ritual. In the Koch society, if someone dies or born the family have to go through some stages of impurity i.e. *suwa*. At that time the members of the *bangsha/bhagi* also have to observe the impurity stages up to eleven days in the case of death and three days in the case of birth. This is called *suwa-khata*. Since the Koch family follows the patriarchal and patrilineal system, the Koch community gives emphasis on the paternal side in comparison to that of a maternal side. But in terms of the maintenance of a balanced relationship between the father's *bangsha* and mother's *bangsha* is equal. Marriage to any members of the *bangsha* is strictly prohibited. Because it is believed that they are from the same bloodline. Although many times the term *bhagi* is used by the Koches instead of *bangsha* it is seen that the term *bangsha* is used in a wider range than the *bhagi*. *Bhagi* is used generally to determine the members of the same blood to whom the people of the village can trace the kin link on his father's side. So basically *bhagi* stays only from the paternal side and it continues till the seven generations.

In Assam, the Koches belief that they belong to the *kshatriya varna* of the Hindu society where they belong to the *kashyapa gotra*. But in the individual socio-religious ritual especially in the rites of passage or in terms of selecting the bride for marriage in the Koch society of Assam, the *gotra* doesn't play an important role as most of the Koches believe that they are from *kahsyapa gotra*.

2.5.3: Village Administration

In terms of the village administration, the village council plays a major role in the traditional Koch society. Although, at present time for the major criminal cases people go for the local police station and only the minor cases are handled by the village council, but the authority of the Koch village council have their own rules and regulations. The village council still play the highest authority ruler in the society and the decision was taken by the council is accepted by the villagers. In the Koch society, the village council is known as *nalish*. In the eastern part of the region, the village council is also called as the *raij mel* or *bisar xobha.* The size of a *nalish / bisar xobha* depends upon the size, population and number of the families inside the village. Generally, the members, structure and functions of a *nalish / bisar xobha* depend upon the village to village, but the norms and structural framework remains the same. In the eastern part of the region, the *bisar xobha* is led by the *Gaoburha* who is the head of the village. The *Gaoburha* along with the elders of the village plays an important role in all village affairs and has the authority in all important matters, disputes, quarrels etc. that are related to the village. Moreover, all adult male can participate and be a member of the *bisar*. Generally, women do not participate in meetings, but many time women are also welcomed in those meetings. The village elders assemble in a particular place in a place, which is the centre of the village under the lead of *Gaoburha* and discuss the matter. In any festival or occasion of the village like hunting, marriage, *bahomara* (fishing), cremation etc all the villagers participated and the decision was taken by the *bisar xobha* are accepted.

In the western part of the region, in the Koch society, the main member of the family who has the authority is known as *dewani*. As the head of the family, he has the authority over the property and all important decisions are taken by him only. So every *dewani* of each family formed the village council which is called as *dashjon* and the number depending upon the family numbers. Whenever some kind of dispute or quarrel occurred in the village, *nalish* is given in front of this *dashjon* and then they tried to solve the problems.

Although *Gaoburha* led the *bisar xobha* along with the other elder members of the village, there are other functionaries also like *halmajhi* (peon), *deori* (village priest), *dhon bhorali* (treasurer) etc. The position of *halmajhi, dhon bhorali* etc. are movable. *halmajhi* plays an important role in the village administrative system and is created by the village people where he has to inform about the decisions, date of meeting to each family of the village. The structure of the village council, according to their position, is given in the diagram form:

Diagram 2.1: The Structure of Village Council.
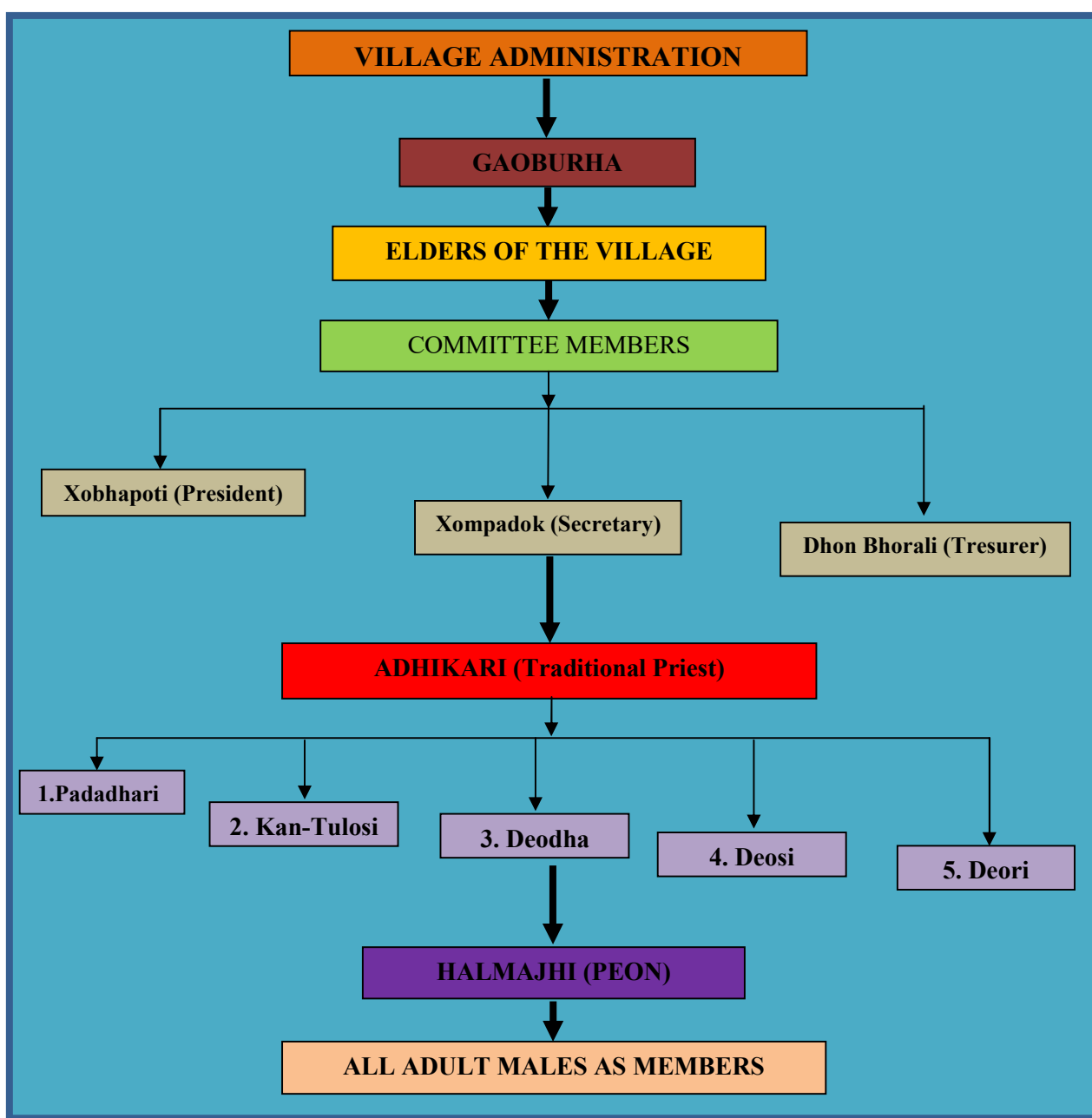
But whatever the form of the village administration according to the region is, the villagers have their firm faith over the decisions and capacity of the village council in terms of solving the problems without any discrimination that are occurred in the village.

2.5.3.1: Offenses and Punishment

The structure, function and way of punishment differ from village to village. But generally, the *bisar* has the main jurisdiction in most of the affairs related to the village and they are related to multiple functions of the village like developmental, judicial and administrative. Whenever there is some cases are a suit against someone in front of *Gaoburha,* then a *bisar xobha* is called by him. The *halmajhi* then invite all the members of the *bisar xobha.* The *bisar xobha* is always conducted in an open field or nearby village temple or *Namghar*. The accused person is summoned by the council and he/she has to present in front of the council to explain the fault. If he/she denies the accusation then he/she has to prove himself/herself with through the eyewitness or taking oath in front of the temple. If the accused person found guilty, the council give their judgment and punish the person according to the nature of the guilt.

So the nature and degree of punishment vary from crime to crime. Generally and most commonly, fines are imposed on the person as a form of punishment. But sometimes social boycott to the family of an accused person are also can be seen. A tabular form of punishment according to the Koch law and order are given below:

Table No. 2.6: Forms of Punishment[52]

Nature of Crime	Punishment
Theft	i. To confess the guilt and to return the stolen materials or the value of the stolen materials. ii. Fine to be paid. iii. Oath to be taken in front of the temple by offering *Guwa-pan* (betel nut and areca leaf).
Violence	i. Fine to be paid.

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[52] Data collected from Boripara, Panbari, Palengbari and Gerukabari village of Chirang district, Manikpur, Odlaguri, Mamugao, Saonagaon village of Bongaigaon district.

	ii.	To apologise to the non-guilty party.
Adultery	i.	Forced to merry the girl.
	ii.	Fine to be paid the family of the girl.
	iii.	To apologies to the council.
Rape	i.	Forced to merry the girl or to take responsibility for the girl.
	ii.	Sometimes temporarily or permanently boycott from society.
	iii.	A huge amount of fine to be imposed.
Seduction of a Girl	i.	Forced to merry the girl.
	ii.	Fine to pay to the family and the council.
Eating of meat like beef or dog	i.	Have to go through a religious purification process.
	ii.	Oath to be taken in front of the temple by offering *Guwa -pan* (betel nut and areca leaf).
Killing or injuring cattle	i.	Have to go through a religious purification process.
	ii.	Have to go to at least ten households to ask alms hanging a rope around the neck like a cattle.
	iii.	Oath to be taken in front of the temple by offering *Guwa -pan* (betel nut and areca leaf).
The beating of elders like mother, father, brother, sister etc.	i.	Have to go through a religious purification process.
	ii.	Oath to be taken in front of the temple by offering *Guwa-pan* (betel nut and areca leaf).

There are other crimes also that are judged by the council that are breaking the social norms of the village. In the case of *suwa* (the impure stage), the family have to gone through a social ostracize for a temporary period of time. The religious purification process that is forced in the cases like eating beef or dog meat, killing or injuring the cattle, beating of the elders or if the wife beats the husband is called the *parasit hoa* (purification process) and it is done according to the customary law by the *deosi/deori* (priest).

2.6: Economic Life of Koch People

The economic life of any community is reflected through their landholding system, cultivation system, cattle domestication process, amplification of water

management, as well as their exchange patterns that are reflected through the trade and exchange. As in the case of the Koch people, the main economic sustenance comes from the agricultural production and most of the time this is reflected in their folk life. Their rituals, beliefs are primarily surrounded in this main economic system which is very much significant to understand Koch folklife.

2.6.1: Land and Ownership

The land is considered as the most important assets to signify a strong economy in the Koch society. Generally, in a Koch village, the land belongs to either the individual or the village and the land pattern of the Koch village can be divided into *rupon mati* (cultivated land), *bosti mati* (inhabited land) and forestland. In a Koch village, there are certain common lands that are demarcated for common use for communal gathering, various religious institutions, cremation etc. and all these are controlled and managed by the village administration under the guidance of *gaoburha*. These common village lands are not allowed to be sold or to give in lease.

The individual land is owned by each family and these are used either for dwelling or for the agricultural purpose. This individual land always remains under the control of the head of the family and handed down between the male members of the family. Traditionally the family who dwells first in the village holds the huge chunks of land. Further, it is said that the families used to go to the jungle and occupies the land by cleaning that jungle. It is called as *mati bhanga*. But now a day this is not seen anywhere. Moreover, the people who do not have land take permission for the land in order to cultivate from the family who had a huge land property. This land is given in lease and in native language this is called as *adhi diya*. In the *adhi* system, the *adhi* holder is allowed to cultivate, but once the cultivation is over and harvested they have to give a certain percentage of the produce crops to the owner. Although there is no fixed rate, this may include as on third or sometimes two fourth of the grains. It depends upon family to family.

2.6.2: Agriculture

Like other communities of Assam, agriculture is the main economy of most of the Koch families. They engage mostly with the paddy cultivation. The exact time, according to Amalendu Guha, when the Koch and Bodo people started ploughing is unknown. In North Bengal and Goalpara, Rabha and Bodo community started their ploughing experience is not very old. Buchanan accounted that one branch of the Rabha community used the plough and another community still cultivated with the spade. He further said that in the British Goalpara there are approx 200 Bodo families among only a few used to plough. Others used the spade. The accounts of Buchanan (1809), Hodgson (1849) and Dalton (1872) prove that the transformation of the Bodo farmers from *jhum* cultivation to plough using farmers is a fact of the nineteenth century.[53]

The paddy that Koch people are engaged can be broadly divided into three kinds of rice varieties: *bitri, bao* and *hemoti*; which are known in Assamese as *ahu, bao* and *xali*. *Bao* paddy is actually a verity of *xali* paddy, but because of its different nature, it is recognized as a different kind paddy. Area wise *hemoti* rice is also known as *sali*, *heuti* or *bhadoi,* and *bitri* is known as *aush*. Other than these two kinds of rice the Koch community used another kind of rice that is known as *bao* which is actually a variety of *hemoti* rice. The *bitri* rice is used to cultivate in the Assamese month of *Magh* (January-February) to *Ahar-Xaon* (June-July-August). On the other hand, *hemoti* rice is cultivated from the Assamese month of *Chot* (March-April) to *Ahar* (June-July). On the basis of the farming month, the name of the rice *koitha* (seedlings) depends. The *koitha* that are cultivated in the month of *Chot* (March-April) is called *gosibison* or *khawbison*, at the *Bohag-Jeth* (April-May-June) month seedlings are known as *pota bison* or *jethuwa bison* or *nomla bison* and the *koitha* (seedlings) of the month *Ahin* (September-October) is known as *bolan*.[54] *Bao* rice is distinguished as '*bipodor bhat, nidanor dhon*' (the rice of famine, the wealth of the poor) among the Koch as well as Assamese families, because of

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[53] Bhakat, Dwijendra Nath, *Axomor Koch-Rajbongshi Jonojati*, Dhubri: Ms. Ananya Bhakat, 2008, pp. 66-67.

[54] Informant: Sumesh Baruah, Male, Age: 53, Mamugaon. Interview date: 17/05/2016

the production of this rice is good without very much hard work and care. This rice grows very well even when the water level rises in the field and the rice remains undamaged.[55]

For the paddy cultivation, the process of field selection is very much important among the Koch people. The plain land with *aythali mati* (alluvial soil) is considered as the mother of the soil and is most preferable for the paddy cultivation not only for Koch but also for their fellow communities like the Bodos. The selection of the paddy field also depends on the basis of their natural feasibility.

Other than the paddy cultivation Koch people also engaged with the jute cultivation along with various kinds of seasonal vegetables like potato, pumpkin, cabbage, tomato, bitter guard etc., spices like chilies, onion, garlic, ginger etc., various kinds of lentils, sesame seeds, mustard seeds etc. But these kinds of crops are cultivated mostly for commercial purpose. Sesame seeds, potato, seasonal vegetables etc. are sometimes grown for the domestic use also. The agricultural calendar of the Koch people is specified here with the activities generally followed as per the time.

Table No. 2.7: Agricultural Calendar

Assamese Month	English Month	Activities
Bohag	April – May	Ploughing for *Xali* paddy
Jeth	May – June	Sowing of *Xali* paddy. Harvesting of *Ahu* paddy started.
Ahar	June – July	Harvesting of *Ahu* paddy. Transplantation of *Xali* paddy (it is called *pahar para*).
Xaon	July – August	Transplantation of *Xali* paddy.
Bhad	August – September	Sowing of Sesame seeds, various kinds of lentils.
Ahin	September – October	Rabi crop cultivation.
Kati	October – November	Harvesting of *Xali* and *Bao* paddy.
Aghon	November –	Harvesting of *Xali* and *Bao* paddy.

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[55] Informant: Sumesh Baruah, Male, Age: 53, Mamugaon. Interview date: 17/05/2016

	December	Sowing of Mustard seeds starts.
Puh	December – January	……………..
Magh	January – February	Harvesting of Mustard and pulses starts. Ploughing for *Ahu* paddy.
Phagun	February – March	Sowing of *Ahu* paddy starts. Ploughing for jute.
Chot	March – April	Sowing of *Bao* paddy.

Koch people have various narratives regarding the origin of farming which are very much similar to that of the Bodo people. According to the story,

Narrative 2.4: Origin of Agriculture

> **"Once upon a time there was a family of an old man and an old woman. As they are growing old, one-day, the old lady told her husband, "Oh old man, we are becoming older day by day and after a few years we are going to die. So, after our death, how will our children going to eat?" After listening to his wife, the old man told his wife that he is going for a journey and told her to pack some *laru*s (a kind of round sweets made out of coconut or rice flour) for him. Then the old lady prepared two kinds of *laru*; one is the *laru* of hunger (*bhukor laru*) and the second one is the *laru* of thirst (*piyahor laru*) and gave those to her husband. The husband tied those in his waist and started his journey to bring some seeds from Kuber.**
>
> **When he reached his destination, Kuber asked him the reason for his visit. Then the old man told his reason and asked him to give one portion of the seeds of various crops for the human being that the god used to cultivate. Listening to him, Kuber agreed to give him seeds and gave him different kinds of crop seeds. The old man carried the whole seeds and returned to his place. One day, the old man cultivated the whole seeds and for the first time crops started to grow in the earth. It is believed that from then only human being started to do agriculture on earth."[56]**

Koch people actually believe that it was Siva who taught the Koch people how to cultivate. The story available among the Koch people of the eastern part of the Chirang

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[56] Informant: Satish Das, Male, Age: 63, Bakhrapara. Interview date: 21/05/2015.

and Bongaigaon district tells that Siva was the first to start the paddy cultivation for the human being. According to the story,

Narrative 2.5: Origin of Paddy

> In a very old time, Lord Siva wished to cultivate crops for the human being. Therefore, he went to a place far from his house restricting Parvati to go to that place until he will call her. He borrowed a plough from Indra, a bull from Yama and seeds from Kuber. He then started to plough the land with the help of the bull that is borrowed from Yama pairing with the other bull that he has already and spread the seeds in the field.
>
> One day, when Siva was not present at the home, Parvati went to the field to satisfy her curiosity. When she reached the field she witnessed the beautiful paddy crops with a huge bunch of paddies. Seeing the crops Parvati was so amazed that without knowing automatically she utters '*Ai-oi*' with excitement. When she utters those words a fire came out of her mouth and started to burn the crops.
>
> When Shiva returned to the home and unable to see Parvati there, he went to the field and witnessed the situation. He tried to extinguish the fire, but the fire lasts for three days. Half of the rice was burned and become red. That red rice is today known as *Ahu* or *Bitri* and the rest of the rice which were not burned is known as *Xali* or *Hemoti*. Seeing the crops Shiva was so angry on Parvati and cursed Parvati and said, "Because you ignored my restriction and came to the field and created this mess, therefore I will curse you that you women folk will not able to see any kind of cultivation. Whenever you will go to see the crops they will die or get destroyed."[57]

Therefore, Koch families do not allow the women folk to go to the field and to check the crops whether they are growing well or not before it is ready to harvest. This represents the beliefs as well as the role of women in the society and economy. So this type of narratives restricts the mobility of woman in the economic fields as well as their rights in the property. The labour of the women is extracted and allowed to enter in the paddy field at the time of sowing and transplanting the paddy, but the same women creates evil eye when crops are in bloom. In a way, this reflects the dominance of male in the economy as well as in the family.

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[57] Informant: Bimala Ray, Female, Age: 51, Patiladaha. Interview date: 28/05/2015.

So the said narratives not only reflects the beliefs and practices in the agriculture practices, but also it connects us to the Puranic times of *Siva, Yama* and *Kuber* and reflect how these narratives fulfils and establishes the habits of the community and its practices.

2.6.3: Weaving

In addition to agriculture, the women folk are engaged with weaving also to earn the economy for the family. Like other communities, the Koch women are too known as expert weavers. Most of the women folk weave various kinds of clothes in their home and sell them in the market. While the idea of a good family man is always attributed with the skills that the man has in the agricultural field; the skills in weaving are always attributed with the woman in the same manner and that is because weaving is such an important cultural activity that supports the economy of the family other than the agriculture.

2.6.4: Other Forms of Economy

Other than agriculture and weaving another economic source for the Koch people is animal husbandry. They domesticate and rear cows (*goru*), goats (*sagol*) and birds such as chicken (*sorey*), duck (*has*), pigeon (*paro*) etc and some families even grow pig (*bara*) too. The cows are basically reared for the milk production where the bulls (*haula*) are reared not for business reason, but for cultivation. Occasionally like at the time of Puja for sacrifice purpose or *Bihu/Bishua* they earn money by selling those animals. Among the Koches, the rearing of the livestock on *adhi* system[58] is also prevalent.

Fishing is another sustenance mode for livelihood. It is seen that most of the household have individual ponds where families usually use those ponds as fishery and either they sell them in the market or rear them for individual eating purpose. Moreover, all the villagers have the right over all the water resources that are inside the village

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[58] In the *Adhi* system, the owner gives away his property to another family or person temporarily and the production is distributed between the owner and the *adhi* holder. The *adhi* can give through land or cattle. In the case of cultivating the land, the owner gave the land to another cultivator family to cultivate in that land and the production from that land is equally divided into two shares between the main owner and the case. But in the case of cattle, when the cow gives birth, the authority of the first calf will remain to the main owner. After that, the ownership towards the other calf will be transferred to the *Adhi* holders.

territory. For the fishing purpose, all the materials and equipment that are needed are built by every family. It is said that most of the Koch people are an expert in the bamboo works and all the necessary materials that are needed for cultivation, fishing, hunting etc are constructed by themselves. The necessity for the economic purpose gives birth to very diverse forms of material culture that formed their cultural life.

2.7: Material Culture

In general material, culture is understood as the physically tangible art and artifacts that are completely contrasting to the oral culture. However material culture also includes the intangible value of beliefs, norms and practices. Therefore, material culture can be said as the physical part of the folklife that encompasses the tools, techniques or any other tangible items or objects along with the beliefs, rituals, behaviour or norms carried by that object. These carry the same aspect of conversation and identities of a particular cultural group the same as the oral tradition. According to Richard M. Dorson, in a tradition oriented society, material culture concerns about how societies "build their homes, make their clothes, prepare their food, farm and fish, process the earth's bounty, fashion their tools and implements, and design their furniture and utensils".[59] Therefore, the material culture of a particular community depends upon its settlement in a particular topographic condition and the geographical influences and availabilities like water, soil, flora and fauna etc. Thus, material culture is the human dependency upon the environment that produces certain cultural products which can be said as the barrier of their cultural legacy. This nature-culture dichotomy is the main component of any cultural society. As the Koch society is also very much dependable on the surrounding nature that has an impact upon its society, polity, economy or religion, the material culture of the Koch people tends to be a very important and essential element of their folklife. As Henry Glassie has rightly mentioned that material culture is the "conventional name for the tangible yield of human conduct"[60], the material products and their related

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[59] Richard M. Dorson (ed.), *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1972, pp. 2-3.

[60] Henry Glassie, *Material Culture*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999, p. 41.

beliefs and practices definitely give a better understanding of various socio-cultural aspects of the Koch people.

2.7.1: Homestead

The house structure of the Koches in the Goalpara region is quite similar to the housing pattern of the Koches of the other parts of the Assam valley. The process of the making house is called *bhitasoba* or *bhitabandha* by the Koch people. Traditionally, before the process of *bhitasoba,* the head of the family consulted with the *ganak* or the traditional astrologer to confirm that the place does not have any difficulty from the evil spirits and decided a date to start the work.

The traditional house pattern of the Koches always follows the proverb which also followed by other communities of Assam. The proverb is like this:[61]

<div align="center">

Uttore Guwa, Dokkhine Dhuwa,

Pube Has, Poschime Bash.

</div>

The proverb literally means that in the North there are trees of betel nut (*guwa*), the south should be open (*dhuwa*). In the west, there are bamboos (*bash*) and in the east there are duck (*has*). The meaning of this proverb is actually related with the environmental situation of Assam. In Assam, the wind that comes from the west side blows very much speedily that has the potentiality to destroy the houses. Therefore, it is suggested to plant bamboo trees on the west side so that the bamboo trees as a barricade and can reduce the force of the western wind. Moreover, the uses of bamboos in the socio – cultural life of the Koches are everywhere. From the part of making houses to the daily household uses products bamboo plays a major role.

Pube Has that is in the east there is duck means in front of the house there should be some river or lake or if that are not available, than some small pond should be exist. If there is river, than the fish will easily available and that can be eat with rice. Also the duck meat and duck egg are also mostly preferred by the community. The wind that comes from the east direction is very mild and the Koch people also believe that if there

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[61] Informant: Satish Das, Male, Age: 63, Bakhrapara. Interview date: 21/05/2015.

is river or lake in the east direction that wind is very much good for the good health of the family.

Like the bamboo, the betel nut also plays a major role not only among the Koch people but also all Assamese society. They prefer the north side because if the betel nut trees are in the north side of the house than the shadow will not come in the house and there will be no scarcity of the proper sunlight which will not affect the health issue of the family. The southern side is suggested to remain open so that the house gets sufficient sunlight and open air.

The Koches of Assam generally used to build four houses in the housing area and the area surrounded by these four houses is called '*chok*'. The house that is on the north side of the *chok* is called as '*bor-ghor*'. The bor-ghor is generally divided into three parts. In the bor-ghor, there is a separate room for the *masa* or *golaghor* or *bharal* which is the storage house. But sometimes the *golahor* / *bharal* /*bhakhri* is constructed separately if the family is economically strong. Moreover, they make an extra house in front of the gate which is called *dari ghor* for the unmarried male members. It can be said that it is the remaining sample of the *deka-changhor* of the tribal communities of Assam. But it is as important as the other houses. It is used as the resting room for the guests and sometimes family gatherings are also taken in that room only. Koch people generally use the western house as their *pakghor* or *randhon ghor*. But it is also seen among many of the Koch families that they use the eastern room of the *bor-ghor* as their kitchen. Strict rules are followed to maintain the cleanliness of this *pakghor* or *randhon ghor*. This room is considered very much pure and tried to avoid everything that can make it unclean (*suwa*).

They also built the cowshed on the opposite side of the *bor-ghor*, which is called *golighor*. *Golighor* is not built by giving walls. It remains wall-less, only raw bamboo is used to make the boundaries. The same type of house is not built for the buffalo by the Koch as well as any Assamese family. It is believed that when God was distributing the shelter, buffalo was absent at that time. Then the banana tree said to God, "My leaves are very much vast and thick. I can protect them from rain and sun. They can take shelter

under my leaves". So, after listening to the banana tree God did not give any place to the buffalo to take shelter and it is believed that whenever buffalo get a chance out of their anger they destroy the banana tree with their horns. The Koch families preferred to build the storage house or *golaghor (bharal)* near the *golighor* or the cowshed. Except for the cowshed every house has a verandah which is called *kathi*.

The courtyard or the open ground surrounded by the four houses is called *'sotal'* or *'agina'*. There are many belief systems connected with the *sotal*. For the family, it seems very discourteous and ill-mannered if he or she directly goes to the *bor-ghor* crossing the *sotal* without resting in the *choraghor*. There other believes also associated with the *sotal*. Some of them are:

- ➢ It is prohibited to walk around the *sotal* or *agina* taking the axe or spade on the shoulder. It is believed that if someone does some family member will die soon.
- ➢ If crow or vulture dropped or leave a piece of meat in the *sotal* or *agina* that will be very much ominous or unfortunate for the family member. But if the vulture vomits the meat it will carry fortune and luck to the family.
- ➢ If someone crosses the *sotal* or *agina* and scolded or cursed any member of the family, then he is considered as the enemy of that family.
- ➢ In the night, if a fox howls or a *hapa* (a wild animal) cries in the *sotal* or *agina* than that is believed very much ominous and inauspicious for the family.
- ➢ It is believed that if the male members of the family walk the unclean *sotal* or *agina* their age will be decreased. So, early in the morning, the female members clean the *sotal* or *agina* before they wake up from the sleep.

Besides the *sotal* or *aigna* there is usually another courtyard which is near the entrance to the homestead and that is called *kholan bari* or *baira bari*. The inner courtyard is not kept open. There are fences which are called *hangar* is very much common in many households. Many time region wise the terms regarding the homestead

also get different names. In the eastern region of the Goalpara region, the whole compound is called *chok*, wherein the western part it is called *bari*. The main houses are called *bor-ghor*, the kitchen is called *pakghor*, and others are *pubor-ghor, poschimor ghor* etc according to their location. The granary is called *bhakhri* and the cowshed is called *golighor*. The container which is used to give fodder to the cattle is called *thāli* and the haystacks are preserved for the cattle near the *golighor* and it is called *puji* or *kheror puji*. To maintain the privacy of the house, the *hangar* is generally placed in front of the main house.

2.7.2: Food Culture

In due course of time, the traditional food habit of the Koches has undergone various kinds of changes. The impact of Hinduisation is one of the factors that brought changes in their traditional food habits. History says that the Koches have reached its final stage after the tribal communities especially the Bodo and Rabha has quit their food habit of eating pork and drinking. So, in general, the Koch community of Assam does not take pork or bring pork meat inside the kitchen because of its consideration as impure, nor do they drink and prepare rice beer. Although, this is not applicable to all of the Koch people of the region, the present identity movement has brought a drastic change in the food pattern also. People, now-a-days are accepting pork as the main food item in their kitchen and they are again practicing the age-old tradition of preparing rice beer.

Like every community of the North Eastern region, rice is the staple food of the Koches. There are two kinds of rice used by the Koches, they are *atop / aula / alowa* (uncooked rice) and *usa / uha /ushna* (per boiled rice). Rice is used to make various other items also which are equally popular among the Koches are: *sira* (flattened rice), *muri* (puffed rice), *khoi* or *akhoi* (popped rice), *kare* (fried rice) and *gura* (powdered rice). Another popular dish prepared from the rice is called *ponta bhat* where the leftover rice of the night soaked in water for overnight and then the next day they eat the rice with salt, mustard oil, raw onion and chilies. The *kharkhara bhat* or *jokra bhat* is also the leftover rice but is kept without soaking in water.

Rice is eaten with various kind side dishes like curry, fry, chutney, meat, fish etc. Generally, the curry is called as *anja*, but sometimes it is also called as *xak* or *sak*. Vegetables are sometimes boiled, stir fried and accompanied with either meat or fish. Besides fish and meat, eating of insects like *usringa* (cricket), *foring* (grasshopper), *kakra* (crab), *samo/samuk* (water snail), *lata* (silkworm) etc are also popular among the Koches. Various kinds of shoots and tender leaf collected from the jungle and the backyard of the house is also the popular delicacy of the Koches. Among them, *bash tenga/gaja* (bamboo shoot), *betor gaja* (cane shoot), tender leaves of *kosu* (arum leaf), *sojna* (drumstick), *dheika* (fern) etc. are very much popular. Preservation and fermentation of vegetables and meat is for the next season is also practiced by the Koches. Basically, they are smoked, sun-dried or fermented. The most popular among them is the *sidol* which is prepared with the smoked fish or sun-dried fish pounded with *man kosu* or *kala kosu* (arum stalks) adding some garlic, chili pepper and a little *seka* (alkaline) and dried in the sun making small balls out of the paste. Although, *sidol* is a popular food among the Koches, but another food item that is equally famous is *nafam*. It is basically borrowed from the neighbouring Bodo community. To prepare *nafam*, the smoked fish is pounded in an *ural/sam* (mortal) with *dudh kosu, gon kosu*, and *bor kosu* (arum stalks) with garlic, chilly etc. and make a paste. The paste is then kept inside of a *bahor sunga* (bamboo pipe) and tied with a plantain leaf after putting turmeric powder on the top of the *sunga* (pipe). This pipe is kept in a warm place in the kitchen and after five to six days it becomes ready to eat and is preserved for the whole year. Moreover the smoked fish and meat especially pork is also famous among the Koches. Other than the meat and fish, the Koches also preserved leafy vegetables for the future use, like *sukta/sukati* (dried jute leaf), *dheika* (fern), *mula pat* (radish leaf), *lai pat* (mustard leaf) etc. Here are some of the popular and common methods and dishes of the Koch cuisines are given below:

➢ *Seka*: It is an integral part of the Koch cuisine. Throughout the Assam, it is known as *khar*. It is basically alkaline prepared by burning the sun-dried trunks of the *athiya kol* (variety of banana tree) and extracted juice from those ashes.

➢ *Pura or Suba*: Dishes prepared by roasting. For this fish, potato, eggplant, tomato etc are used for this style of dish.

➢ *Uha*: It is simply a boiled dish. Basically, vegetables are prepared like this.

➢ *Bhaja*: Fried vegetables or fish or meat adding mustard oil.

➢ *Patao or Patot Diya*: It is prepared either by roasting or boiling but keeping the vegetables, leaves or fish inside a banana leaf or *Tara pat* (a wild leafy grass).

➢ *Pithali or Nelpa*: Curry prepared by adding rice powder adding a little *seka*. It includes both the vegetables as well as meat.

➢ *Labra*: It is a mix up of different kinds of vegetables together.

➢ *Potka*: After boiling or roasting the edibles is mashed adding mustard oil, salt and chilly. In some area, it is also called as *xana*.

➢ *Bota*: This type of food is prepared by grinding raw and fresh leaf or soaked lentils or stalks.

Like other communities of Assam, the addiction towards chewing *tamul-pan* or *gua-pan* (areca nut and betel leaf) is very much widespread and common among the Koches. Generally, the *tamul-pan* is eaten raw with soon (lime) and *sadha / tangkhu* (tobacco). As the Assamese culture, in the Koch culture also *tamul pan* holds a very prestigious and significant place. The invitation to any important and special occasion or ritual made by *tamul-pan* gives respect to the family. Moreover, without *tamul-pan* not a single rite and ritual is observed among the Koch. In the village area, especially the old people both male and female, the smoking of *kasreng* or *biri* is a common scene.

2.7.3: Weaving

The Koch women are confined to the weaving from a long past. Most of the Koch families weave their own clothes at their home. The knowledge of weaving is an important criterion for the marriage of a girl and without its knowledge, no girl is chosen and no Koch home is measured completed without a loom, especially in the eastern region. So, in domestic life, the loom becomes an integral and essential part and generally, we can see a loom in every family in the courtyard. They produce their clothes

for both male and female. Regarding the importance of weaving, B. C. Allen has mentioned that "as weaving only occupies the leisure moments of the women, the use of homemade clothing helps to save the pocket of the villager. There is, however, but little doubt that weaving as an industry is commercially a failure, the price obtained for the finished article being out of all proportion to the time expended on its production. The principal articles made are *patanis* or cloths worn by women that are tied above the breasts, large cloths called *gilap* or *bor kapor*, smaller shawls *pachora*, and *gamchas* or napkins often worn on the head."[62]

The most common loom that is used by the Koches of Assam is the traditional feet loom (*tat xaal*) which has four poles made either from bamboo or from betel nut tree. The different accessories and parts of the loom are made locally using wood and bamboo. The name of the various important parts of the loom and they are *gari*[63], *ra*[64], *maku*[65], *nasni*[66], *boa*[67], *boa sunga*[68], *putol-bari*[69], *garka*[70], *kanni*[71], *jotor* , *serki*[72] and *peta*[73]. According to the traditional belief system, the loom is considered very much precious, pure and part of their daily life and therefore, various kinds of beliefs, taboos are attached

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[62] B. C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers, Voll: III, Goalpara*, Calcutta: The City Press, 1905, pp. 87-88.

[63] It is the roller made with wood and is used in number two. One roller is used to the wrap the cloth in front and another one is used to hold the threads.

[64] It is the reed. Traditionally made with bamboo, but the present time the one sold in market is more popular.

[65] The shuttle

[66] The pulleys.

[67] The heald.

[68] The pipe to winding the heald. It is made with bamboo

[69] The temple made with bamboo and tied safety pin or needle at the edge of each two temples with cloths.

[70] The pedal.

[71] The leage.

[72] The spinning wheel.

[73] The pirn.

with the cloths of the loom and the loom itself. Some of the taboos and beliefs associated with the loom are given below:

➢ The clothes that are still in the loom are believed as the easiest way to do sorcery and witchcraft to the family. The

➢ If the thread or yarn of the loom breaks for several times, it is believed that this is because of the evil eye and for that as a precaution the lady always keeps a broomstick with the green chilly in the loom to prevent the evil eye.

➢ When women are at their menstruation period, it is prohibited to sit in the loom.

➢ Before the evening, the weaving in the loom should be stopped as it is believed that at the evening time gods and spirits roam around. And evening time is considered as the time for prayer. So if the woman is still weaving in the evening time and lighting the earthen lamp in front of the *dhip* (the altar) at the courtyard, it is believed that the deity got angry and so the prosperity of the family will be wiped out and the evil spirit will enter to the family.

2.7.4: Costumes

The spinning and weaving is an integral part not only of the Koches but also several communities of Assam. In Assam, the identification of a particular community from other communities can be easily done by observing their colour, pattern of design and wearing style. At the present time, when the Koch community is trying to separate their identity from the Assamese identity, the dress is used as a common source for identity. Mostly the dress of the Koches is very much similar to the Bodo people. The Koch women used to wear *patani* which is very much similar to the *dokhona* of Bodo women. The colour remains the same and some time design also, but the wearing pattern is quite different than the Bodo women. Although, sometimes the Koch women and girl used to wear the *patani* like the *dokhona* of Bodo as it is and then it becomes hard to define whether it is a *patani* or a *dokhona*. Moreover, the Koch male traditionally used to wear *angsa* or in some place, it is called *aosa* is exactly the same as the Bodo people in

terms of design, colour and wearing style. It is observed that the Koch women mostly preferred green, yellow, orange colour *patani*, but other colours like blue, maroon, purple, brown etc. are also used.

The traditional and main dress of the Koch women is *patani*. It is one piece of cloth that is wrapped tightly around the body from breast to toe. It is also known as *fota*. The cloth is not stitched and it remains open. By measurement, the *patani / fota* is five cubits long (*pas hat dighla*) which is around ninety inches long and two and a half cubit (*are hat*) which is around forty-five inches width. The *patani / fota* are of different colours, but most central colours are green and yellow. The *patani* is designed by border and artistic flower designs using different colours. If the design consists only with the plain border lines than it is called *pari* and if the borders are designed with flower patterns, they are called as fool *basa*. There are different kinds of designs used by Koch women. Such designs are *ghugupari, dighlapari, sotopari, boropari* etc are the plain design as well as the *paskol kholopiya, nakar khujia, chikolbala, parsuka, tin patiya, paspoti, paspati kundul* etc. are some of the traditional and popular designed among the Koches.

Generally, a *patani* is always accompanied by *agoron*. It is used to wear on the upper part of the body to cover the exposed portion of the body. It is thrown over the shoulders to cover the chest. The *agoron* is quite similar to the *chunni* or *dupatta*. Another, dress the women are used to wear especially when they are at home is *bukuni*, which is a *mekhela* of the Assamese people but without *sador* and is also long enough then the traditional *mekhela*. While the traditional Assamese *mekhela* is tied down at the waist, the Koches wear their *mekhela* over the breast and tied up a knot on the left side above the breast. These *mekhelas* are generally designed with some simple flower designs. Among which the *kasi dat, kodde xeira, lewa, mogor* etc. designs are most popular. The use of patani / bukuni is also reflected through proverbs also. According to the proverb,

"Hazar takar Kuchuni / Tao pindhe bukuni/patani"[74]

The proverb says about the *Kuchuni* (Koch woman) that how much she belongs to a rich or well-established family, her love towards *patani / bukuni* will not change definitely proves that Koch women usually feel comfortable wearing the *patani* or *bukuni* and they are not ashamed for it. The *topor* is another part of the dressing pattern of the Koch women. *Topor* is basically a traditional head-dress of the Koch women. A small *gamsa* is used to tied and cover the head. The *topor* is then ornamented with several *sedar kata* (porcupine spines). It is a general belief of the Koches that the *sedar kata* protects and save the people from evil eye and evil spirits.

The most common and popular traditional dress used by the Koch men is *angsa / aosa*. It is a lower garment for males. It is wrapped around the waist reaching up to the knee and tied down by giving a knot in the centre just below the navel. In the eastern part of the region, the *angsa* is also called as the *gamsa* and the most popular colours are white, green, *pui* (peach colour), yellow, coffee colour, blue etc. Various kinds of geometrical design are used in the *gamsa* by using various colour, but no floral design is used in *gamsa*.

2.8: Folk Medicine/Ethno-medicine

There are certain herbs and plants that are believed and practiced by many folk societies as having the power to cure diseases and use as medicinal purpose. This knowledge of curing various diseases by using various medicinal herbal plants along with incantation and charms are practiced generation wise and learned through traditionally and orally by learning, observing and practicing. This is different than the modern day practice of medicine and known as folk medicine. Folk medicine shares "the ground with and exists in tension with the higher forms of medicine (representing the 'large culture').[75]

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[74] Informant: Satish Das, Male, Age: 63, Bakhrapara. Interview date: 21/05/2015.
[75] Don Yoder, *Folk Medicine*, Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction, edited by Richard M. Dorson, p. 192.

Folk medicine is the common phenomenon in almost all rural societies and in that rural society their dependency upon the folk medicine and its practitioner is far more diverse than one can actually imagine. The various unpredictable natural occurrences, diseases, danger and the uncertainty towards these lead the people to believe in folk medicine. In the communal measurement of a particular society, folk medicine has a significant role and deeply rooted in their folk religious practices and beliefs. Hence, the practice of folk medicine is not only used to cure the diseases of the human body but also to the causes that create those diseases and illness which is believed to happen from the evil spirits. Further, folk medicine holds two aspects in it. As Don Yoder has described "the first of these represents one of man's earliest reaction to his natural environment, and involves the seeking of cures for his ills in the herbs, plants, minerals, and animal substance of nature" and the second one being the magico-religious aspects that attempts to "use charms, holy words and holy actions to cure diseases", Yoder terms these two variations as (i) Natural folk medicine and (ii) Magico-religious folk medicine.[76]

Therefore, the present segment is described through the two branches of folk medicine that has been classified by Don Yoder: the first one being the natural folk medicine and the second one is the magico-religious folk medicine.

2.8.1: Practice of Natural Folk Medicine

Regarding the practices and treatment of folk medicine, the Koch people have their own traditional ways to cure the illness. In native terms known as *akhori daruk*, these have a great impact on their folklife. Generally, Koch people have their own sets of beliefs and practices that can heal the physical and mental illness of the patient. According to the belief, it the wrath of the spirits or deities that causes various ailments that can be cured only by satisfying those deities and spirits by venerating them on the right time. For that *oja* and *ojani* (the traditional medicine male and female) plays an important role in the society who has earns the knowledge regarding various illnesses, their names, symptoms and their cures traditionally. According to the Koch belief system, the *oja*/*ojani* gains

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[76] Don Yoder, *Folk Medicine*, Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction, edited by Richard M. Dorson, p. 192.

their knowledge regarding different aspects of folk medicine from their *oja*[77] (teacher) and sometimes through their dreams also. The *oja/ojani* prepares the medicine from various parts of a plant by uttering certain chants and sometimes upgraded the medicine with prescribed charmed on it. Here a list of some of the natural folk medicine practiced by the Koch people is given below. Moreover, the present list is not an extensive one and the data has been collected from the field.[78]

Table No. 2.8: List of Natural Folk Medicine

Sl. No.	Medicine/Herb/ Meat	Botanical Name/English term	Used as a Medicine for
1	*Kasa Haldhi*	Fresh Turmeric	Stomach ache and for the cuts and wounds. Also to cure all skin related issues
2	*Ada*	Ginger	Indigestion caused by the evil eye. For that the *Oja/Ojani* gives chanted ginger rendering some mantras on it.
3	*Bisoillokoroni*	Eupatorium triplinerve	To stop the blood from any injury or cut
4	*Gol Moris*	Black pepper	Cough
5	*Bi Dheika*	A kind of fern	The *Oja* waves this plant chanting mantras to remove headache, body pain etc. Moreover this is also used to ward of the evil spirit that possessed the human body.
6	*Tulosi*	Basil plant	Cough and cold
7	*Mohaneem*	Azadirachta indica	Skin related issues
8	*Bhui tita*	A wild bitter fruit	Diarrhea
9	*Sadha/Tangkhu*	Tobacco	The *Oja* use the leaves and roots of tobacco as an ailment for teeth, skin diseases.
10	Leaf of guava and blackberry	…….	Dysentery
11	*Masandari*	Houttuynia cordata	Dysentery
12	*Kodde*	Star fruit	Jaundice
13	*Kathonda*	A white flower	The *Ojani* prepares *Jara-pani* soaking this flower in water and chanting mantras to cure chicken pox

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[77] The term *Oja/Ojani* sometime also refers to a teacher.

[78] Informant: Debojani Talukdar, Female, Age: 72, Golapi Rajbongshi, Female, Age: 76, Kunjabala Das, Female, Age: 78. Interview date: 29/04/2015.

14	*Kainha*	Leucas Aspera	The *Ojani* prepares *Jara-pani* soaking this flower in water and chanting mantras to cure chicken pox. This is also used for sinus problems.
15	*Rohor dalir pat*	Leaf of Rohor pulse	Jaundice
16	*Manimuni*	Centella Asiatica	Any stomach related issue
17	*Thekra*	Garcinia pedunculata	Loose motion
18	*Harjora lewa*	A wild creeper (Cissus quadrangularis L.)	To treat the fractured bone, *Oja* used this wild creeper by chanting mantras. This creeper is also used to treat menstrual disorder, piles, gout, constipation etc.
19	*Baska tita*	Justicia adhatoda	For cough, to kill worms.
20	Cooked meat of *Dura Kasu* with *Tengsi Tenga*	Tortoise with Indian Sorrel (Oxalis Corniculata Linn)	Dysentery
21	*Baduli Mosong*	Bat	Asthma
22	*Gui Xaap Mosong*	Bengal Monitor (Varanus bengalensis)	Skin diseases, fertility
23	*Kuisa Mas*	Freshwater eel/Swamp eel	Anaemia

As seen in the above table Koch uses various types of herbs as well as meat and fish as the medicine for various health issues. Moreover, it has been also seen that the *oja/ojani* basically the one who gives this medicine and the attachment of the chants is an important part of the medicinal practice. This carries the magical aspects attached to natural medicinal plants and herbs.

2.8.2: Practice of Magico-Religious Folk Medicine

In the traditional level, the perimeter of magico-religious folk medicine or occult folk medicine includes "using words, charms, amulets, and physical manipulations in the attempt to heal the ills of man and beast. It is base on the primitive worldview of the unity of all things, heaven, earth, man, animal, and nature."[79] Like most of the primitive societies, the Koch people also believe that the diseases or illness of human or any animal is caused due to the influence of the evil spirits or because of the wrath of the deities. So, in order to eliminate these illnesses that is happening because of the evil spirits or the wrath of the deities by performing rituals with spells or by preparing amulets or charmed

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[79] Don Yoder, *Folk Medicine*, Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction, edited by Richard M. Dorson, p. 203.

chords. Among the Koch people, the process of magico-religious folk medicine is known as *jara-phuka* and according to believe the practice of *jara-phuka* can be either black or white. The oral practice of *jara-phuka* is mostly practiced by *oja* or *ojani* where the folk treatment is basically based on the magico-religious aspect through counter magic, using charms, incantations or sometime propitiating deities and spirits. For that, the *oja/ojani* uses various types of tools and techniques in order to treat the patient.

1. ***Kasni***:[80] Charmed chord that is made from the cotton thread and is used to protect the human from various diseases like fever, shock from a bad dream or fright while sleeping. Further, it is also used to protect a person from evil spirits. It is worn at the arm. The *kasni* is also tied down by the *ojani* when a child is attacked by the chicken pox.

2. ***Madli***: It is used to protect the body from various unseen threatening from evil spirits and ghosts. It is like invisible armour and believes that while wearing the *madli* even the wind also can't penetrate the human body and mind. It is in a drum shape and made out from either from iron or copper. It is tied down around the neck, arm or at the waist with either black or red thread. Herbs, animal substance, metal, various parts of a plant etc. are kept inside the *madli* and then the *oja* sealed the *madli* incanting some mantras. The madly is worn after this is purified with the sacred water. The person with the *madli* has to follow certain rules in order to maintain the purity of the *madli*. The person is not allowed to go to cremation ground or touch a dead body wearing the *madli*. During the impure stage of the family, the person should remove the *madli* until the impure stage is over.

3. ***Pani Jara/Tel Jara***:[81] This is actually the charmed water or oil and is given to get rid of various pains, aches and nerve related issues. The *oja/ojani* chanted some mantras depending upon the nature of disease or difficulty.

Thus, it has been seen that in a Koch society the belief and uses of folk medicine whether it is natural or magico-religious are generally practiced by the *oja* or *ojani*.

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[80] See the picture at the photograph section, p. 389.
[81] See the picture at the photograph section, p. 389.

Moreover, the efficacies of those medicines are also believed to have lied on the chants, incantations that are attached with the herbs, plants or animal substance. Although an *oja* or *ojani* does not have any prescribed medical qualification, their expertise mostly depends upon the beliefs that are running through generations among the community members. The common belief for the reason for the occurrences of various diseases is basically connected with the belief in deeds or misdeeds of the human being. Every time, there will be a cause either it is witchcraft, evil eye or the wrath of a god or spirits or for that the *oja* or *ojani* will try to resolve the issue by either satisfying the deity or spirit or by doing countermagic. As Om Prakash Jaggi in his book *Folk Medicine* has mentioned that "folk medicine has its own concepts about the causation of diseases: wrath of gods, evil spirits, magic, witchcraft etc. It has its own diagnostic tools and techniques which lean heavily on divination. Treatment is based upon the the removal of the causative factor through the propitiation of gods, exorcism, countermagic, use of charms, administration of some herbal preparations- a perfectly rational approach in so far as it is intended to remove the basic cause."[82] Folk medicine does not reflect simply the remedies for the diseases, but simultaneously it also mirrored the associated belief, magic, witchcraft, evil eye that exists in the society. Hence, the involvement of the practice of folk medicine among the community often overlaps with folk religion and reflects their beliefs and practices. Considering this aspect in the folk medicine practice, Richard M. Dorson has rightly commented that "folk religion overlaps at points with folk medicine in instances where a famed miracle-maker saves souls and heals bodies."[83]

2.9: Religion and Religious Life of Koch People

The etymology of the term religion is on the whole an issue of debate. The natural development of the word religion is traced with the Latin word *religio* in terms of regard or respect towards gods or something sacred. Lactantius connected the root of the term religio from the term *re-ligare* where *re* means again and *ligare* means to bind or

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[82] O. P. Jaggi, *History of Science, Technology and Medicine in India: Folk Medicine,* Vol. III, 1981, Delhi: Atma Ram and Sons, preface.

[83] Richard M. Dorson (ed.), *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972, p. 04.

connect. Cicero also drew it from re-ligare and gave equal status as *religiosus,* which carries the meaning of 'to gather', 'to choose'. Max Muller, also preferred with the etymology given by Cicero, but at the same time, he mentioned that it is not only the attention to the gods or God as interpreted by Cicero, but it is bond of piety, respect towards them. He further mentioned that the Latin root for religion "became more and more exclusively applied to the inward feeling of reverence for the gods and to the outward manifestation of that reverence in worship and sacrifice".[84]

The Encyclopedia of Religion defines religion as "a system of beliefs and practices involving a god or some other higher power beyond the everyday reality of life on Earth. Religious beliefs are expressed both in the form of rituals and in the way believers lead their lives."[85]

2.9.1: Working Definitions of 'Religion':

Many scholars and thinkers also proposed their ideas about religion to define the concepts. Sometimes religion is defined as a cultural and social product and most often it is equated with sacred, but there is no universally accepted definition on religion. Even James Frazer also commented that it is impossible to have a single definition that can satisfy everyone because people by people views differ. Understanding the difficulties to define a single definition of religion, Max Weber, in the starting paragraph of his book '*The Sociology of Religion*' commented that a definition of religion 'can be attempted, if at all, only at the conclusion of the study."[86] Although many anthropologists and sociologists accepted the difficulties in defining religion, many had come with the definition of religion. Max Müller, accepting the difficulties to define a definition of religion said: "religion is something which has passed, and is still passing through an

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[84] Max Muller, *Natural Religion*, London: Longman, Green and Co., 1979, p. 39.

[85] Philip Wilkinson and Douglas Charing, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, London: Dorling Kindersley, 2004, p. 9.

[86] Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, London: Social Science Paperback, 1966, p. 1.

historical evolution, and all we can do is to follow it up to its origin, and then to try to comprehend it in its later historical developments."[87]

It was Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, known as the Father of Social Anthropologist, who first tried to give a rudimentary definition of religion in his classic work, *Primitive Culture.* As a preliminary definition, Tylor defined religion as a belief system in spiritual being, which exists in almost every human society. Apparently, the existence of belief in a spiritual being is noticeable through various forms like Animism, Totemism, Polytheism, Monotheism etc. which are accompanied practically with different forms like myth, sacrifices, rituals, rites of passage, symbols etc.[88] In Tylor's 'Animistic Theory of Religion', the term 'Animism' used to designate the belief system in the supernatural being that is reflected through not only human but also through the non-human being also. Tylor's hypothesis on the double existence of human souls later transformed themselves into the spirits and then came forward with the idea of their continuation as gods among the primitive people. The emergence of the belief in gods through inanimate beings, for Tylor, formed the idea of religion through some ideological contents like rituals, worships, beliefs, practices etc. In this regard, Evans-Pritchard writes "Primitive man then transferred this idea of soul to other creatures in some way like himself, and even to inanimate objects which aroused his interest."[89]

It was the failure of human intellectual to transfigure the exact position of human experiences like dreams, vision, life and death which manifested the idea of soul to spirit and finally to god. James George Frazer, on the other hand, defined religion as the stage towards rationality from irrationality in human intellectual development. Frazer is another evolutionary theorist who was very much influenced by Tylor. Frazer's theory of religion is actually an elaborated version of the idea of magic presented by Tylor. Tylor symbolized magic as a form of the religious phenomenon and accepted the fact that it is

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[87] Max Müller, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion*, London: Longmans Green and Co., 1901, p. 21.

[88] Subhadra M. Channa, *International Encyclopaedia of Tribal Religions*, New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 2000, p. ii

[89] E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965, p. 25

pretty much older than religion. For Tylor, magic is the mystical link between observation and further classification of similarities.[90] But for Frazer, the intellectual error led people towards magic and religion. According to Frazer, chronologically, the intellectual evolution of human mind carries three stages: magic, religion and science. These are the stages which carry human thought from illusion to a stage of truth. The failure of magic developed the reliance towards a higher power: towards the birth of religion with the increasing beliefs in spirits and the practices to achieve their blessings. At the highest stage of human intellectual development, which is the stage of science, human tries to find the truth rejecting the stage religion as an illusion.

Religion, defined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, is as "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."[91] The French sociologist, Emile Durkheim comes forward with his most brilliant theory about religion which is called the sociological theory of religion. For him, religion is a product of social unity and collective consciousness. His structural-functional approach, with respect to religion, offered a brand new definition of religion from the perspective of sacred. According to him, religion is "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things."[92] When he used the term 'sacred', Durkheim means that the things that are "set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them."[93] According to Durkheim, religion is about the sacred and sacred is the system of belief and practices which deal with the sacred things and these sacred things are not limited to

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[90] Ibid. p. 26

[91] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture*, New York: Basic Books Inc. Publishers, 1973, p. 90.

[92] Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Form of Religious Life*, New York: The Free Press, 1976, p. 62

[93] Ibid. Page: 62.

the gods and spirits only.[94] For Durkheim, the boundary of a sacred thing can comprise anything and "the beliefs, myths, dogmas and legends are either representations or systems of representations which express the nature of sacred things, the virtues and powers which are attributed to them."[95]

In India, many times the word *dharma* is considered and used as a synonym for the English term religion. The root of the Sanskrit term '*dharma*' is derived from the word '*dhṛ*' which carries the meaning of to form, to support, to sustain, to maintain, to hold or to keep. But in Indian philosophy, the word *dharma* does not merely refer to an equivalent word for the English term religion. It is more than that. Like Heinrich Zimmer mentioned that the term dharma can be explained as the whole context of religious and moral duties. Discussing the character of dharma, Bhagavan Das mentioned that "Dharma is not mere other world-religion, but every duty, every law, every proper and function of everything or being, in this and in all other worlds."[96] Therefore the meaning of dharma comprises religion along with various components of meanings like law, duty, morality, justice, virtue etc.[97]

2.9.2: Traditional Priests and their Groups

In a Koch society, the office of the priest differs from deity to deity and ritual to ritual. The people who are engaged with the religious works and rituals are known as *adhikari* and they are selected by society only. They are like the traditional priests who have the power to conduct all the religious rituals for the community. For being an *adhikari*, they must be a male and the authority to conduct a ritual is passed through generation wise, from father to son hereditarily. On the basis of the rituals, *adhikari* is divided into various groups, such as *padadhari, kan-tulosi, deodha, deosi,* and *deuri*.

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[94] Because of these sacred things, Durkheim considered Buddhism as a religion. He mentioned that "in default of gods, it admits the existence of sacred things, namely the four noble truths and practices derived from them." – see Emily Durkheim, *Elementary Form of Religious Life*, 1976, p. 37.

[95] Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Form of Religious Life*, New York: The Free Press, 1976, p. 37.

[96] Bhagavan Das, *Science of Social Organization or the Laws of Manu in the Light Theosophy*, Benares and London: Theosophical Pub. Society, 1910, p. 123.

[97] Austin B. Creel, *Dharma in Hindu Ethics*, Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Ltd., 1977, p. 2

Padadhari is the priests who practice the ritual related to marriage, death, puberty etc. Region wise they are also known as *paradhari, pathadhari, chakradhari* and *godian*. After attaining the quality for a *padadhari*, he carries a Chakra, made of bronze as his identity. A *padadhari* can also appoint students. *Kan-tulosi* is actually had to work as an assistant under the *padadhari* for few years. After they have worked under the *padadhari* for some years, the *tadadhari* give him a *tulsi* leaf in his ear and declared him as the *kan-tulsi* only if the *padadhari* beliefs that he is able. After that only he can perform the religious rituals independently.

Deosi and *deodha* are the priests who are basically related to the offerings and rituals at the Temples and are considered as the mouth of the deities. It is believed that the deities make their contacts and gives their blessings with devotees from the mouth of the *deodha* and *deosi*. They recite verses till the deities possess them, they speak and answered the problems of the devotees and those words are believed to be from the deities. It is also believed that they have some spiritual powers by which they can detect and tell the details of the problems related to the family or the village. They are considered as the 'medicine men' as they are one of the solutions for any diseases, growing misfortune, disaster or unrest in a family or the whole village. Every *deosi* has an assistant with them and is known as *deuri* or *thengdhora deosi*.

2.9.3: Beliefs and Magic

The belief in the magic and its practice is very much widespread not only among the Koch people, but also the other communities like Rabha, Bodo of the region. According to Hutton Webster, magic as a belief "… is the recognition of the existence of occult power, impersonal or only vaguely personal, mystically dangerous and not lightly to be approached, but capable of being channeled, controlled and directed by man. As practice magic is the utilization of the power for public or private ends, which are good or bad, orthodox or heterodox, licit or illicit, according to the stimuli placed upon them by a particular society at a particular time."[98] Most of the Koch beliefs in magic are related to supernatural beings such as gods, spirits, ghosts who are believed to have the capacity to

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[98] Hutton Webster, *Magic: A Sociological Study*, London: Oxford University Press, 1945, p. 55.

harm or cause illness. The person who practices the magic is known as *Oja* and is believed to have the capacity to detect the problem and is considered as the experts in exorcising with these malignant beings.

Historically, Kamrup is considered as a land of magic and sorcery always by the outsiders and about the dreadful effects of magic and sorcery, references have been penned down about this land by various accounts. Martin mentioned that "although magic is not very flourished in the hands of the sacred order of Kamrup, it has a numerous class of the practitioners among the plebeians both Hindus and Mohammedans, who by means of certain incantations pretend to cure diseases and the bites of serpents, and to cast out devils. These incantations are powerful forms of commanding the disorder in the name of certain deities to quit the afflicted person, and here usually are called Kamrupi-montros,….and are composed in a mixture of the vulgar and polished languages. Both Mohammedans and Hindus acknowledged that these incantations were first divulged by order of Kamakhya. Almost every person knows more or less of them and the numbers of those who profess to repeat them for hire are considerable…"[99] Goalpara region is also mentioned in some accounts for the use of magic and sorcery. Martin talked about Goalpara as the "chief place for this science" and in some works, some particular places like Khuntaghat[100] is mentioned as "notorious for magic and sorcery and gives a vivid account of the extraordinary doings of the magicians of this area."[101]

The behaviour pattern of the Koch people including both private and the public have been very influenced by the beliefs and practices of magic and sorcery. The magical influences in various means of their rituals, rites or activities such as the fertility of the soil, to ensure a good harvest, to live in harmony with nature and to control it has been clearly reflected. The diseases and injuries created not because of the malignant gods, but

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[99] Montgomery Martin, *The History, Antiquities, Topography, and Statistics of Eastern India, Vol: III*, London: W. H Allen and Co., 1838, p. 510.

[100] *Khuntaghat* is a place situated in the Northern Bank of the Brahmaputra Valley of undivided Goalpara region and in the *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi* written around 1640 has mentioned about the practice of magic and sorcery of this place.

[101] Birendranath Datta, ibid, p. 59.

because of the evil spells that are diagnosed and cured by the witch-doctors. They have the remedies for those diseases like fever, stomach ache, sprains, fractures etc believed to be because of the evil spells. The mode of treatment that is offered is *jara pani* (charmed water). Different kinds of talismans like *madli, tabij* including objects like tiger's nail, boar's teeth, elephant's teeth and charmed cords are known as *kasini* are freely used to protect from the evil eyes and other undesirable influences.

There is a belief that using different spells using nails, hair clippings or pieces of the garments that are used by the person for his bath, various harms can be done to the intended person. The intended victim is made to face various troubles by burying charmed objects in the compound of his/her house or sometime when he/she unwittingly crossed the charmed objects buried in other places.

2.9.4: *Bans*

The *ban* can be literally translated as a charmed arrow and the vocabulary meaning of a *ban*, in the field of magic and sorcery, can be understood as an invisible arrow of spells that have some kind of effect on the person or the object as desired by the one who uses or casts this spell. These *bans* generally use against a person to cause harm to that person. Various kinds *bans* such as *lengra ban, bishali ban, khasula ban* etc. are used to cause various kinds of diseases and sufferings like severe headaches, consumption, madness, stomach ache, cramps etc. Sometimes, the uses of a *ban* can also bring death to the victim.

Mohini ban is a different kind of *ban*, which is used to achieve success in love, public performance etc. It is believed that the thieves and dacoits also practice their own *bans* and their antidotes. But generally, *ojas* are believed to be the experts in all kinds of *bans* and their antidotes.

2.9.5: Divination

Other than the *bans*, divination can be said as another kind action based on the belief in magic power resorted by men in their "desire to be guided as to the best course

to take when in doubt, difficulty, or danger or to be forewarned about the future."[102] In the Goalpara region, not only among the Koch people but among the Bodos and Rabhas also the publicly organized divination is very common. The Koches have their *deodhas*, the male priests, who perform the shamanistic dances and make pronouncements in a state of trance in the festivals of *Marai Puja, Bas Puja*. Sometimes, the *deodhanis*, the female counterpart of the *deodhas* also plays the role of shamanistic dancers in the *Marai puja*. Among the Bodos, the *deodhanis* play an important role in their *Kherai Puja*. These *deodhas* and *deodhanis* are the professionals who are believed to have some kind connections with deities and supernaturally they are chosen by the gods.

2.9.6: *Daini/Daina*

The Koches do believe in witches and their existence in their society. But the beliefs in witches are not that much widespread as they exist among the Bodos and the Rabhas. The witches are called as *daini*. A *daini* is not a spirit but a human being who achieve extra-ordinary powers by practicing some secret spells. They are believed to have powers by which they can harm any desired person or family. In a Koch society, he belief in the existence of a female witch i.e. *daini* is more than *daina* or a male witch.

2.10: Rites and Rituals

As already mentioned, a very large stock of people of Koch community has already been converted and assimilated into the Hindu society and contact with Hinduism is very close and significant. On the basis of the nature of their beliefs and practices, the rites and ceremonies of the Koches can broadly be divided into two broad groups: (i) Individual Life Cycle rituals and (ii) Communal Rituals.

The rites and ceremonies are the most important part that holds a bulk of rites and customs that influences the social as well as the cultural life of people. The agriculture base Koch community follows various traditional rituals and rites in their social life circle. Although region wise the nature of these rituals and rites and sometimes the names of the rituals are varied, but the base of their belief system is the same. With this, we will

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[102] Alfred C. Haddon, *Magic and Fetishism*, London: A Constable & Co Ltd., 1906, p. 40.

take an attempt to focus some of the rituals and rites that are followed by the Koch community of the Goalpara region in the following chapters.

At the present context, the traditional religious beliefs and practice, as well as the life cycle rituals, are undergoing through various changes and transformations. The influences of Hinduism, especially Vaisnavism and the influences from the neighbouring communities primarily the Bodos and the Rabhas; in addition to this, the dominance of Assamese culture has gradually added new colours in their culture. But the Koches of the Goalpara region still keep practicing their traditional beliefs and practices; whether it is the life cycle ritual or the communal rituals or the mode of worshipping to the gods and goddesses. The main Hindu deities although are keeping the important places in their beliefs and practices, but still, the existence of the traditional deities cannot be neglected. Therefore various aspects and role of these folk deities, their origin, mode of worshipping and various narratives related to them will be discussed in the continuing chapter very briefly.

2.11: Conclusion

Thus, from the above discussion about the Koch community and their folklife, it has been cleared that the Koch community of Assam carries a very much diverse and rich tradition of folklore. This knowledge may be dated back to the primordial age about which written documents is not that much clear. But still, it is intrinsically woven in their folklife that helps us to understand their socio-political, economic and cultural life. The finely intricate song, music, dance, language, material culture , customs reveal a different aspect of Koches including their social, religious and ritual structure. The folk culture of the Koches is not simply indication or remaining of the past, rather "their thought process, the hopes and fears, ideas and primitive philosophies of our remote ancestors as well as the sudden or gradual changes in all these things affected by the changing conditions of material life."[103]

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[103] Christina Hole, *English Folklore*, London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1945, p. vii.

The Koches are one of the indigenous ethnic groups of Assam that belongs to the Mongoloid race who in some point might have intermixed with other racial groups constitute a very important section in the formation of various race and ethnic groups of Assam. Although the existence of some matriarchal leftovers can be noticed, the social structure of the Koch is mainly patriarchic in nature where their traditional social organization is headed by the village headman. Regarding the origin of the community, various myths have revealed that the origin of the Koch people traced back to the place known as *Rashan mukprak tari* that can be loosely translate as the place where sun rises. This gives an idea of the Koch to have migrated from the hilly region of somewhere in Tibet and from there they have migrated to the plains of North Bengal, Assam and Meghalaya crossing the river of *Mesi* and *Kosi* in Nepal. From there the community gets its name as Koch. Moreover, in the origin myth of the Koch, the attribution of Shiva with the community in various aspects reveals their deep attachment and belief in Shiva. He is not only related with the origin of the community but with the agriculture also which is the central economy of the community.

Various genres of their folk life carry certain important facets of their social function. Hence, from the understanding in the present chapter about the Koch folklife, it has been seen that most of their social, economic or cultural aspects are directly or indirectly related with the religious beliefs and practices. Here, religion plays an integral part in their mundane life where magico-religious practices are common in their daily activities. Existence of various beliefs related to deities, spirits, ghosts, witchcraft can be also reflected in their songs, house structure, weaving, folk medicine, and so on. Most of their folk religiosity is reflected in their rituals and rites which validates their beliefs and culture and rationalizes the rituals and rites that are observed by the community members. Therefore in the next chapter, the thesis will discuss the folk elements that are reflected in their rituals.

Chapter: 3

LIFE CYCLE CEREMONIES: THE RELIGIOSITY OF THE KOCHES

3.1: Introduction

Every religious community has its own set of rituals and beliefs related to human life. The agriculture based Koch community follows various traditional rituals and rites in their social life circle in order to maintain their communal unity. These rituals and rites connect the individual family observances with the communal level in order to socialize and bind the members with the community. The social rites and ceremonies including the life cycle are the most important part that holds a bulk of rites and customs influencing the social as well as the cultural life of people. These life cycle ceremonies or more popularly known as the "*rite of passage*" as van Gennep has introduced are the traditional customs that mark the transformation phase from one social status to another and carry significant changes in the social status of that member. Most of the time these customs are accompanied by different believes and maintains with various ritual performances. Ritual is a system of fixed symbolic activities performed in a particular space and time that are either religious or secular depending upon belief systems. However, in terms of Koch folklife, one cannot pinpoint the segregation of these two spheres directly. Similarly, one also cannot ignore vigorous religious beliefs and practices associated with them. Rituals usually involve "a physical action (giving the food), a shared belief (the premonitory dream), and a material object (the penny loaf). Customs that have acquired considerable magical and sacred potency are known as rituals."[1] Although region wise the nature of these rituals and rites and many times the names of the rituals are varied, but the base of their belief system remains the same. The strong social organization of the Koches helps in sustaining these ritual practices and carries their legacy of collective as well as personal identity in order to make distinctiveness from others.

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[1] Richard M. Dorson, *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, University of Chicago Press, 1972, p.3

The life cycle ritual covers a set of symbolic methods that change the identity of the individual who is participating in that ritual. These are the ritual that is observed to give a new social status to an individual and to mark a gradual change of the status from one stage to another. As Arnold van Gennep has mentioned, "the life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another…….. Transitions from group to group and from one social situation to the next are looked on as implicit in the very fact of existence, so that a man's life comes to be made up of a succession of stages with similar ends and beginning: birth, social puberty, marriage, fatherhood, advancement to a higher class, occupational specialization and death. For every one of three events, there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined. Since the goal is the same, it follows of necessity that the ways of attaining it should be at least analogous if not identical in detail."[2] Therefore, every human society observes so many rituals and rites starting from birth to death in their whole life that have changed their previous identity by establishing a new social identity.

3.2: Ritual Theories

The undeniable importance of the rituals as a metaphorical element of any community lets various scholars come up with their studies. Scholars from different background and area studied the importance of ritual through its symbolical meaning, its ritual processes both in the private and public sphere of the people. Although, the existence of the concept of ritual exists from a long period, the study of ritual in a formal way is very recent. It is in the nineteenth century that the study of the ritual began to be understood as the formal development of human experience and behavior. The systematic way of study towards the ritual opens various new windows of the approaches of religion, culture, and identity of social as well as individual life. In the nineteenth century, various cultural anthropologists came up with the concept of ritual as a collective consciousness of human experiences. They understood ritual as a part of the religious behaviour. This led to the emergence of myth-ritual theory.

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[2] Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969, pp. 2-3.

Myth-Ritual Theory

In the world of academic studies, the development of study in ritual comes from the debate upon the origin of religion where ritual becomes one of the major components. Many myth ritual scholars tried to understand religion from the perspective of ritual. Scholars like Edward B. Tylor had tried to explain the universal evolution of the mental orientation as the basic element in the evolution of religious behaviour and ritual becomes the necessary expression for this human mental orientation. In later period, William Robertson Smith who is another evolutionary theorist followed Tylor's evolutionary pattern but argued his explanation of religion depending upon the explanation of souls. For him, religion does not arise from the explanation or belief on souls (animism) but rather on the actions and activities that construct the society. In other words, Robertson Smith saw religion as rooted not in speculative myths about the nature of things but in rituals that essentially worshiped divine representations of the social order itself.[3] Further, Robertson Smith's work is based on the ritual practices of sacrifices and consumption of their totemic animal in the Semetic religion which is quite different from the idea of sacrifice observed by Tylor. As Tylor saw the sacrifice as a kind of "gift" to the spirits asking for blessings, Smith considered sacrifice as a "communion" between the society members and the spirits or deity that brings the social unity. For Smith therefore, myth is in a secondary position while his main argument is that ritual as the main component of religion and myth only explains the history and origin of the rite where the novel connotation was forgotten. As Smith has said, "so far as myths consist of explanations of ritual, their value is altogether secondary, and it may be affirmed with confidence that in almost every case the myth was derived from the ritual, and not the ritual from the myth; for the ritual was fixed and the myth was variable, the ritual was obligatory and faith in the myth was at the discretion of the worshipper".[4.]

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[3] Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 4.

[4] William Robertson Smith, *Lectures on Religion of the Semites*, New York: Meridian Library, 1956, pp. 17-18

Robert Ackerman, "Frazer on Myth and Ritual", *Journal of History of Ideas*, Vol. 36, No. 1, p. 120.

Thus, according to the myth ritual theory, folklore is made up of "survivals" and their former practices of rituals. It defines myth as "a narrative associated with a rite" or "the description of a rite". From their view point culture and art begin in the ritual acts of primitive man, especially sacrifice. As culture evolves, ritual becomes progressively verbalised, giving rise to myth. When the verbal description of the rite achieves autonomy, myth achieves independence as an expressive form. Rite is the primary form and myth is its immediate derivative. From myth and rite the secular verbal and performing arts subsequently evolve. As the sacred character of myth and ritual is lost or forgotten, myth becomes tale or song and rite becomes drama, dance, music or game. Therefore, all the secular arts are said to have had sacred basis and ritual as an expression of sacred behaviour. They are mostly concerned to reconstruct the ritual foundation of particular expressive products by identifying the elements of the original rituals that are survived in those products. In other words, the myth ritual theorists consider the myths and other forms of narratives are derived from some earlier type of ritual, either directly or indirectly.

Sociological and Functional Approach to Ritual

The understanding and works of the evolution theorists, in due course of time, led the proceeding scholars to open up a new series of questions. These new scholars, heavily inspired by the works of Edward B. Tylor and William Robertson Smith, mainly concentrate on the functions of ritual. Therefore, these functional scholars' main query is to find the role and relations of society with ritual rather than searching for history and origin of ritual. Inspired by the works of Robertson Smith, French scholar Emile Durkeim, in his book[5] constructed the idea of religion or religious behavior as a fact of collective or social phenomenon. With this book Durkheim actually really sets up an elaborate interrogation on what is actually going on with the religion. Like many other theorists of religion, he began by trying to define religion and says that to find a religion it is important to look on two basic things which involves in religion and they are the beliefs and the rites. He also says that the rites, rituals or the activities of the religion

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[5] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. J. W. Swain, London: Goerge Allen & Unwin, 1982.

whether those are ethical activities or ritual activities have a religious nature. This is because of the object towards their orientation with a class of objects which are sacred.

The most important and basic to his idea is the distinction between sacred and profane and according to him these are the origin of religion. According to him, "all known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex, present one common characteristic: they presuppose a classification of all the things, real and ideal, of which men think, into two classes or opposed groups, generally designed by two distinct terms which are translated well enough by the words *profane* and *sacred.*"[6] The distinction from profane marks the path of sacred. He further argued that, religious beliefs are "the representations which express the nature of sacred things and the relations which they sustain, either with each other or with profane things"[7] and rites or rituals are "the rules of conduct which prescribed how a man should comport himself in the presence of these sacred objects."[8] Durkheim in "The Elementary Forms of Religious Life" ultimately argued about what actually the sacred represents in its elementary level. So when he argued that the representation of god or spirit as sacred in the worship, for humans in the most fundamental structural level, the sacred represents the experiments of the social group. Hence, he argued that when we represent the sacred, what we are really experiencing is the representation of that social group as a whole. The sacredness of one thing is related with the identity of that group.

To understand the nature of religion and its distinction between sacred and profane, Durkheim suggested that it is important to break down the concept of religion into its elementary forms. Durkheim talks about the early form of religion which existed historically and as religious system and that is "totemism". He argued that early religion was primarily totemic in nature. The way Durkheim understand totemism was that it is a form of religion where a group or tribe or clan identify with a particular animal, plant which are there totem and their religious system was based on the veneration of that

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[6] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. J. W. Swain, London: Goerge Allen & Unwin, 1982, p. 37.

[7] Ibid, p. 41

[8] Ibid, p. 41

totem. Durkheim argued that when these groups or clan venerates their totem they actually venerate themselves and distinguish them from others which are actually veneration of that group. Durkheim argued that when the clans look at some sort symbol; it may be an object or idea within the totemic system; it is a symbol of the totemic principle of the God as the divine force of the secret power. He argued, "From the analysis to which we have been giving our attention, it is evident that it expresses and symbolises two different things. In the first place, it is the outward and visible form of what we have called the totemic principle or god. But it is also the symbol of the determined society called the clan. It is the flag; it is the sign by which each clan distinguishes itself from others".[9] Further he argued that when we worship, ultimately we worship ourselves not as individual but as a group. He identified this with the term called 'church'. By the term 'church', Durkheim implies any religious community.

Durkheim also argued that there are basically two types of practices that developed in the religious system. They are the negative and the positive. They are the basically an ethical system. The negative includes all those prescriptions and taboos. These are the instruction by which the clan learns to behave with relation to the society. By these they create a moral community that is defined by certain behavior. He also says that there are also the positive dimensions to religious practice that builds an identity between the religious adherent and the gods or the society. Eliminating the individual consciousness, Durkheim argued that religion helps basically to provide the social world a way to become part of ourselves. Ultimately Durkheim argued that it is the social force, it is the collective consciousness which helps in creating the idea of religion.

Following Durkheim's idea of religion as a social phenomenon, Marcel Mauss enhanced the concept of social phenomenon into a "total social phenomenon". According to Catherine Bell, "For Mauss, to study religion as a total social phenomenon meant that religion must be analysed in terms of how it is linked to every aspect of society. Hence, he held that religion is eminently social, but religion and society cannot be collapsed

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[9] Ibid, p.112.

together as mutually defining."[10] But his writing on the Vedic Hindu sacrificial ritual collaborating with scholar Henri Hubert, focused on various issues relating with ritual sacrifice earlier discussed by scholars like Tylor, Frazer and Robertson Smith. Ultimately, the approach strengthened ritual as fact of sociological notion and religious set of a social life.

Structural Approach to Ritual

In terms to modify the idea of functionalism E. E. Evans-Pritchard's study with the Nuer community of south Sudan appears to be one of an important development in the study of structuralism and symbolism. While earlier studies were concern the social structure as the key to understand the religion, Evans-Pritchard also looked into the other influential factors like environmental, economical or historical in the religion that manipulate the social organisation reflected in the Nuer social values and rituals. In his book[11], Evans-Pritchard argued the "inadequacy" of most of the earlier theories on religion and mainly focused on the structure of the Nuer religion by commenting this "highly complex" religious belief as "remarkably sensitive, refined and intelligent".[12] Although, Evan-Pritchard agreed Fustel de Coulanges, Robertson Smith, Durkheim, Mauss, and others' idea of religion as a "product of social life", he completely disagree of their understanding of religion as "nothing more than a symbolic representation of the social order". In fact, Evans-Pritchard commented that "it was Durkheim and not the savage who made society into god". As according to him, "Nuer religious thoughts and practices are influenced by their whole social life is evident from our study of them", he further stated that "the Nuer conception of God cannot be reduced to, or explained by, the social order."[13] While describing the Nuer social order, he analysed Nuer sacrifice as a communicating ritual in order to establish a relationship of mutual dependency in between human, cattle and god. As the cattle and human are considered equal in

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[10] Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 26.

[11] E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956.

[12] Ibid, p. 311.

[13] Ibid, pp. 313-320.

comparison to god, the cattle is sacrifice instead of human and offered to the god. So, the act of sacrificing ritual is considered as a medium of communicating while reflecting social order. In other words, Nuer rites can be understood as a relationship between the spirits and the human that reflect their structural social relations.

The person whose work worth mentioning in relation to the function and structure of life cycle ritual is Arnold van Gennep, who for the first time saw rites of passage as a distinctive category in ritual life. Rites of passage are the ceremonial events that take place the life of an individual of a social group to mark the transition from one social or religious position to another. Terms like "*life crisis*" or "*life cycle*" ritual is used as a synonym to the rites of passage, the ceremonies related to social and religious transformation overlaps the passage rites. While most of the common rites of passage are connected with the natural biological transformation like pregnancy, birth, puberty and death, in realty the depiction of socio-cultural overlap on it easily makes the ritual un-identical.

For him, a rite of passage is any life cycle ritual in human life such as birth, initiation, puberty, marriage and death that brings the transition into a person's or group's identity from one social status to another. Further with his study into various cultures, he found universal similarities on structures in certain kind of rituals in the world and these rituals are associated with the changes of one position to another in the social structure. He with his book[14] tried to understand the ritual life of rites of passage through tripartite process- separation, transition and incorporation. According to the first stage, all individual begin with a period of separation from the old position and from a normal time; in the second stage which involves the liminal or transitional period, the participant is neither in their old status nor they are incorporated into the new and in the final stage which is the incorporation, the individual is reintroduced into the group or society with his/her new identity and position. With the help of these three stages, Arnold van Gennep tried to understand and exhibit "a wide degree of general similarity among ceremonies of birth, childhood, social puberty, betrothal, marriage, pregnancy, fatherhood, initiation

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[14] Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960.

into religious societies, and funerals. In this respect, man's life resembles nature, from which neither the individual nor the society stands independent."[15] In addition, van Gennep's articulation and details about the uses of space in a ritual further explains the structure of the ritual and the symbolic interpretation of the social beliefs. Furthermore, in connection to this; his understanding on the concept of sacred explains "sacredness as an attribute is not absolute; it is brought into play by the nature of particular situations."[16] Therefore, sacred is not something which is already fixed, rather it is something in which a ritual defines it.

Arnold van Gennep's effort on the study of the structural model of ritual revitalized Victor Turner to come up with his well-built model on the study cultural symbolism and its associated meaning of that culture. Turner sees ritual as a form of "*social drama"*, which plays an important role in order to maintain the social harmony among the members of the community compare to other forms of dramas. For him, social drama is a dynamic sequence of breach, crisis, redressive action, and reintegration. Victor Turner further advanced the idea of transition stage (liminality) put forward by Arnold van Gennep by promoting its applicability in the study of both western and non-western cultures. By using van Gennep's three partite sequences of rites of passage, Turner tried to develop the structure inside of the ritual process. While van Gennep's writings were based on traditional society, Turner did not want to limit its application into only the traditional initiation rites but to all kinds of occurrences in modern societies.

In his number of studies on the ritual process among a north western Zamibian tribe called Ndembu, Turner was particularly interested in the transitional phase where the person is neither here nor there or in Turner's word the person is "between and betwixt". While analyzing the liminal period of Ndembu initiation rites, Turner has commented that the liminal persona whom Turner termed as "neophytes*"* is defined by "a name and by a set of symbols" and as per his interpretation, the symbolizations are "the neophytes are neither living nor dead from one aspect, and both living and dead from

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[15] Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960, p. 3.

[16] Ibid. p. 12

another."[17] He further said that "their condition is one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary categories."[18] For that period of transition of the ritual, the *neophytes* "have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows." [19] Those neophytes now stand out of the common social organisation (structure) of the society and remain for a period of liminality (anti-structure). Victor Turner coined the term communitas in order to define the equal status and common shared unity among all the members separated generally through the rites of passage. Both liminality and communitus are the components of the anti-structure model referred by Turner and the distinction between structure and communitas is not simply a distinction like the difference between sacred and secular. For him, ritual as part of the social mechanism has the ability to change its position. "Certain fixed offices in tribal societies have *many* sacred attributes; indeed, every social position has *some* sacred characteristics. But this "sacred" component is acquired by the incumbents of positions during the rites de passage, through which they changed positions."[20] Turner further commented that both the structure and communitas are important to its social life and any one or group who is deprive of any of these, will try to fulfill that through ritual which will provide them either structure (in the case of structurally inferior) or communitas (in case of a structurally superior).

Like Victor Turner, Mary Douglas is another anthropologist who has also left a major impact in the study of ritual through her functional-structural approach. She mentioned that human beings understand the world around them by dividing it into binary categories. With her book[21], Douglas extended Turner's idea of structure and anti-structure of the group of a society and develops her understanding into *grid* (structure)

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[17] Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University press, 1967, pp. 95-97.

[18] Ibid, p. 97.

[19] Ibid, pp. 98-99.

[20] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989, p. 96-97.

[21] Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, London: Cresset Press, 1970.

and *group* (anti-structure). For her a grid is "order, classification, the symbolic system" and group is the "pressure, the experience of having no option but to consent to the overwhelming demands of other people."[22] In order to explain the concept of grid and group, she prepared a chart where she hypothesize four types of societies: the first one being the strong group with a strong grid; the second one is the strong group but weak grid; third one is the weak group with the weak grid and lastly, the weak group with a strong grid. She argued that society with a strong grid or group has a larger ritual and larger control, while the society with a weak grid and group holds the less ritual and control over individuals.[23] In her book[24], Mary Douglas discusses about the universal patterns of purity-pollution symbolism that are existed and are based on reference to the human body. Overall she argues her case from a Durkhemian perspective suggesting that shared symbols "create a unity in experience" and that religious ideas about purity and pollution symbolize beliefs about social order. Marry Douglas sees ritual as an symbolic act of communication very much like speech and defines ritual as a "routinised act diverted from its normal function, subtly becomes a new form of communication"[25] which effected certain set of values in the social behavior of the group. This symbolic communication of ritual activity can be seen in her illustration of purity and pollution and various food taboos in the study of the Biblical book of Leviticus. Further, Douglas explains the human body as the symbol of social body and the social control is symbolized by the bodily control. While discussing about the purity-pollution and ritual cleanliness, Douglas concentrates on the social systems that generates this idea. According to her, the beliefs in pollution are universal and the things which are not fit in the socially constructed structure are considered as polluted; hence they are abominated. She further argued that the transition period is considered as dangerous as they are neither here nor there in the social structure. They are indefinable.

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[22] Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, London: Cresset Press, 1970, p. 61.

[23] Ibid, pp. 61-71.

[24] Marry Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London & Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited, 1966.

[25] Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbol*, London: Cresset Press, 1970, p. 2

Thus, from the above overview of various ritual theories it has been noticed that the ritual studies started among the scholars as a part of the religious study. In the progress of time, the study transformed as the element of sociological phenomena in order to understood its function and how it incorporate and reflect various social realities in the form of a symbolic structure.

Keeping the mind on the above theoretical discussion, the data for various rites and rituals are collected in order to understand the religious life of the Koches. Although life-cycle ritual or the rites of passage is not the only genre to understand the ritual life of human society; but certainly it will provide the religio-cultural understanding of the human social life. However, all these theories that have been discussed above reflect the importance of the ritual as they carry symbols, metaphors of that culture and create personal as well as group identity. In order to understand the Koch rituals as an expression of their symbolic, metaphorical religious-cultural life some selected life-cycle rituals of the Koch people are explained and analysed. In this regard, the present chapter will discuss and analyze the ritual processes of individual as well as family level life cycle ceremonies including birth, marriage and death rituals of the Koch community of Assam. Furthermore, the manifestation of folk religious practices in the rituals and beliefs of the community is also discussed in this chapter. At the same time, while discussing the folk religious practices, the chapter also considers the two other important religious phenomena which are magic and witchcraft. As magic and witchcraft is a crucial part of various folk religions, the practices of magic and witchcraft cannot be separated in the veneration of deities. Among the Koches, it is equally an important part of their religious beliefs. The chants of *ojas* or *deosis*, the oracle of a *deodha*, and different performative taboos and practices reflects the importance of magic and protection from witchcraft an important aspect in the Koch life cycle rituals. Therefore, the chapter also considers at the practices of magic and witchcraft in the Koch life cycle rituals.

3.3: Life Cycle Rituals of Koch

The life cycle rituals for the Koches are an integral and significant part of their folk life that symbolises their unity and social bonding. A Koch individual life cycle surrounds relatively on three major rituals that are birth, marriage, and death. Although,

there are other rituals also observed at various stages of life, compared to the above they are less important. Moreover, as the observation of the puberty ceremony in the eastern part of the region is quite popular due to more Assamese influences, in the western part it is observed in a minor way. With this, the present chapter will study some of the Koch life cycle rituals and rites of the Goalpara region. The transition period from one stage to another of any ceremony have to cross certain stages and acts where the concepts of various belief systems like sacredness, magic, purity, impurity, taboo are attached so much depending upon the ritual process. For example, the impurity level of an individual ritual person in the puberty ceremony is higher than the ritual person of a marriage ceremony; while the family impurity level is higher in a death ceremony than the birth ceremony. But overall all these folk belief systems have bound and affected by their ritual pattern. Thus, the present chapter will try to analyse the selected life cycle process of the Koch community, which is birth, marriage, and death rituals. This will help the researcher to interpret how the Koch folk religiosity gets reflected through each life cycle ritual. Moreover, the present chapter will extensively use the theoretical model of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner. The theoretical frame on life cycle ritual will provide us to understand and interpret the religious-cultural life of the Koches which is layered by different folk beliefs.

3.3.1: *Jatwk Jwnma*[26] (Child Birth Ritual)

In any society, after their marriage, every man and woman desires to have a child. In the Koch society also, the occurrence of pregnancy and the birth of a healthy child is considered a happy and cherishing moment for that family. The birth of the child constructs a new identity for the husband as his identity is transformed from a married man to a father. But this transition from one status to another new status affects the woman and the child most. While the woman changes her identity from a married pregnant woman to a newborn child's mother; the child is counted as a new member of the family as well as in the community. But, in order to incorporate these new identities and roles, the mother and the child has to go through certain rituals and rites that are

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[26] The whole process of *Jatwk jwnma* is also known as *Ahujor Suwa*. Both terms are simultaneously used in the Koch society.

bound by a set of religious observances. In the Koch society, these are specific rituals organised separately for both mother and child. So, each stage has elaborate processes.

3.3.1.1: The Ritual Process:

A pregnant Koch woman should have to follow various strict social customs till the time and also after the childbirth. The community believes that obeying the social customs correctly and rightly will give the pregnant lady a smooth and safe birth. Further, the future of the child will also depend upon these social customs. Therefore, the wife and the husband, both try to follow the customs correctly to get rid of any complications at the time of the child's birth. The whole ritual process of the *jatwk jwnma* (birth ritual) can be divided into three stages. They are (i) Pre-Delivery, (ii) Delivery and (iii) Post-Delivery stage. The first stage is observed at that moment when the woman comes to know about her pregnancy and ends when she starts to get the pain. The second stage starts when the woman starts to feel the delivery pain and ends with the birth of the child. And finally, the third stage starts soon after the birth of the child and ends after the incorporation of the mother and the child with the family and society.

3.3.1.1.1: Pre-Delivery Rituals

For every couple, pregnancy is considered a defining moment for a happy married life. Although, it is a knowing fact that due to the sexual union between two opposite sexes leads to pregnancy, like other communities[27] of the region, the Koches also believes that without the god's kindness no woman can get pregnant or no man can impregnate a woman even though they have sexual relation. They are led by the supernatural agencies. Therefore, many times it is seen that animals are sacrificed or offerings of other things are given to the deities by the couples who do not have any children.[28] The Koches believe that pregnancy is a kind of blessing of the almighty and

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[27] "The Rabhas strongly feel that without God's mercy, no woman can become pregnant or no man can impregnate a woman even if they have much vigour. As such, a barren couple goes to the temple and worships the deity for the issue" – see. Rajen Rabha, *The Rabhas*, p.116.

[28] Basically the Koches worship *Katika deo* and *Madan Kam* in order to beget a child. For that the female members of the family observes *Katika puja* in a close manner where males are not allowed. On the other hand, males observed the *Madan Kam puja*.

the woman who is unable to bear a child is many times looked derogatively in the society.[29] When a Koch woman notices physical changes in her body and misses her *sinan/mahekia* (menstruation) for one or two months, she recognizes herself as *gao-bhari* (pregnant).[30] This fact, then she informs her husband and her mother-in-law. The moment she and her family members come to know about her pregnancy, they start to take care of her physical as well as her mental health. She is restricted from doing heavy works.

Although, at the time of the pregnancy, the woman is not considered as unclean and is allowed to enter and cook in the kitchen, but at this stage different taboos and restrictions are attributed with the pregnant woman along with her husband in order to prevent the element of black magic and effect of malevolent deities and spirits. Moreover, they resort to various customs and *ojali* (exorcism) in order to prevent the upcoming troubles. The husband also takes precautions and observes certain taboos related to food and sex life. During the pregnancy period, the woman is prohibited to enter into the jungle or forest, to go outside of the house alone or to walk over a rope, to touch the dead body or to go to the cremation ground. She should also restrict herself to cross a river or a pond especially on *sokhabar* or *khorabar*[31] i.e. the Tuesday or Saturday; because according to the Koch belief system, by doing that the evil spirit can cause harm to the child and even kill the unborn child in her womb. If the woman has to travel on these two days or she has to cross the river then one *oja*[32] is summoned.[33] The *oja* chants *Mantras* on a flower and is kept on a glass of water and roll it around her head to toe without touching her body and sprinkle that water on her body. The belief is that by doing so she is protected by the mantras and the evil spirits cannot do any harm to her

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[29] The woman who can't bear a child is called *Baja* and they are restricted from participating in the main birth ritual events.

[30] Informant: Minabala Ray, Female, Age: 65, Kahibari, Interview date: 28/04/2016.

[31] According to the Koch belief system, the malevolent spirits become more active and strong in these two days of a week.

[32] *Oja* is the person who practices magic and is said to be as the experts at detecting and exorcizing various kinds of malignant agencies. He is considered as the practitioner of the ethno-medicine in the community as well as a ritualistic practitioner. He chanted Mantras in the Rajbongshi language.

[33] Informant: Minabala Ray, Female, Age: 65, Kahibari, Interview date: 28/04/2016.

and her unborn child. The husband also should avoid going to the cremation ground, sacrificing of animal or killing of an animal. Moreover, they are strictly prohibited to kill a snake as it is believed that if they kill snakes, the child will be born as abnormal.[34] As the snake is always related with the Goddess *Bishohori* who is considered as the family deity and also with God Siva who is considered as the progenitor of the community. It is also believed that such an act can cause misfortune to the child, mother as well as to the family. He is also prohibited to carry the funeral bier and to attend the funeral rites. The concerned couple should also avoid eating of unnatural joint fruits because the belief is that it will bring the birth of the *joyja* (twins). Moreover, the family along with the pregnant woman takes so many precautions in order to prevent the danger of witchcraft and black magic.[35] It is believed that her nail, her hair, food that is eaten by her, clothes which she normally wears, etc. are the easiest material to be subjected for the black magic and witchcraft. Therefore, the pregnant woman takes precautions while she combs her hair, cuts her nail or eats her food by keeping some secrecy.

After the three months of pregnancy, the lady is given a sanctified charmed cord known as *jap* or *kasni* by the *oja* to protect the mother and the unborn child from evil spirits and any undesirable influences. This *kasni* is tied down on the waist or at the arm of the pregnant lady to protect herself and her unborn child in the womb. Most often, the woman ties a *tabij* (amulet or talisman) made with iron on the hands and a knife is always kept under her bed in order to avoid the attack of an evil spirit. If the pregnant mother feels severe pain at her lower abdomen and the pain starts to move from the lower abdomen to upper, it is believed that the pain is caused because of the evil sight of the female spirit called *Pettani*. This is known as *pohila bish*. The evil sight of this spirit can create weakness to the mother which ultimately cause the death of the unborn child or even sometimes the mother. When someone feels this pain, an *oja* is called immediately. She is then offered *jara-pani* to drink and a *kasni* is tied on her. Generally, a Puja is organised to please the deities of the house either at the third month after the pregnancy is

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[34] Informant: Parbati Bala Ray, Female, Age: 75, Aolaguri, Interview date: 30/04/2016.

[35] Informant: Parbati Bala Ray, Female, Age: 75, Aolaguri, Interview date: 30/04/2016.

confirmed.[36] This puja is also done by the *oja* and offerings of sacrifices are also made towards the deities like *Subasini, Bishohori, Bura-Buri, Aideu*, etc.

When the woman is in her fifth months of pregnancy the ritual of *sadh khawa* is observed. The ritual is observed in a much-closed manner, where only family members and elderly neighbours participate. This ritual is also called as *panchamrit khuwa*.[37] On that day, she is given *panchamrit* prepared with *seni* (sugar), *mou* (honey), *doi* (curd), *ghiu* (ghee), and *awa gakhir* (raw milk) to eat and the elderly lady of the community blesses her with money for a healthy child. The ritual milk is usually collected from seven different cows. With those ingredients they prepare *bhog* (sacrament) and first offer this in front of Goddess *Aideu*. Once the women offer the *bhog* to the deity *Aideu* and ask for her blessing, the pregnant lady is then given that *bhog* to eat. According to the belief, only after eating the *sadh/panchamrit*, the child gets his/her life and starts to move inside the womb.[38]

Further, the Koches worship another evil spirit after the delivery is confirmed and this ritual can be observed in any month from five to seven. This spirit is known as *Moila deo* who causes weakness in the pregnant lady that the weakness may cause premature delivery or the death of the unborn child in the womb. For that, the family organizes a ritual to worship this *deo* and for that, a stream is selected. There seven idols (like human figure) are made with the help of jute sticks and are worshipped by offering uncooked rice, banana, flower, sweets, etc. by the *oja*. For the ritual, sacrifice is also made to satisfy

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[36] Informant: Parbati Bala Ray, Female, Age: 75, Aolaguri, Interview date: 30/04/2016.

[37] Generally, the ritual is observed at the father's house of the pregnant woman. But if she is not able to go to her father's house for this ritual, five to seven married women will come to her husband's house with rice, milk, *Pitha* (traditional rice cake), sugar, fish, meat, betel nut-leaf etc. along with a small box of vermillion and a new *Patani* (traditional dress for women) with a red border. The women who will perform the ritual should have their first child to be alive. Widow, childless women or the married women whose first child is dead is not allowed to participate in the ritual. Moreover, on the day of the solar eclipse, lunar eclipse, *Purnima* (full moon), *Amavasya* (new moon), *Ekadashi* (eleventh lunar day), *Sokhabar* (Tuesday) and *Khorabar* (Saturday), this ritual is not observed. The community segregates some days as auspicious and other days as prohibited. This shows their concern regarding the time.

[38] Informant: Parbati Bala Ray, Female, Age: 75, Aolaguri, Interview date: 30/04/2016.

the *deo*. Once the worship is over, a small portion of jute sticks from each idol is cut and put inside the *madli*[39] (amulets) and is tied on the pregnant woman.

For better health of the mother and the child, another ritual called *jeora diya* is observed. The name *jeora diya*; where *jeora*[40] means barrier or fence or frame and *diya* means to give, literally signifying to make a frame or fence by blessings of the elders to protect the couple and their unborn child from malevolent spirits and evil eyes. It is observed in a large manner, where relatives and elderly ladies of the community are invited. This is generally observed on the seventh month of the pregnancy period, but can be observed on the ninth month depending upon the feasibility of the family. At the time of the ritual, the couple sits over a *sal-pira* (a small flat tool) covered with a *gamsa* (traditional small towel). On that day, both are given an *anakata*[41] *sador*[42] which is held by both of them. On that *sador*, the elder woman comes and gives fruits to the couple one by one and blessed them by saying to have a healthy child like the fruit. On that day, both husband and wife are blessed by the elders. They keep fasting for the ritual. On that day, a Puja is offered towards all deities of the household shrine. *Aideu, Bishohori, Podda, Bura-Buri*, etc are worshipped by offering Prasad, flower, betel nut-leaf, fruits and in some families sacrifice is also offered towards the deities seeking for the protection of the mother and child.[43]

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[39] For detail information about *Madli*, see the chapter two, p. 87.

[40] Traditionally *jeora* is used to be prepared with bamboos to mark the boundary of the house from the outside world and to protect its hosts from outsiders; it may be human or spirit as per the Koches belief.

[41] *Anakata* is kind of clothes which is used and prepared only for the rituals. The literal meaning of the word is *ag nakata* means which is not cut. Therefore, when the weaving of this kind of cloth has finished the front and the end part is not cut by any metal or steel instrument. Rather, one or two stone is used to cut the thread by smashing the thread with stones. In the process to prepare an *anakata* cloth, the person who is given the responsibility also has to take many precautions as it is considered very much pure and sacred. If the in charge woman for the cloth is in her menstruation period, she should avoid weaving the cloth; even she should also not touch the cloth. Moreover, the responsibility for this kind of clothes is given only to a married woman whose husband is still alive and who has given birth to a child.

[42] *Sador* is traditional attire worn by the women folk along with *mekhela* to cover the upper part of the body.

[43] Further, on that day a pair or sometimes one *guwa/gwi/tamul* (areca nut) and a leaf of *khili paan* (betel leaf) are kept hidden by two bowls separately by the elderly ladies at the bedroom of the couple. Then, the pregnant woman is called inside the room and they tell her to select any one of the bowls. It is believed that

3.3.1.1.2: Delivery Rituals

Like many other societies of Assam, the Koches also don't have any strict position for a midwife or female attendant. Instead, at the time of childbirth, the neighboring ladies help each other. The aged woman who is most experienced in delivery from the community performs the role of a midwife. Among them, the lady who is the most experienced or specialized in delivery is called *dhai/dhaini* takes lead and helps the mother at the time of delivery. Generally, only women attend the delivery. At the time when the labor pain is started, a separate house/hut is prepared for the delivery. The newly prepared delivery hut is called as *suwa-ghor*.[44] Once she is taken inside the *suwa-ghor*, she is considered as *suwa* or impure.

Traditionally, the expected mother then takes a position on her knees supporting herself on a *sam* (wooden mortar). If the woman suffers too much of pain at the time of the delivery process, someone brings *pani-jara* (charmed water) or *tel-jara* (charmed oil) from an *oja* and rubs this on the woman from waist to stomach. It is believed that this will help the woman relieve from the pain and lead to an easy delivery. Moreover, if the main door of the house is closed or any box of the house is locked at the time of delivery, it is also believed that the delivery will not be easy. But sometimes if the mother takes too much time in delivery and she feels too much pain while delivery, she is believed to be attacked by the *Daini*. *Daini* is considered as an evil spirit or witch and is considered as the main reason for a painful delivery. Therefore, in order to have a smooth delivery and to remove the delivery pain, the family organizes a ritual or *puja* for *Daini*. For that, at the evening time, the husband sacrifices a duck or chicken or a pair of pigeons or a tortoise. After that, the meat is cooked and offered along with boiled rice, curry, chilies, and ashes. These sacraments are offered at the junction of the road.

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if the woman selects the bowl with areca nut then a boy child will be born and if she selects betel leaf then the child will be a girl.

[44] But nowadays, instead of making a separate hut, inside the main house a separate room is selected for delivery. Inside the *Suwa-ghor* free entry of men is strictly restricted. Even the husband is also not allowed to enter that room.

After the delivery of the child, in order to cut the umbilical cord of the baby any kind of iron or steel made instrument is not used. Instead, a *seiska*[45] is used to cut the *nasti* (umbilical cord) of the baby and is tied with either cotton or silk thread. Moreover, the cord is also not cut in just one stroke, rather seven strokes for a girl child and five strokes in the case of a boy child. Simultaneously, the cord is tied down at five finger distance for boy and seven finger distance for a girl, with five times by the thread for a boy and seven times for a girl child.[46] Other than this, no widow is allowed to cut the cord as it is believed that if a widow cut the umbilical cord, this will shorten the life span of the baby. On the contrary, the cord is generally cut by the woman whose hand is believed as *tita* (bitter) and this will help in drying the cut fast, while the woman whose hand is supposed to be *mitha* (sweet) is not allowed to cut the cord as it is believed that the cord will not dry easily.[47] It is also an important fact to mention that the same belief system of cutting the cord does also exist among the Bodo community.

Generally, the placenta is buried covering in a plantain leaf within the campus in front of the *suwa-ghor* on the same day. Sometimes the placenta is buried inside the house, but mostly it is buried in front of the *suwa-ghor*. But in the case of a consecutive death of the newborn child, the placenta is buried nearby a *sari-ali* (junction of four roads) by the father. If the child's father is already dead or absent then the formalities are done by an elderly woman. In the case of burying the placenta, very much care and precaution are taken. The burial of the placenta is done in such a way that no animals can

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[45] A *seiska* is a freshly prepared green bamboo split which is about one foot long. It has very sharp edges. To make this the green skin is stripped off from a standing bamboo tree and then before the use, this is washed with cold water and soon after cutting the umbilical cord it is thrown away either on the rooftop or on the back side of the house.

[46] These numbers signify the works in the life of a boy and a girl as it is believed that a boy must eat, drink, sleep, urinate and do the toilet and for a girl other than this five, she has to menstruate and to do parturition.

[47] The criterion of considering someone's hand as *tita* (bitter) or *mitha* (sweet) is recognized by the act of plantation of a tree especially an areca nut tree or betel leaf plant. The woman or man who plants a tree or plucks the leaf from a betel leaf plant and if soon it dries out or died out it is believed that his/her hand is bitter and he/she is not able to grow a plant despite of their effort. On the contrary, the man/woman whose hand is sweet is not needed to do that much of hard-work to grow a plant. It is said that if they just throw the plant in the ground it starts to bloom without any hardship. It is also believed that if the cord is cut off the child by the bitter hand, he/she will be rough during their conversation, while a sweet hand will make them a soft speaker and their behavior will also be good.

access it as it is believed that it will cause to dry the milk of the mother and it can cause the death of the newborn child.[48] Further, it is also believed that if any *daini* (witches) gets the placenta, they can harm the child or even kill the child. The burying of the placenta in the courtyard carries a symbolic meaning of the Koch's faith and belief that from that day onwards the child becomes a member of the family and wish to serve the family and be reborn in the family again and again.

3.3.1.1.3: Post-Delivery Rituals

Soon after the birth of the child, the child is breastfed by his/her mother. Then the mother baths the baby with lukewarm water and *xanti pani*[49] (believed as holy water) is sprinkled over the child. Soon the child is born, some member of the family makes sound by beating on a *bera* (wall) of the house if the new born is a boy child for five times and beats a *kula* (winnowing fan) for the seven times if the newborn is a girl. In some area, after the child is born, a touch of the mother earth is given to the child and as mother earth is considered as *Ai Basumati*, it is believed that this will bring good luck to the child. After that, the newborn baby is kept in a *kula*[50] (a winnowing fan)[51] and he/she is given *mou* (honey) for three times in their tongue. But before that, the tongue of the child is cleaned by the hair of his/her mother. After taking a bath, the mother washes and cleans the armpit and other corner parts of the body of the child with her wet hair. According to the belief by doing this the child will not suffer from any infection or allergy in future. A small fire with paddy husk or cow dung is kept always near the bed of the mother and the child and a *jinjiri/jijri* (sickle) or a *katri* (chopper) are placed under the bed of both mother and child to protect them from evil spirits. In addition, branch of *moin kata* (a wild shrub which has long thorns in its body) or *bogri* tree (Indian Jujube)

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[48] Dijendra Nath Bhakat, *Axomor Koch-Rajbongshi Jonojāti*, Dhubri: Ms. Ananya Bhakat, p. 104.

[49] This water is prepared with plain water adding uncooked *aula saul* (rice), milk, *dubri boon* (doob grass), holy basil leaves, a ring or an ornament of gold and silver.

[50] Keeping the child in a *kula* (winnowing fan) has a belief that this will make the heart of the child as big as a *kula*. The child will become a generous and a kind-hearted person later in nature.

[51] This carries the belief that keeping the newborn child over a winnowing fan will make his/her heart is as broad as a winnowing fan.

or other kind of thorns like *bet* (cane tree), *bagh asura*[52] (a wild thorny creeper), shells of snail are kept or hung on the doors and windows of the *suwa-ghor* and fishing net and iron made *khukhri/katri* (a kind of knife) are kept on the bed. According to the Koch people, these thorns and iron will protect the child from the evil spirits who are always searching for the spirits of a newborn child. The birth of the child does not end the taboos and restrictions for the mother, father, and even the family. Soon after the birth, the mother and the child are given a *kasni* or an iron amulet.[53]

From the first day of the birth of the child until the fifth night, elderly women from the community take care of the mother and the child. After the birth of the child, the whole family is considered in a state of uncleanliness which is known as *ahujor suwa* or *jytakar suwa* and secluded from the society and they can't participate in any religious rituals. Even the *bhagi* (blood lineage) family from the father's side also observes *suwa* (impurity) for one month and do not participate or organise any religious rituals at home. As the Koches do believe in rebirth concept, they don't know which community or caste earlier the newborn baby was from and therefore they do not shave hairs, cut nails as they are considered as *suwa* (impure).

As a part towards the cleanliness of the family, a simple function is organised on the fifth day for a girl and on the seventh day for a boy and the ritual is known as *ekkaman* or *pasoti*. As it is believed that cleaning the house with cow dung purify the

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[52] This specific creeper is believed to have a very hard thorn that even a tiger also can't escape from its thorns and is believed to have medicinal and magical element. Moreover, it is believed that ghosts and evil spirits are very much afraid of this specific creeper and hence they keep away all kinds of malevolent spirits and diseases. Therefore, at the time of *Bishua* or *Bihu* festival which is celebrated as the beginning of the new year, this specific plant is kept in every nook and corner of the house and boundary believing it will keep away all the evil spirits and diseases from the house and its members throughout the year.

[53] The mother is prohibited to go out from the *suwa-ghor* in the evening time. At the day time also, if she went out from the *suwa-ghor* she has to take one *katri* (small iron knife) and one *eluwa boon* (a kind of grass used to make broom) from the broom and before entering into the house she has to cross the fire burn out of the stick of the broom along with some *kher* (paddy husk), *narzi/xukta* (dried jute leaf) with a stone. And while she is coming out, leaving out the baby she is prohibited to turn and show the backside of her body (she has to leave the room moving towards the back) until the child is away from her eyes. This is because the mother is considered the savior of the child and if she shows her back then it becomes easy for the evil spirits to harm the child. Moreover, when she washes the clothes of the child, she is prohibited to tweak the clothes as it is believed that tweaking the clothes will give the wrinkle in the body of the child; even the bones will also bend. And while the mother collects the dried clothes from outside, she has to give the heat from a fire burned out of *kher* (paddy husk), *narzi/xukta* (dry jute leaf) and a stone.

environment of the house by making it suitable for a ritual. So, as a part of the ritual, the family members clean and mop the house and room with cow dung (*gobor san diya*). On that day, the mother brings the child outside of the *suwa-ghor* for the first time and places the child on a *kula* with some paddy husk covered with cloth and places it over a *sal-pira* (a small wooden tool) and after that, the hair of the child is cut by the maternal uncle in front of the elderly person. Then the mother rubs the body of the baby from head to toe with a duck egg and utters the sentence *"dimar nisna pisla aro kumla hobi"*[54] (your skin will become soft and smooth like an egg). Then she takes one stone and hits the four corners of the *sal-pira* one by one and each time while beating she would say, *"baghok bhoy nakhabi, ghongok bhoy nakhabi, xiyalok bhoy nakhabi, mansik bhoy nakhabi"*[55] (Be brave and have a strong heart. Don't fear for tiger, don't fear for leopard, don't fear for fox and don't fear for human). On that day, a *gonok* (astrologer) is called who informs the family about the child's *rashi* (zodiac), *borgo, asthih* and other astrology related information according to his/her birthday and time. According to his advice, then, maternal uncle selects a name for the child. Finally, when ritual is over, each female member is distributed one *topla* (packet) containing a pair of *puthi mas* (a small fish), a piece of *kumra* (ash guard), *noon/nimokh* (salt), and a piece of *kasa kol* (unripe banana) beautifully wrapped in banana leaf.

The *pasoti* becomes a very important ritual for the child. As it is believed that after the birthday of the child till the fifth day, every night *Bidhata* (deity of fortune) and evil spirits come to see the child. When the child is born he/she comes with a blank fate, where nothing is written on the *kapal*[56] (forehead) of the child and the deity comes to write the fortune on the night of the *pasoti* day. So, according to the belief system, the *pasoti* and the night is considered very crucial for the newborn child. On that night, the elderly ladies from the community and the family members did not sleep for a second and

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[54] Informant: Bimala Ray, Patiladaha, Female, Age: 51. Interview date: 28/05/2015.

[55] Informant: Bimala Ray, Patiladaha, Female, Age: 51. Interview date: 28/05/2015.

[56] It is believed that deity *Bidhata* writes the whole life and his/her fortune and luck on the *kapal* or forehead. It is also considered as the future of human life. So, if someone has a broad forehead it is said that he/she is a lucky person and have a good fortune.

try to surround her with her child in a religious atmosphere by reading religious books and singing religious songs. A *saki/gosa* (earthen lamp) is lightened up in the eastern side of the room and is not let be put out. Moreover, a fire of *tuh* (paddy husk) or dried and powdered cow dung is kept burning and kept lit for seven days. The reason for this ritual is that the community people believe, on that night *Bidhata* (deity of fortune) writes his/her future on his/her forehead and if the deity finds the room dark or not suitable he returns back without writing his/her future and then this circumstances or chances are taken by the evil spirits and is misused by writing bad future for the child. Therefore, the earthen lamp keeps burning for the whole night to create a kind of religious environment in order to ward of the dark forces.

The *ek-kaman / pasoti* ritual is only the first stage towards the end of the unclean process, but in the social level, the unclean process is not yet completed. The unclean stage stays for one month. The whole process is also known as *suwa-kheda*. On that day, along with the hair of the child, the mother also cuts her nails. Then the hair of the child and the nails of the mother are wrapped very tightly in a banana leaf and buried deeply under a banana tree nearby the home. It is believed that the child has two lives; one life stays under a banana tree and another life stays on the human body. After that, the mother takes a ceremonial bath. Although this ritual ends the part of the *suwa* from the family, the family members are still restricted to participate in the communal ritual or festival. The mother is restricted to cook or enter in the kitchen, to enter the prayer room and the father is restricted to go to the field.

After one month of the birth, the family arranges a ceremonial rite to remove the unclean stage of the family and it is called as *mahika/dokaman/suwakamani*[57]. At this ceremony, thorough cleaning, washing and sprinkling of sacred water are done in the house and *Nam-kirtan* is organised by the family. Then, the *adhikari* (replaced today by Assamese Brahmin) performs the ritual where ancestors are offered a *puja*. The hair of the newborn baby is then shaved by a barber and then a small part of his/her hair is buried

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[57] The reason of the three separate names for one single ritual is the dialectical difference of the language. In the eastern part, the ritual is called as *Mahika* which means the ritual of one month. On the other hand the *Dokamani* and *Suwakamani* is mostly used in the middle and western part of the Goalpara region. *Dokamani* means the second stage of removing the impure stage. On the other hand, *suwakamani* simply means the removal of impurity.

with cow dung, as it is believed that the hair is one of the easiest part on which witchcraft can be done. After this ritual only the family is completely removed from the unclean stage. For that day onwards, the mother and the father are allowed to do their regular works.

Another ritual related to the child is *bhat mukhot diya/bhat choa* (rice feeding ceremony) and this is celebrated when the child is seven months old. Sometimes, especially in the case of a boy child, the ceremony is held up to nine months. On an auspicious day, the ceremony is organised and the maternal uncle offers the first feeding to the child. On that occasion, an *adhikari* (priest from the community) is called to perform a *Puja* to the ancestor and the other family gods. The number of family deities varies depending upon family to family. But most common family deities are *Aideu, Bishohori, Bura-Buri, Podda, Ai Thansri*, etc. Many families also organise *Bura-Buri Puja* for that day. The articles for the ritual include *aola Saul* (uncooked husked rice), milk, honey, ripe banana, flower, *dhoop* (incense stick), banana leaf and some *Dona* (container made from the banana stem). For the Puja sacrifices of pigeon is also offered to the deities. After the *puja* is done and offerings are given to the ancestors and deities, the child is brought outside. This *puja* is done in the morning. Simultaneously, another ritual is observed which is known as *pani tula* in order to conduct the bathing ritual.[58] For the bathing ritual, generally the wife of the maternal uncle performs the ritual, but if the maternal uncle is unmarried, the mother performs the ritual. After the bathing ritual is over, the child is taken and kept in front of *Aideu than.* A *dala* (winnowing fan) is brought and kept with a piece of soil (*matir tukra*), one *xona/shona* (gold ornament), one book, one pen, one coin, one bundle of paddy, one mirror and comb and the child is allowed to touch them. Whichever item will be touched by the child, it is believed that it will reflect in his/her future.[59] Once this is over, the child is fed first by the maternal

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[58] For that five newly bought *Ghot* (small earthen pot) and one pitcher is taken and all of them are then tied with *Awka Suta* (cotton thread) for five times at the neck of the pots and mango twigs with five leaves and a coin is given on each pot and marked with vermillion. After that five *Akumari* (who has not touched the puberty ritual) girl child is allowed to take the *Ghots* and the pitcher is carried by the woman who will perform the bathing ritual.

[59] The beliefs related to each material are Soil: the child will be a landlord, Cow-Dung: Owner of cattle, Gold and silver: Rich and powerful person, Paddy: the blessing of *Ai Thansri* will be there. This means

uncle with different items including fish, meat, different curries, rice pudding and various types of rice cakes. The end of the rice feeding ceremony concludes the birth ritual of a Koch family. Although, some families do perform *japurnama* (hair shaving ceremony) and *kan bindha* (ear piercing) ceremony, not all the Koch family follows these rituals.

As it has been seen that the life of the pregnant mother and the child is very much bounded with different types of rituals, the dependency of taboos and restrictions, influences of magic and witchcraft can also be noticed. Moreover, during the whole journey from pregnancy to childbirth, the family members try to appease various malevolent spirits like: *Moila Deo, Phul Deo, Pettani, Khetor*, etc. in order to safeguard the neophytes by offerings and sacrifices. Therefore, in order to protect the neophyte from the unseen threats, the family venerates the deities in various ways. The performances and the rituals that are done to protect the child carry the beliefs and trust over the deities. These deities are mostly the family deities who are believed as the protectors of the family. Further along with the deities, in most of the rituals, the ancestors are also given a share of their happiness and offering. Rituals are organised to appease the deities, spirits in order to protect not only the child and mother, but also the entire family. These supernatural beings are an important part of their religious life. As the associations of spirits are more in the birth ritual, we can explain and analyse the religious idea of Koch birth ritual through the following diagram.

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prosperity in his/her life, Book and pen: Intelligent and owner of knowledge, Money: Rich, and Mirror and comb: Fashion conscious.

Diagram 3.1: Presence of Supernatural beings in Birth ritual.
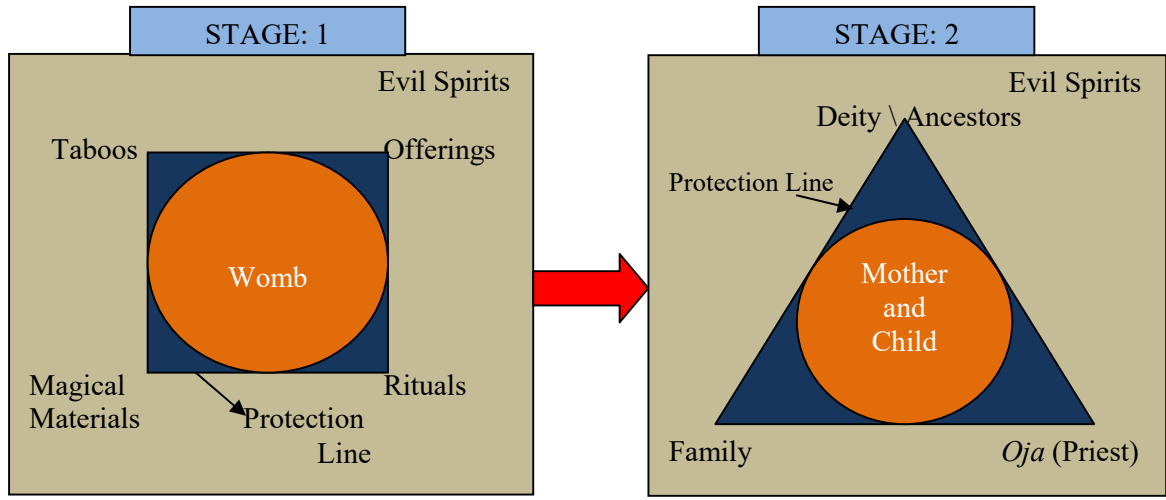
The impact of the evil spirits in the whole process of birth ritual has shown through the above diagram. The family tries to protect the womb (unborn child) as well as the newly born child and his/her mother. Here, stage 1 appears at the moment the family comes to know about the pregnancy. From that moment family member attributes various restrictions and taboos to the couple for the protection of the womb. This protection is mainly from the evil spirits, ghosts, evil eye etc. It is the fear, and superstitious beliefs connected to that supernatural agency that makes to emerge the stage 1. These are the religious beliefs based upon fear. Therefore, actions are taken to ward of that fears. In the stage 1, the family members try their best to protect the womb (unborn child) either appeasing the spirits or by creating a protecting shield. Here, the rituals, offerings are conducted in a very close manner. For that, various occult practices are used and the *oja* (traditional medicine man) has been employed. As it is believed that the *oja* has the knowledge and capacity to prevent or cure from the effect created by evil spirits, they play a major role in creating a shield for the womb. The prevention is done through applying/using various magical practices like *kasni* (enchanted chords), *madli* (amulets), *jara-pani* (charmed water), *jara-tel* (charmed oil), etc. at various stages of pregnancy period until the child is born i.e. at the pre-delivery stage. These occult practices are the primary thing at the preliminary stage of the birth ritual. Further, offerings and rituals are organised in a very close manner. In the pre-delivery stage, taboos, rituals, offerings and

magical materials play the prime role in to order to prevent the evil spirits for the protection of the womb.

On the other hand, the stage 2 starts after the delivery where the family members need a strong protection line in order to safeguard not only the newly born child but also the mother. Therefore, in this stage along with various occult practices, family members organise different rituals and offerings venerating to the deities and ancestors. This happens in an open manner where participants from other members are also needed. This brings the faith and beliefs on the deities and ancestors. In this stage, the faith on the household deities and ancestors construct their belief system. So, in the whole process after the delivery, deities and ancestors play the major role in order to protect the child and mother.

The birth ritual of the Koches here is represented through diagrams viz. Diagram No.1 and Diagram No. 2. Both diagrams are divided into two parts; where **Part-A** presents the sequence of the ritual courses and **Part-B** present the structure of the ritual. Again, the entire process of **Part-A** is divided into three stages; the pre-delivery, delivery and the post delivery and in each stage, the sequence of rituals are numbered sequent wise. In the **Part-B,** the structure of the rituals, each ritual, and observance are structurally analyzed and interpreted from the perspectives of Arnold Van Gennep, Victor Turner and Mary Douglas.

Diagram No. 3.2: The Ritual Process in *Ahuj/Jatwk Jwnma* (Birth Ritual).

Jatwk Jwnma (Birth Ritual)

Phase in Ritual ← → **Structure of the Ritual**

Pre-Delivery

1. Recognized as *Gao-bhari* (pregnant) and dietary as well as behavioral restrictions and taboos are attributed. (For both the couple).
2. *Ojali* (exorcism) are resorted by tying *Kasni* (chanted chord) to the woman.
3. Again at the three month another *Kasni/Jap* or *Tabij* (amulet) is given and a Dao (big knife) is kept under the bed.
4. A puja is offered to spirit *Pettani* if the family feels that the lady is attacked by the spirit.
5. *Sadh Khawa* ritual is observed at the fifth month of pregnancy.
6. *Jeora Diya* ritual is observed at the seventh month of the pregnancy.

First Stage of Separation from 1 to 6

Delivery

7. Inform about the labour pain to her husband and family.
8. A *Suwa-ghor* (delivery hut) is prepared and the lady is shifted into the hut.
9. *Dhai* (experienced lady) helped in delivery.
10. *Tel jara/Pani jara* (charmed oil/water) is applied for a smooth delivery.
11. If the lady has problems in deliver, *Daini deo* (witch) is worshipped by offering cooked food and sacrifice.
12. After delivery, the *Nasti* (umbilical cord) is cut either in five strokes (for boys) or in seven (for girl).
13. The placenta is buried within the campus in front of the *Suwa-ghor* by father.

Second Stage of Separation from 7 to 22

Post-Delivery

14. The child is given a touch of Ai Basumoti (mother earth).
15. Child is breast fed, bathed the baby and holy water sprinkled.
16. Iron made *Jinjiri* (sickle) or *Katri* (knife) is kept under the bed and thorny branches and shell of dead snail are hanged at the door and windows.
17. Small fire is always kept inside the room.
18. Beat on the wall of the house (for boys) and winnowing fan (for girl).
19. Mother and child is tied a *Kasni* or *Madli* and new restrictions are attributed to the couple.
20. On the fifth day, *Pasoti/Ek-kamani* ritual is observed. Name is given to the child and brought outside for the first time.
21. No one sleeps in the family at night as it is believed that deity will come to write his/her future.
22. Now, mother can enter into the kitchen but not in the temple and father is restricted to plough.
23. At the one month, *Mahika/Do-Kamani* ritual is observed. *Suwa* is completely removed.
24. On the seventh month, first rice feeding ceremony is observed.

Incorporation at 23 to 24

Diagram No. 3.3: Supernatural Beings related to Birth Ritual[60]

Supernatural beings in the Ritual	**Birth Ritual** → **Structure of the Ritual**

Pre-Delivery

1. Restrictions, taboos and exorcism are attributed to protect the mother and unborn child from *Jokh-Jokhini,* witchcraft and other evil spirits after the pregnancy is confirmed.
2. A puja is offered to the household deities like Subasini, Bura-Buri, Aideu etc. for the protection of the mother and child at the three month.
3. A puja is offered to spirit *Pettani* in order to appease her and to relief the pregnant woman from the pain created by the spirit.
4. A puja is offered to *Moila deo* if the woman is too weak to protect her from premature delivery or miscarriage done by the spirit.
5. At the *Sadh Khawa* ritual (fifth month of pregnancy) household deities (*Subasini, Bura-Buri, Bisohori, Aideu*, etc.) are worshipped for the blessing and protection of the mother-child.
6. At *Jeora Diya* ritual (seventh month of the pregnancy), *Aideo* (household deity) is worshipped for the blessing and protection of the mother and child.

First Stage of Separation (From 1 to 6)

Delivery

7. *Tel jara/Pani jara* (charmed oil/water) is applied for a smooth delivery.
8. If problem occurs at the time of delivery, *Daini deo* (witch) is worshipped to resolve the delivery issue by offering cooked food and sacrifice.

Second Stage of Separation (From 7 to 13)

Post-Delivery

9. A touch of Ai Basumoti is given soon after the child is born.
10. Iron made *Jinjiri* (sickle) or *Katri* (knife) is kept under the bed and thorny branches and shell of dead snail are hanged at the door and windows to keep away evil spirits.
11. Small fire is always kept inside the room to keep away from evil spirits.
12. Mother and child is tied a *Kasni* or *Madli* and new restrictions are attributed to the couple for the protection of the child.
13. On the fifth day, *Pasoti/Ek-kamani* ritual is observed. At night earthen lamp is lightened and no one sleeps in the family at night as it is believed that deity *Bidhata* will come to write his/her future.
14. At the one month, *Mahika/Do-Kamani* ritual is observed. *Suwa* is completely removed. Ancestors and family deities are worshipped.
15. On the seventh month, first rice feeding ceremony is observed. On this day Ancestors are worshipped and invited in the ritual, household deities and family deities like Bura-Buri, Aideu, Bishohori etc. are worshipped and asked for the blessing and protection.

Incorporation from 14 to 15

From pregnancy to a certain age of the child

* Precautions are taken in order to ward of the attack from the evil spirits like *Phul deo, Pettani, Moila deo, Khetor deo* and if the pregnant mother or the child is attacked by any of these spirits, *Oja* is summoned and worshipped are done to appease these spirits by offerings and sacrifices.
** Moreover, precautions are taken in order to ward of the affect magic and witchcraft is also considered.

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[60] For the table of supernatural beings related to the birth ritual, see in the appendix. P. 363-365.

3.3.1.1.4: Analysis

As we have seen in the above diagrams, in the Koch society the actual childbirth ritual begins once the woman comes to know about her pregnancy i.e. the pre-birth stage. However, the Koch birth ritual brings to us an interesting ritual structure. As van Gennep has identified separation as the first stage that separates an individual's from his/her previous status, in the Koch birth ritual separation period appears in two phases where the first phase of separation stays for a longer time than the second. This is quite different than what Gennep and Victor Turner has mentioned. Further among the stages of life cycle rituals, as described by van Gennep, the first stage "separation" does not start with a special ritual. Rather, among the Koches, this period starts with a prescribed code of conduct and taboos not only to the pregnant wife but also to the husband. A series of taboos and restrictions are attributed to both couples starting from dietary to some behavioral taboos in order to protect the unborn life from the malicious spirits, ghosts and witchcraft. So, for that various magical objects like enchanted chords, amulets, charmed water, charmed oil, etc. are used. Further, the period of separation is prominent in terms of the pregnant woman as she is separated from her family and the society with certain prescribed behavioral acts. Therefore, the first stage of 'separation' in the Koch birth ritual appears in the pre-birth ritual to the husband and wife as they are no longer in their old status which is marked by some dietary and behavioral code of conducts considered as taboos. So, the pregnant lady and her husband are literally separated from other members of the family and society through certain symbolic behaviours like beliefs in spirits, ghosts, witchcraft and by using of magical instruments. These symbolic behaviors reflect that they are neither in husband and wife status nor their status is father and mother. Further, the time period stays longer in this period. This first phase starts in the in ritual (A) from 1 to 6 of the pre-delivery stage (in both diagrams).

On the other hand, the lady is again separated from her previous environment and status when the labour pain started and she is transferred to the *suwa-ghor* (delivery hut). This period stays for a short period of time. Here, she is again separated with new restrictions, behavioural acts and dietary taboos. This phase starts from 7 to 13 in the delivery stage and last till the post delivery from 14 to 22 (in the first diagram) and in the

second diagram it starts from delivery stage of 7 to 8 and lasts from 9 to 13. At this state, she is going through the transition of status from a pregnant woman to a new mother. Once the child is born, the pregnant woman becomes mother and husband becomes the father and the whole family gets a new status as a new member is added into the family. But, the delivery makes the whole family separate from the society as *suwa* (impurity or polluted) is added to the family and for that, family members have to follow certain restrictions for certain days. Further, the delivery of the newborn baby introduces the separation for that baby from its earlier environment at the time when the umbilical cord is cut. As van Gennep has noted, "the principal separation is expressed in the cutting of the umbilical cord (with a knife of wood or stone, etc.) and in the rites surrounding the portion which dries and falls off by itself at the end of a variable number of days."[61] Therefore in the Koch society, in the case of the newborn child, the delivery period becomes the separation period and in this case, the *seiske* (bamboo split) becomes the main material that separates the child from his/her earlier environment which is his/her mother. Further, in the Koch society, burying of the placenta by father in the courtyard signifies the acceptance of the child in the family but the name giving ceremony is the first marker of the construction of the child's personal identity on the fifth day, when *pasoti/ek-kamani* ritual is observed. On that day, hair is cut and the name is given to the child and the child is brought outside for the first time.

Regarding the liminal period, Victor Turner has identified this as the period of confusion where the liminoid or the ritual passenger has to stand in the betwixt and between. Further at that period, the neophyte is neither here nor there with no status. As he said, "the subject of passage ritual is, in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically. 'Invisible'."[62] By this, Turner wants to argue about the position of the liminoid is not clear or decided either by socially or structurally. But in the case of the Koch birth ritual, the identity of the whole family including the mother, the child and the rest of the family is constructed through rituals that are observed soon after the child is

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[61] Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960, p. 50.

[62] Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989, p. 95.

born. Burying of the placenta, beating on the *bera* (wall of the house) for boy and *Kula* (winnowing fan) for girl, giving a touch of the mother earth (*Ai Basumoti*), keeping of iron made *jinjiri/jijri* (sickle) or *katri* (knife) under their bed, keeping of a small fire inside the delivery room, keeping of some thorny branches of the tree, shell of the dead snail are hung on the main door and window, cleaning of the child's tongue, armpit and other corners of the body by the hair of the mother reflects the identity of the family. Further, while Victor Turner argued by saying, "they have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing, rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows"[63], also is not applicable in terms of the Koch birth ritual. The name giving ritual on the fifth or seventh day which is itself in the liminal period establishes the individual identity of that child. Most importantly, the observation of *suwa* itself identifies the family identity of childbirth. So in the Koch birth ritual structure, the absence of liminal phase is a major difference from the western and African model developed by Turner and van Gennep.

In the third phase of the structural model which is the incorporation, the period starts in the post-delivery stage from 23 to 24. The rituals of *mahika/dokamani* and *bhat mukhot diya* help the family to incorporate in the society with the ritual bath, feast and venerating the household deities with sacrifice.

Additionally, it has been noticed that there are three types of supernatural beings venerated in the birth ritual and they are: (i) the malicious spirits like ghosts, evil spirits, and witches, (ii) the household deities and (iii) the ancestors. Moreover, if we look at the reason of the venerations of these spirits and gods in the Koch birth ritual spirits come as the possible threat for the unborn child and pregnant mother. Therefore, the actions are taken not to harm the child-mother or to prevent them to harm the mother-child. The deities are worshipped for basically seeking protection and blessing for the well-being of the child. On the other hand, ancestors are remembered and worshipped to be a part of that ritual, while the spirits, ghosts and witches are worshipped as they are much part of the Koch religious life and venerated to appease so as not to harm the child and mother.

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[63] Ibid, pp. 98-99.

Thus, it can be said that the Koch people lives in such a world which is always surrounded by various spirits. Their fear and superstitions on this spirits forms their religious belief system. In order to negotiate with the fear, they need to negotiate with these spirits and protection from the deities. Therefore, the novice always needs the assistance of sacredness which forms their worldview.

3.3.2: *Biya* (Marriage Ritual)

In human life, marriage is considered as one of the most important universal social institutions and is celebrated with joy. In fact, various rituals and customs are surrounded by marriage and from the social, cultural and religious point views most of these rituals, rites, and customs are significantly important. "Marriage has been defined as a union between a man and a woman such that the children born to the woman are recognised as legitimate offspring of both parents. Marriage creates new social relationships and reciprocal rights between spouses, between each and every kin of the other, and establishes what will be the rights and status of the children when they are born. Every society has recognized procedures for creating such relationships and rights, and for making it known that they have been created".[64] So, marriage is considered as the legal procedure to establish a legitimate family and produce offspring to continue the family inheritance. On the other hand, from a social and cultural point of view, marriage helps a boy and girl to construct and establish a new social relationship as husband and wife and as in-laws.

Among the Koch people, the marriage is called as *biya* which is an Assamese word that comes from the Sanskrit term 'Vivaha'. The Assamese word *biya* represents the customs and rituals through which a man and a woman socially established a new relationship between them as husband and wife. According to the Chandrakanta Abhidhan, an Assamese dictionary, the word *biya* represents the "acceptance of a man to a woman as his wife and acknowledging a man as her husband by a woman through certain social rites, customs, and rituals."[65] Like other communities of Assam, the Koch

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[64] Lucy Mair, *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972, pp. 90-91.

[65] Maheswar Neog (edited), *Chandrakanta Abhidhan*, Jorhat: Asam Sahitya Sabha, 1987, p. 681.

community also has its own traditional system of marriage. Regarding the different modes and customs of marriage that are prevalent among the Koch, Birendranath Datta has commented that "In fact, most of these customs and institutions themselves bear close resemblance to those prevalent among the tribal societies of this whole region and it needs little reflection to be convinced of their tribal origin."[66] One of the most important features of the marriage system of the Koches is the existence of the bride-price.[67] The existence of the bride-price is not only limited to the Koches but also it is an important feature of the marriage system among the other tribal communities of other regions too.[68] The practice of the bride-price is not only to the tribal societies only but according to B. C Allen "even the Brahmans also receiving the money for their daughters."[69] Although, nowadays the practice of the bride-price is not favored by the Hindu societies, among the Koches it is still prevalent. But the formality regarding the bride-price is transformed from a mark of a respectable practice to a time-honored custom.

In the Koch community, the marriage relations follow endogamy (within the community members), as well as exogamy (outside the blood relatives) as a standard form of customs and norms of the community. Among the Koch people, there are various kinds of marriage system prevalent in their society. Those are *phul-biya*[70], *ghor-jiya*[71],

[66] Birendranath Datta, *A Study of the Folk Culture of the Goalpara region of Assam*, Guwahati: University Publication Department, Gauhati University, 1995, p. 127

[67] Area wise the name of the bride price is different. The Koches of the eastern part call it *Gao-dhon*, in the middle part it is known as *Khalti* and in the western part, it is called as *Pon*.

[68] "….. the systems of payment of bride-price …….. are to be found among a large number of tribes in North-East India, both in the hills and the plains. In the hills such tribes include the Nagas, the Dimasas, the Kukis, the Mizos and so on. And in the plains there are the Bodos, the Rabhas and others.".……"among the Bodos…. Bride-price is an indispensible feature of a marriage… Of the different forms of Bodo marriage, the socially most respectable is marriage by negotiation between the families of the bride and the groom in which fixation of the bride-price is a vital factor." – see Birendranath Datta, *A Study of the Folk Culture of the Goalpara region of Assam,* pp. 127-128.

[69] B. C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers, Voll: III, Goalpara*, Calcutta: The City Press, 1905, p. 37.

[70] The general form of marriage of the Koch people is known as *biyao* or *phul-biya* and the married person is called *biasta* (male) and *biasti* (female). This form of marriage is considered as the most respectable in the society and in this system, the unmarried boy known as '*phul-patro*' marries a virgin bride call as '*phul-koya*'. In this kind of marriage system, the go-between known as *koroya* in the western part and *ghotok* in the eastern part plays a very important role in the initial stage of negotiation. After acceptance from both sides, the date for the '*jopsira/jopsiri*' and '*basina*' is decided and the ritual is done in the bride's house. After that ritual, only the date for the marriage is fixed. Among the Koches of the eastern part of Goalpara

dangua[72], *ghor sondani*[73], *gao-gos* or *sendra-fela*[74]. In the Koch society, a man is allowed to marry several wives and he is also allowed to marry after the death of his wife. Though the marriage of several wives is accepted, in reality, the practice is seen very less. There is an interesting practice of taking concubine which is also accepted in society. The social practice of taking concubine is known as '*koina-patro*' and for this, an unmarried girl is accepted as a concubine. Regarding this kind of institution, Martin has made a note that "A Rajbansi girl, who has never been married, may live with a man as a concubine and is

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region instead of the *jopsiri* and *basina*, *telor-bhar, juron* and *angti-pindha* (ring ceremony) are conducted. In the day of *telor-bhar*, as a part of the custom the groom's family have to carry loads of presents to the bride including *masor-bhar* (load of fish), *doir-bhar* (load of curd), the dresses and ornaments that are used by the bride at the time of marriage, quantities of betel nuts and betel leaves etc.

[71] *Ghor-jiya* is another kind of marriage system in which a son-in-law start to live in the in-laws family. It is, in some areas also called as '*dhoka-thaka*' or simply the *dhoka* system. According to J. F. Grunning, "A young man who has no parents often works for a wife in the old patriarchal manner. He goes to the house of the girl's parents and lives with them and after working for them from one to seven years, the girl is given to him for his wife. A man who adopts this method of getting a wife is known as a *ghor-jiya*."[71] This system of marriage where a man gets a wife after serving in the in-law's house for a period of time is considered as a regular form of marriage. The rigid custom of paying the bride-price and the boy's inability to pay the price for the bride because of his poor situation may be the reason for the origin of this kind marriage system.[71] The boy has to serve the in-laws for a sufficient period of time to make free from the debt of the bride-price. But every time, this may not be the reason for this kind of marriage. Sometimes, when the bride's family only have girl child in their family then also they accept a dependable youth as a member of the family and perform this kind of marriage.

[72] When a widow or a divorced woman brings a man and starts to live as husband-wife, then this kind of marriage is known as *dangua* or *dangua sonda*. In this kind of custom, the woman can make the man leave her house at any time she wants, even any proper divorce. But this marriage does not enjoy a very respectable status as a *biyao* or *ghor-jiya* marriage and is looked down as very low in status in society. According to J. F. Grunning, "A dangua is a man who lives with a widow with her husband and is kept by her; he is looked down upon by the Rajbansis and is considered as an outcast; the woman can turn him out of her house at any time. So great is the disgust with which he is regarded by his caste people that it is said that if a cow dies and a dangua removes the carcass from the cowshed, even the vultures will not eat it. Another story is that elephants will refuse to eat rice which has been tied up in grass and offered to them by a dangua." The widow who keeps a *dangua* is known as *danguani*.

[73] Another similar kind of marriage that has been treated with disrespect is when a married man starts to live with a woman who has been divorced by her husband. This is known as the *ghor-sondani* marriage. If the woman is not a divorcee and her husband is still alive then the man has to give compensation to her previous husband. Only then the woman is accepted as a divorcee. The amount of compensation is decided by the head members of the society. This kind of custom is also done when a widow and widower are remarried. The female is known as '*shangani*' or '*pasua*' and the male is called '*shangna*'.

[74] When a widow gets pregnant, the people of the society tries to find him and after finding him he is forced to live with that woman. This kind of custom is generally known as *gao-gos*.[74] In this marriage, the female is called as *gao-gos pasua*. In some areas, it is also known as *sendra-fela*. If the male responsible is unable to be found by the society and any other man who accept her is called as '*gos khara hoa*'. The children of them are accepted by society after the marriage.

called *konyapatro*. There is no religious ceremony at the union, but an entertainment is given to render the contract notorious. These women are more respected than the widowed concubines, and living with them is considered as more honourable for the men."[75]

The attitude towards divorce and widow marriage is very much liberal. Like other neighbouring communities such as Bodo, Rabha, divorce among the Koches is also common and fairly easy. Further, the process is also quite similar to those of the Bodos and Rabhas.[76] The role of the *boirati* or *airok* system in the Koch marriage is also an important part of their social life.[77] Moreover, according to the traditional custom and practices, the Koches follow two types of marriage procedure in their regular marriage system viz. *saja biya*[78] and *tola biya*[79]. As the *saja biya* is very much common and popular in the society, here, various rites and rituals of a *saja biya* are discussed.

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[75] Montgomery Martin, *The History, Antiquities, Topography, and Statistics of Eastern India, Vol: III*, London: W. H Allen and Co., 1838, p. 555.

[76] Among the Koches, tearing off of a betel leaf, known as *pān sirā* decided the divorce (*chāri dewā* or *erā-eri hoā*) process between the two parties. Sometimes the mutual consent is enough for the divorce process. The divorcee male and the female do not face any kind of social discrimination and enjoy the same status as others. They are also considered fully eligible for remarriage.

[77] In a Koch marriage, *boirati/airok* plays a fundamental role in the marriage. Their function in the proceeding of the marriage ritual is very much important, especially in the bride's place. The position of *boirati* is considered as a respectable one and carries many responsibilities. It has five members and formed only by a married woman whose husband is still alive. Moreover, a woman who is married only by socially accepted modes i.e. *phool biya* and not by other forms of marriage like eloping, *dangua biya, ghor jiya* etc. can be a member of the *boirati*. They perform the role of assistance in every auspicious rites and ritual. Therefore, they are charged to assist in various responsible works like to clean the place for the sacred rituals and practices, to welcome the groom, to carry the *sailon bati* which is considered as a sacred object, offering *gon tel* to the deities, etc.

[78] The practice of *saja biya* is very much common among the people. According to this type of marriage, at the evening time, the groom goes to the bride's place and marries her as per the socially accepted marriage rites. After that, the newly married bride is taken to the groom's house.

[79] On the other hand, in *tola biya* system, the bride is taken to another family whom she has adopted (*tuli loa*) as her mother and father. These people mostly are the relatives of the groom. In their house, the groom comes and wedding rites for marriage are completed. But this type generally happens when the bride's house is far away from the groom's village or the parents of the bride agrees to this mode of marriage.

3.3.2.1: The Ritual Process

The complete process and stages of a regular Koch marriage can be broadly divided into three phases. The first phase is pre-marriage ritual, the second phase is the marriage proper and the third phase is the post-marriage ritual. Each phase is briefly discussed and analysed below.

3.3.2.1.1: Pre-Marriage Rites

The pre-marriage ritual starts from the preparation for the marriage centering on the selection of a bride and groom for the engagement. This also includes other rituals and ceremonies that are observed before the day of the main marriage ceremony. Moreover, this phase stays for a long period of time. When a boy/girl reaches in a marriageable position, the parents of that girl/boy first discuss the issue among their family members. Then, again, they discuss and take opinion and comments from the other family members and close relatives and friends. If they support their decision, the parents then take the verbal consent from the boy through his friends or close and trusted relatives. When the boy is mature and fit enough to support him as well as his family, he is considered as suitable for marriage.[80] However, for a girl the maturity level or the marriageable age count once she reached her puberty ritual.[81] Once the consent is

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[80] Moreover, depending upon certain conditions, the parent may pressurise the boy to accept the proposal. These types of conditions are:

    i.   Maturity on age or if he is not interest for marriage till an age like crossing 30.
    ii.   If the boy is already established and earning money with a govt. or semi govt. job.
    iii.   If the family needs another female member for household activities urgently.
    iv.   If the boy is an active household worker in the family especially in activities related to agriculture like ploughing, harvesting, etc. and recognised as a good farmer.
    v.   If the boy seems quite shiftless or careless and the family thinks of his changes after marriage.

[81] In terms of the female, in the Goalpara region, the young girls are apparently expected to get married before getting at the age of twenty. The proverb *"api mansi kurite buri hoi"* (female folk tends to get old at the age of twenty) reflects the criteria the marriageable age. While Allen has observed and mentioned that, 'in Goalpara the followers of both these religions viz. Hinduism and Muhammadanism marry their girls at a much earlier age than is usually the custom in Assam.' (B. C Allen). Birendranath Datta, in this aspect mentioned, "The situation appears to have changed appreciably since then, but girls are even now married fairly in Goalpara." – See: Birendranath Datta, *A Study of Folk Culture of the Goalpara Region of Assam*, p. 121.

confirmed positively by the boy either directly or indirectly, the parents start to search for a suitable bride for their boy.

In terms of the selection of the bride, the Koch family generally and mostly looks on the expertness on weaving and skills on agricultural works in her. There is a general belief that every Koch daughter-in-law should know how to weave. Moreover, the Koch family finds out a suitable bride by determining her character after looking and considering the gestures and the physical structure of the girl.[82] Furthermore, in a selection of a good daughter-in-law, her physical beauty appears one of the major factors.[83] After the preliminary discussion in the family, the parents will summon and arrange one middleman or go-between known as *ghotok*[84] to initiate the marriage proposal to the girl's family on behalf of the boy's family. This is the first and most important part of the preparation of the pre-marriage ceremonies among the Koches to the selection of the bride. On that process, various get-togethers are organised by both of the families. The proposal, generally, comes to girl's family from the boy's side and this is called as *gahok aha* or *gahok aise*.[85] The *ghotok* starts the preliminary negotiation

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[82] For example: if the girl makes sound with her toes while she walks or if she walks thrusting out her breasts, she is considered as a nature of *Lokkhisara* (because of her who loses every prosperity of the family). An Assamese proverb which is also prevalent among the Koches says that the girl's appearance should be judged by looking at her gait. The proverb is like this: *"Ahu saba godhuli, Xali saba pua,Khoj karhote suwali saba, kun kenekua", w*hich means that *Ahu* rice is pleasing when it is seen in the evening time, while *Xali* rice is in the morning; like that a girl should be judged and selected by looking the way she walks.

[83] Representation of the female beauty and female body in various folklore genres reflects the assumptions, beliefs, priorities in the selection of a good bride. A tomboy girl or any woman with a masculine nature is always an undesirable choice for each and every family. Proverbs like *jar ghorot motamua tiri, tar ghorot nahe siri* (woman in masculine nature does not bring prosperity in the house) or *othor opore ghopher sari, sei tiri dekhate bari* (a woman who has a mustache, definitely attains widowhood) represents the stereotypical concept of beauty in a woman which is undesirable. The Koch parents choose a potential bride who has a pointed nose, bright eyes and face, small teeth and thick, long and black hair. On the other hand, the desirable groom also demands a stout and strong physique, heavy voice and a good moral character.

[84] *Ghotok* plays a significant role in the preliminary stage of a marriage ritual. He is the person who mediates each and every decision from one party to another and often has to take the blame for a mismatch. After looking and considering all the criteria, if the *ghotok* finds out a suitable bride, he will first inform the groom's family. If the groom's family is interested to see the girl then the *ghotok* approaches the parents of the bride.

[85] This is the preliminary stage of the marriage. At this stage, both families do not talk or communicate with each other directly. All communication and fixation are done through *ghotok* (middle man). When the first proposal of marriage will come from the boy's family through *ghotok* to the girl's family that proposal is

between the boy's family and the girl's family which is known as *kotha sola soli kora*. This is the formal process of pre-marriage ritual.[86] The *ghotok* basically starts the conversation by introducing both families with each other and gives detail information about the groom and his family background. After the initial stage which has already done by the *ghotok*, this becomes the first step towards the marriage.[87] Moreover, while coming to the girl's family for selection of the bride, the Koch family generally looks for and guidance by certain good signs[88] and bad signs[89] which are traditionally considered

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called *gahok aha* or *gahok aise*. *Gahok* generally means and used for the buyers at the market. So, significantly the uses of such word have a deeper meaning in the social construction of the Koch society. Once the proposal comes to the girl's family, the parent then discusses the topic with the family members and close relatives and tries to find out some more details about the boy and his family. once they are satisfied with the boy, they send a message to the boy's family through ghotok and then fix a date to meet directly and for further discussion.

[86] The parents of the boy select any feasible day, probably and generally a Sunday, and inform the girl's family through *ghotok*. On that day, a group of three to five members; the father along with the *ghotok* and other family members go to the girl's house carrying some *guwa-pan* (areca nut-leaf) and sweets and offer to the girl's family.

[87] After the formal approach of kotha sola soli kora, the boy's family then looks at the girl. After this simple ceremony, the boy's family leaves and informs their decision through *ghotok*. Therefore this is ceremony is also known as koina sawa where *Koina* means bride and *sawa* is to look. So, generally, this means going to search or look for a bride.

[88] **Good signs:**
   i.   When the selection party arrives at the house of the bride and see the view of husking or drying or pounding paddy, this considered as a good sign as she is believed to be a fortunate and hard working wife in future.
   ii. If the party sees the bride cleaning or mopping the courtyard with cow dung, she is considered as the bride will have a long life.
   iii. If the party sees the bride entering into the main house putting her left foot inside, she is believed to have an auspicious nature and to bring *Lakkhi* (prosperity and luck) into the new family.

[89] **Bad signs:**
   i.   If the members of the selection party witness the view of cutting bamboo, cutting or falling of tree or fire in the field near by the bride's house, it is believed that after the marriage either husband or wife will die. So this pair is considered as an inauspicious pair.
   ii. While coming to the house of the bride, if the party came across with a dead body, it is considered as a bad sign and believes that one from the couple will die early.
   iii. While discussing the new relationship, if the party heard the sound of thunder, it is considered a bad pair. At this point, the bride is considered as a person with a hot temper and always tries to dominate her husband. So, it is believed that there will be a quarrel and their married life will be unhappy.
   iv. The crossing of a cat, running of a snake from left side to right and running a *neul* (mongoose) from right to left in front of the party before reaching of the house of the bride is considered as a bad sign for the new couple as it is believed that there is a chance for separation.

as important for the marriage. After looking everything, if the parents or the representative gives a positive response, then the groom along with his two or three friends visit the girl's family for the second time to see the *koina* (bride). This visit helps the groom to get confirmed.[90] After the visit, the groom's decision considered as the final decision for marriage whether he likes the bride or not. But importantly, this stage of ritual occurs when the groom also wants to see the bride.[91] After this, the girl's family or the representative of the girl's family comes to the boy's family for their satisfaction about the boy and the family.[92]

The first marriage ritual in Koch marriage system is known as *jopsiri diya* and from the day of this ritual onwards, the girl/boy to be is considered as *koina* (bride) and *bor/boro* (groom). The ritual is done at the house of the *koina* (bride).[93] But, before the meeting for the *jopsira diya* ritual, the family offered a puja called *sura/khara Puja* or *guwa-pan soja.* So, in the religious context, offering a *puja* towards the deity *Subasini* is the first step in a Koch marriage. In order to protect the family as well as to ward any

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[90] For those special foods are arranged for the groom's party. She then offers either a *Phool thaka gamsa* (scarf with heavy flower design) or a *rumal* (handkerchief) which is woven by her to the groom as well as his friends. This will show her weaving skills to the groom and his friend which is considered as a proud as well as a necessary skill of a female.

[91] If the decision of selection of the bride is finalized by his parents, the ritual of *koina sawa* by groom does not occur.

[92] This ritual is called as *ghar-bari sawa*. It is also an important step in the pre-marriage ritual. At this time, the girl's family also has the power to reject or reconsider the marriage proposal. At this point, the girl's family member or representative will observe their economic condition, land property, the moral character of the boy, as well as the family reputation in the village.

[93] At the time of the *jopsira diya* ritual, the close relatives of the bridegroom's family come to the bride's house. The bride's family also invited their close relatives in the ceremony. There, in the presence of the *Gaobura* (village headman), both parties have officially sat, discussed and asked for everyone's permission and consent regarding the marriage. After a fruitful discussion, the senior person from the bride's side stands and socially announced about the upcoming marriage by uttering the names of the bride and the groom in front of everyone. From here she/he is considered as a bride/groom officially and they have to take some precautions in food and travel and prohibitions are made for them. In terms of the food they have to take precautions while eating areca nut-leaf, water, etc. in order to protect them from witchcraft and black magic. Furthermore, she is not allowed to visit the cremation ground. She is also restricted to visit or attend any kind of death ritual. Then the bride is blessed with money and a pair of areca nut and betel leaf from the groom's relative's side. This ritual is observed when both families are agreed for the marriage and the groom's family has to give their words in front of the bride's people, family or society. So, generally, the meaning of the *jopsiri diya* ritual is to give the words in front of the people.

kind of misfortune, the family offers puja to *Subasini Mao*.[94] Before fixing the marriage date, in any Tuesday or Saturday of the week, the *puja* for deity *Subasini* is done in a small and closed manner. In this type of *puja*, offerings are made only through *guwa-pan* (areca nut and betel leaf), *sun* (lime) and *hamaku* (tobacco). The *puja* is restricted only to the women folks and no Brahmin or male priest is required for this *puja*.[95]

After that the ceremony *khata kora*[96] is observed to fix a date for where and when the proposed marriage is going to coordinate.[97] Before a few days of the main marriage

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[94] Informant: Biren Ray, Male, Age: 70, Khuksigao, Interview Date: 19/05/2016.

[95] At the early morning, the female priest takes bath before the sunrise and mob the area of the Tulsi plant and the courtyard. As a part of the preparation, she prepared either three or four *thait/thati* (plate) with *dala* (round winnowing fan). Each plate, except the central one, is consisted with half and one-fourth of a full areca nut, half of the betel leaf and full glass of water. The central plate, which is in the middle position, is offered for deity *Subasini*. Here the number of the areca nut and betel leaf is given in number nine. At the right side of the deity *Subasini's thait/thaiti*, another *thaiti* is offered to *Dharma Deo* and next to *Dharma Deo*'s *thaiti* another *thaiti* of *sun* and *hamaku* (lime and tobacco) is placed. The plate where only the lime and tobacco is given, the quantity of the water is given less. On the other hand, on the left side of the central *dala* of *Subasini* is given to another female deity named *Newri-Newri* who has the nature of the conspiracy and who has mischievous nature of gossiping. Therefore, the young women and unmarried girls are prohibited to eat the areca nut and betel leaf from this offering. Each plate is decorated with a mark of vermillion (*fota*). After that, the *Ojani* (female priest) offered mustard oil letting flow in front of each plate and over the oil, one vermillion mark is marked. Then *Tulsi* leaf, *dubri* (dub grass) and flower are placed in each plate. The earthen lamp is lightened and the *Ojani* starts the ritual of the *puja* with flower, *dubri* (dub grass), *tulsi* (holy basil) and *bisni* (bamboo fan). After that, the *Ojani* throws water from the plates with her hair and end of *Agoron* towards the backside first and then in the front side. At the end, when the ritual is over, each place is taken inside the main room carrying over the head of the *Ojani* and while carrying the plates, water is thrown over the roof of the house believing that the water drops which was thrown on the roof will fall down on the plates while carrying them inside the house and falling the drops over the plate is considered a good sign for the family. It is believed that she blessed the family from above.

[96] *Khata Kora* is the ritual to fix the date for the marriage.

[97] For this, both the parents discussed and put forward about various terms and condition. For that the head people from the groom's family basically the father along with other members comes and sits in the bride's house in presence of the *Gaoburha* of the bride's village. Few members of the bride's family also sit as the representative of the bride's side. After that, both parties discuss the date for the marriage. For the selection of the marriage date, except the birth day and month of the bride and groom, any auspicious day and month are selected. Moreover, there are some taboos and prohibitions are also considered while selecting the months for marriage rituals. According to this, various circumstances are connected with the months and they are:

   i.   *Ashar/Ahar*: Destruction of the properties.
   ii. *Saon*: Death of children.
   iii. *Bhad*: Prostitute nature.
   iv. *Ashin/Ahin*: Death of the bride.
   v.   *Kati:* Suffers from various diseases.
   vi. *Push/Puh*: Characterless.
   vii. *Sot*: Afflicted with sexual desire.

ritual, the groom's family again visits the bride's family and observes another ceremony. For this ceremony, the groom's family carries *guwa-paan* (areca nut-leaf) in ample amount and distributed among the relatives and village people from the bride's side. This ritual is known as the *guwa-pan kata*.[98] Once the date and month have been fixed, various rituals are followed one by one as the preparation. Before a week or two from the main marriage ritual, an interesting ceremony of *gon-tel bhaja* is observed on any auspicious day.[99] The literal meaning of this ceremony is frying scented oil.[100] But before they light the oven, a *duni* made with atop rice (uncooked rice), pair of areca nut and betel leaf and a coin in a bowl is offered to *Agni deo*. The *akha bana* ritual is observed in both families separately. The term *akha* means oven and as the name suggests, in this ritual basically an oven is worshipped. For that purpose, a new oven is prepared to cook food on the day of the marriage. In order to prepare the oven (*akha*), two *Boiratis* (see the reference number 71) are needed. For that, a suitable place is decided near a stream or river or sometimes near the house from where *sitka mati* (marshy soil) is collected. The soil is taken ceremonially by offering flower, rice, vermillion and a *saki* (earthen lamp) to *Ai Basumati* (mother earth) and a coin or cowry to the guardian of that area. Offering coin significantly means that they are buying that soil from the guardian of that area. After that, they knead the soil with water and make five or seven *dhips* (pillars). These *dhips* look like glass. Once this is prepared, they leave these to be dried and then worship these on the day of the marriage. Further, as a part for the marriage preparation, the *saymon*

Other than this, the month of *Boisag, Jeth, Aghon, Magh*, and *Phagun* are considered as an auspicious month for marriages.

[98] The literal meaning of the term *guwa-pan kata* is cutting of areca nut and leaf. On a fixed day, the groom's family with few relatives reaches the bride's house. In the courtyard, they keep this *guwa-paan* in front of the household shrine where already a *saki* (earthen lamp) and incent sticks were lighted. Groom's family then requests each person from the bride's family to accept that *guwa-paan* in a *dona* (container made with banana plant). After this, both the parties play a game of question and answers and after this kind of fun and jokes both parties finish the ritual of *Guwa-pan kata* by offering money with the *guwa-paan* to the bride's party. Then the bride's party accepts their offering with respect and cut the *guwa-paan* together and eats. With the eating of the *guwa-paan* the ritual comes to an end. Finally, both parties discuss the marriage and try to solve other issues by discussing if they have some quarries or issues.

[99] Informant: Anamika Ray, Female, Age: 65, Patiladaha. Interview Date: 23/04/2016.

[100] The female members of the family, relatives, and neighbours are invited to the ceremony and amidst the joy; they prepared the mustard oil by frying *kaljeera* (black cumin), *methi guti* (fenugreek seed), roots of *xonpera, motha, pera* (wild herbs) along with some flowers and betel leaf dipped in sandalwood paste.

(marriage venue) is prepared before a few days ago of the main marriage ceremony. Generally, the young man or boys helped in this preparation. As a ritual, the central pillar is made with a banana plant and under this *saymon*, only the *sira khunda/bhuka* (pounding flattened rice) is conducted. For that, the first three *khola* (series) of pounding is done by five boiraties with five *gain* (pastel). But before starting that an offering is made to *Agni deo* with areca nut-leaf and rice.

Generally before the day of *adhibash* (the day before the marriage), another ritual called *panchini* is observed. In some places, it is also known as *telor bhar*. For the ritual, the groom's family goes to the bride's family with a load of stuff as a final settlement for the marriage.[101] In the western and southern part of the region, this *bhar* is called as *Naronder bhar* (the load of Narada) and there is a popular story that exists behind the name of the *bhar*.[102] On that day, another *bhar* is carried from the groom's family which is known as *topar bhar*.[103] After the arrival of the groom's family, all the stuff they have carried is kept in front of the household deities of *aignar Than*. The betel leaf, areca nut, lime and tobacco that are carried from the groom's side are first offered to deity *Subasini*. After that, all the family members and relatives from both sides sit in the courtyard. Then the bride is carried outside from the room and in front of everyone she stands in a *pira* (a small wooden tool). The younger brother gives each stuff one by one

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[101] Stuffs like clothes, ornaments, *doi* (curd), various sweets, one *jhuki* (full) consisting of sixteen numbers *manohar kol* (a type of banana), quantities of *guwa-pan* (areca nut and betel leaf), *sun-hamaku* (lime and tobacco), a pair of *puthi* fish, any kind of a big fish, mustard oil for the family of the bride. All this is stuff are called as *bhar*, literary means load. In the eastern part of the region, another *bhar* is carried by preparing two earthen pot filled with mustard oil, rice, and vermillion and tied down by banana leaf on the two sides of a bamboo stick with a bamboo basket called *khorka*. It is called as *telor bhar* (a load of oil). This *telor bhar* is kept safely near the shrine inside the house till the marriage day.

[102] According to the story, "*When Shiva wants to marry Paravati, Shiva prepares a bhar (load) with rice and other food materials, cloths, ornaments, tel-sendur (oil and vermillion), etc and send this to Paravati in order to satisfy her. This bhar is carried by sage Narada. After reaching Himalaya, Narada offers these to Parvati giving respect towards her love for Shiva. And because of this, only the bhar is also known as Narador bhar.*"

[103] Although, *telor bhar* and *Panchini* are observed as two different ceremonies and popular among the Koch marriage, in general *telor bhar* and *Panchini* is observed together on a single day and the ritual is called either *telor bhar* or *Panchini*. With the *bhar*, groom's younger brother, elder brother in law, two/three guardians comes. Parents of the groom are not allowed to take part in the ritual. But the number of people whoever comes in the ritual should not be in even number.

in the hand of the bride.[104] After that, the members of both families discussed miscellaneous things like the food and the people that are coming from the groom's side on the day of the marriage.

The day before the marriage is called *adhibash*. It is the ceremonial bathing of the bride/groom. For the bathing ritual, a banana plant is erected and bride/groom stands on two banana bark. On this day, after cutting of nails and hair, the bride or the groom takes a bath and sits in front of the deity *Aideu* (represented by the *tulsi* plant). A pair of *guwa-pan* (areca nut and betel leaf) is given on a *ghot* (small earthen pot) filled with water and a twig of a mango tree is placed on the top of the *ghot* and it is covered with a yellow *gamsa*. The *adhikari* (traditional priest) comes and start worshipping in front of *Baus Thakur* for the prosperity of the bride/groom and blesses the bride/groom by sprinkling holy water. The bride and the groom fast from that period which is broken only after the marriage ritual is over. New restrictions are added from this day. At the evening time, a special earthen lamp is lit at the room of the bride known as *xuag sati* or *dharma sati* and is kept burn until the marriage rite is over.

Most of the Koch family has *Marai* or *Kani Bishori shali* in their home and she is considered as a family deity. So it is compulsory to offer a puja to her. For those who do not have *Marai/Bishohori shali* in their home, instead of offering puja on the marriage day, they offer puja the day after the marriage. Especially at the house of the bridegroom, the *Marai* or *Kani Bishohori puja* is conducted after the marriage only. The puja for *Kani Bishohori* is done by the married women of the family. The puja of this *griha-devi* is conducted in the name of *gota marai, lakhol marai, deriya marai*, and *dhum-kirtan*. Depending upon family to family, preparation for this puja is varied. But generally, this is observed in a smaller way.[105]

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[104] As a part of the ritual her hair is loosened and oil is applied and combed by the younger brother of the groom. The sister in law then puts vermillion on her forehead. After that, each stuff is given a touch by the bride. Every person then blessed her with paddy or rice and dub grass and she is taken inside the house. In the northern part of the region, on this day the bride is given presents also with *the guwa pan*.

[105] Only a pair of pigeon, *aula/atop saul* (uncooked rice), raw milk, banana, flower, *tulsi* leaf, dub grass, etc. are required. The *Ojani* (female priest) who conducted the ritual, have carried a fast from the nigh to the ritual day. At the morning, she unties her hair and washes. With that wet condition, she first mobs the *Marai than* or *dhip* (alter) with water and placed the materials. She placed a small piece of banana leaf and

3.3.2.1.2: Marriage Day Rites

The day of the marriage ritual starts with worshiping of various household deities by offering various *pujas* to them. The Koch family started the marriage ritual after conducting the *Sol-Matrika puja* or *Har-Gauri Khisa* on the day of the marriage. But in order to conduct the ritual, water which is considered pure is required. For that, the ritual *sorog pani tula* or simply *pani tula* is observed.[106] For the ritual, two pitchers is taken and one winnowing fan is decorated which is known as *sailon bati*. On that *sailon*, an earthen lamp along with pair of banana, flower, *tulsi* plant, dub grass, raw rice, sesame seed, turmeric paste, cotton thread, curd, raw milk, areca nut, betel leaf, vermillion, mustard oil, a mix of mustard oil with vermillion are kept and covered with a round slim banana trunk. On that trunk, two pairs of *nul ful*[107] are erected.[108] When they reach the river, they first clean a place at the bank of the river or pond. There, they worship the deity of the river along with the spirits those who lived there by lighting an earthen lamp and offering her raw milk, curd, banana, rice, sugar, *guwa pan*, and a coin. After that, the *boirati* goes to the water and brings soil from the river seven times for the bride and nine times for the groom. With that soil, she prepares two *dhips* (mound) and plants seven broom sticks for the bride and nine for the groom. The sticks are then tied down with white cotton thread; seven times for the bride and nine times for the groom. Curd, banana, uncooked rice and a coin are placed on that alter. This alter is considered as *Bura* and *Buri*. Then they again worship the water body by leaving two earthen lamps over two boats made with banana

over that she lighted an earthen lamp and incents sticks. She offers the deity flower and Prasad mix of uncooked rice, sugar and little bit raw milk and offers her over a plantain leaf. After that, she sprinkles the holy water which she has already prepared by adding raw milk, water, rice and a bunch of dub grass and tulsi leaf. With that bunch, she then sprinkles the holy water over the pair of the pigeon and gives them a mark of Vermillion. After that she offers the blood and head of the pigeons after strangling them.

[106] Literally, *sorog pani tula* means fetching water from heaven. Therefore, in the early morning before sunrise, the boirati/*airoti*, with other female members go to the nearby river or pond to fetch water. In the eastern part of the region, it is done in the morning.

[107] A decorative flower prepared with cutting with the skin of a betel nut and bending it till half and finally applied vermillion on the white parts of the nut

[108] In this ritual, the importance of *Airoti/Bairati* is most important. They take the two pitchers and the *sailon bati* is carried by an *akumari* girl (the girl who does not cross her puberty rite) over her head. In some places, this sailon bati is carried by the mother of the bride or groom. Along with them, other female both married and unmarried and often a local band accompanied.

trunk and leave those boats to flaw on the river.[109] After that, the two *boirati* fetch the water from the river/pond with the two pots by cutting the water with a knife. The *boirati* fetches the water and throws it again to the river/pond by seven times for the bride and nine times for the groom and only at last time two fill the pot with water and return. After that they throw *gon-tel* (scented oil) in the water. Once the *sorog pani tula* ritual is over, the preparation for *Sol Matrika puja* or *Har Gouri khisa* start. This *puja* is done inside the main house in a complete Vedic ritual by the traditional priest. In some places, Brahmin priest is called to conduct this *puja*.

Moreover, after the *pani tula* ritual is over, five *boiraties* go to the nearby shrine and light a *saki* (earthen lamp), incense sticks and worship the deity by offering *gon tel* (scented oil) for the well-being of the bride/groom and their family and to protect them from any accidents. After that, at the courtyard, they perform the *tel sora* ritual before the *ghat-kamani* and *ga dhua*[110] (bathing) ritual.[111] Simultaneously, in the eastern part of the

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[109] By leaving those boats the *boirati* carefully look on their movements and try to predict the future of the couple whether their life will be happy or not. It is believed that if the two boats go side by side together, the marriage life will be peaceful and happy.

[110] The applying of *kur-haldhi* and *gon tel* lead to another ritual called the *ghat kamani* and *Ga dhuwa* ritual. For that four *kol potua* (banana trunk), four bamboo twig, and winnowing fan is needed. The bride/groom sits on a *pira* and the bamboo twigs are placed on the banana trunk and keep it in front of the bride/groom. Then the younger brother (in some places the barber is called) of the bride/groom used a blade and touches the hands and legs seven times for the bride and nine times for the groom. After the bathing ritual is done. For that, a medium size banana tree is dig out with its root and plant it temporarily where the bathing ritual will be conducted especially in the northern side of the house. But before planting the tree in the ground the *jara-behor* (charmed mustard seeds) are thrown to protect from evil spirits and black magic. And after the bathing ritual is done that tree is again dug and finally planted in the garden and it is related to the fertile nature of the bride/groom.

[111] In the eastern part, along with the *pani tula* ritual another ritual is observed known as *xuwag jara* and after the *ghat kamani* and bathing ritual is over, the *xuwag jara* ritual is conducted at the courtyard. For the ritual, the mother of the bride/groom goes to a nearby water source like river, pond, etc. Other female members including *boiratis* accompanied her and materials like a *kula* (winnowing tray), curd, uncooked rice, cowry or coins, banana, cotton, cotton thread, broom, a spud are also carried. At the selected place, she makes two earthen mounds and on that mound, she puts seven broom sticks for the bride and nine for the groom. The sticks are then tied with cotton thread and on the mounds, she puts the cotton ball, curd, rice, flower, and a coin or cowry. She then bows down in front of the mounds as they are considered as Siva and Parvati, and she touches the mounds with cross hands. At that time, one *boirati* stands nearby the mother of the bride/groom with a broom and another *boirati* stands at the back of her spreading a *gamsa* over her back. The first *boirati* then beat her hand with the broom and asks whose marriage is going on and with whom and the mother then replies. After that, the mother throws some soil from the mound over her back and the *boirati* catches that soil with the *gamsa*. This has done for three times. After this, the mother fills the pitcher and takes a mouth full of water from the water source. On the way of returning, one *boirati* dig in the ground with a *kodal* (spud) and on that pit, a drop of water from mother's mouth, uncooked rice,

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region, along with the *sorog pani tula* ritual, another ritual called *gao bandha* is organised. At the morning, an *oja* (traditional priest) is called in order to prevent or protect the family members from the effects of evil spirits, black magic, and witchcraft.[112] Moreover, at the morning of the marriage day, the mother of the bride offers a puja towards *Ai Thansri*. *Ai Thansri* is considered as the *Grihadevi* or household deity who's *than* (shrine) is at the kitchen, at the left side of the oven.[113] After the puja is over a ritual is conducted in the name of the ancestors. This is known as *Propita puja* or *Pitripurukhor shraddha* or *Pinda dan*. This ritual is performed by the father of the bride/groom under the supervision of a Brahmin priest.[114] After the ritual is over, the priest sprinkles the

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curd are given and another *boirati* collects that soil with a broom over a *kula* (winnowing tray). This is done seven times for the bride and nine times for the groom. This soil is kept for the main *xuwag jara* ritual which is done later. The water of the pitcher is thrown on the banana trees that are planted on the main entrance and on the two other medium size pitchers that are kept in front of these banana plants. The two pitchers are then decorated with mango twig with five leaves and one raw coconut (green) with its beard attached. The water of the mouth is thrown in any corner of the room where the *Sol-Matrika puja* was conducted.

At the time of the main ceremony, the bride/groom is taken out at the courtyard and he/she is given a *pira* to sit. A *gamsa* is spread over the head of the bride/groom by four *bairatis*. White cotton thread is moved seven times for the bride and nine times for the groom around the *gamsa*. The mother then gives that soil over the cloth seven times for the bride and nine times for the groom and after that, she collects that soil and tied down in a small cloth. The thread is tied down on the hand of the bride/groom after *gon-tel* is used on that thread.

[112] For that, the *Oja* requires white cotton thread and mustard seeds. But before that, he prepares the holy water by adding uncooked rice, *tulsi* leaf, dub grass, raw milk and touch of any kind of gold and silver ornaments in the water. After that, he recites some mantras. Once the holy water is prepared he then starts to make *kasni* (enchanted chords) for each member. While knotting the thread, he recites mantras and after that, he recites another mantra touching the bag of mustard seeds. In the end, he throws some holy water over these things and suggests any member spread and throw the mustard seeds every nook and corner of the surrounding of the house and the courtyard and to tie down the *kasni* on the hands in one breath. These mustard seeds and *kasni* are used and kept until the end of the marriage.

[113] *Ai Thansri* is represented by a five hand long bamboo which is erected on a *dhip* (alter) which is around two inches long in height. On the day of the marriage, after taking a bath, the mother mobs the *dhip* with water. After that, she gives five marks on both at the bamboo pole and at the altar with the mixture made of vermillion and oil. On a banana leaf, she then lights and earthen lamp and offers soaked uncooked rice, banana, sugar, fruits, and *guwa-pan* in five parts as a *prasada*, along with flower, dub grass, *tulsi*, incent sticks. No sacrifice is offered in this puja.

[114] As a part of this ritual sixteen *manohar kol* (a type of banana), sixteen leaf of *bogri* fruit (berry), piece of turmeric and ginger, areca nut-leaf, dub grass, tulsi, flower, bel pat (leaf of wood apple), raw milk, curd, ghee, sugar, honey, two *ghots* (earthen pot), coconut, *gamsa*, cloth, five *kori* (cowry), *sati* made with paddy- husk and bamboo, *kula* (winnowing fan), *sangli* (sieve made with bamboo), *agloti kolpat* (banana leaf), paddy, *shakha* (bangles), *sendur* (vermillion), *ayna-kakoi* (mirror-comb), *kur-haldhi* (paste of various herbs), mustard oil, *gon tel (*scented oil), sixteen *khorka* (basket), *pira* (small tool), stone, uncooked rice, turmeric powder, mat and *sador*.

holy water on the bride/groom and applies *kur-haldhi* on the body and *gon-tel* on the head seven times for of the bride and nine times for the groom.

On the day of the marriage, the *akha* (oven) prepared by the *boiratis* are worshipped. The puja is conducted by any married female member of the family whose husband is still alive and is related to the bride or groom.[115] Later, food is prepared on that *akha* over a *hari* (big clay utensil) carefully as it is believed that breaking of the *Akha* is a bad omen. Over the *hari*, different food items like fish, rice, curry, etc are cooked and before the starting of the main marriage ritual in bride's house and in groom's house before coming to marry to bride's house five or seven peoples are given food that is newly cooked on that *akha*. Furthermore, some rice is kept on that *hari*[116] (cooking pot made with clay) adding some water. This leftover rice which is known as *ponta bhat* or *ponta pani* is then given to the bride and the groom on the very next day. At the same time, after the ritual of *sol matrika puja* and ancestors worship is over, preparation for another *puja* towards *Mao Aideu* starts. This ritual for this puja is done completely in a non-vedic way by a *deori* or *deosi* (traditional priest) and along with deity *Aideu*, her *Poharadar* (gate guardian) *Bura Soddar* is also worshipped. At the courtyard, at the noon she is offered the *Aideu puja*.[117]

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[115] For that puja, the person keeps fast and wears a new *patani* which should be gifted to her by the bride or the groom. At the time when generally people start to cook known as *randhon por*, the person goes to the kitchen which is already clean and washed and prepares an *akha* (oven) with the dried *dhip* (pillar). Then seven marks of vermillion and ash are given in the front of the *akha*. In front of that, a *gosa*/*saki* (earthen lamp) and incent sticks are lighted and on a plantain leaf some atop *saul* (uncooked rice) is kept and over the rice, ripe banana, sugar and *awa gakhir* (raw milk) is placed along with some flower, dub grass, and *tulsi* leaf. Then she worships the *akha*.

[116] In some area, after the puja is over, the *hari* is kept in the kitchen after washing it thoroughly. Then every day, a little portion of the cooked rice is kept on that *hari* adding some water with rice and offers to the deity *Thansri*. Every week the water mix rice is changed and starts newly. This is also known as *kanji hari*.

[117] For that, a dhip (alter) is made on the selected place and the altar is mobbed with water. After that, two *samtenga gas* (a kind of tree) are erected on both sides of the *dhip*. The *dhip* is considered as the *asan* of *Mao Aideo*. One *aoka suta* (cotton thread) is then decorated with cotton, mango leaf, and *bel* (wood apple) leaf and tie down on both of the edges of the erected tree. In front of the asana, one banana leaf is placed where an earthen lamp is lighted and Prasad made with soaked rice, banana, sugar and raw milk is offered in five parts. Along with the prasada, guwa pan is offered and incent sticks are burned. One *sam* (wooden mortar) is placed on a banana leaf and on another banana leaf one sword is placed. The mentioned everything here is given a mark of vermilion and oil mix. After that, one pig is carried and tied down his legs tightly after giving him a wash and puts the vermilion-oil mix on the pig and four-five people holds the

In the Koch marriage, the groom goes to the bride's house to marry. For that a *mandap* is prepared with four small plantain trees at the house of the bride [118]. Once the reception for invited guests is over, the groom prepare to go for the marriage ritual. It is compulsory to wear the traditional attire for both the bride and the groom at the marriage. Moreover, the attires which were worn for the main marriage ritual should be woven in special condition and by some special person only. For the marriage, the bride wears the *pachrongi patani*[119] and takes a *dopati*[120] on her neck. These clothes are specially woven only for the marriage purpose. But at present many people due to the Assamese influence wears white *mekhela-sador* of *Pat* silk at the time of marriage. On the other hand, generally, a groom wears a green colour *aosa/angsa* with yellow or white *pari* (border) and a white shirt. Some people also wear white *Aosa* or half dhoti and white *kurta*. Along

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pig after putting the legs inside the mortar. Then, the *deosi/deuri* speaks the mantras and after the end of his recitation, he cuts the head of the pig with the sword. But, nowadays, sacrificing of a pig is not prevalent and offerings are made by killing a pigeon or duck or goat and sometimes by offering only *Prasad* made of rice and soaked *gaji-boot* (mung beans and black chickpeas).

[118] Three sides are covered with the cotton thread and mango leaves are hanged after giving a vermillion mark on each leaf. Flowers are made with areca nuts and hanged on each plantain tree. Pair of betel leaf and areca nut is placed inside of four *ghots* (small pot) and then fills with water. Each pot is then given a mango twig with five leaves and placed near by the plantain trees. At the middle of the *mandap*, an *alpona* is prepared using *pachguri* (five types of powder) and another *ghot* is placed where coconut is placed over the mango twig and after giving a pair of *guwa-pan* the *ghot* is again filled with water. Each pot and plantain tree is given a vermillion mark. In front of the *ghot, atop saul,* sixteen banana and fruits are placed.

[119] The pattern of *pachrongi patani* is different, but it is worn similar to other regular patanis. In a pachrongi patani, the border has consisted of five stripes that have five different colours. The name *pachrongi patani* defines that a patani which has pach means five colours. These colours are *matiyar* (brown), *neela* (blue), *ranga* or *lal* (red), *dhunga rong* (ash colour) and *akaxi* (sky blue). According to the Koch traditional belief system, the existence of human life is useless without the five basic elements or *tatva* which are earth, water, fire/blood, sky, and air, and each colour reflects these five elements of God's creation. The colour brown reflects the earth, blue represents water, red represents blood/fire, ash colour represents air and sky blue represents the sky. So, the *pachrongi patani*, in a way, carries the unseen and unexplainable power of God. That is why the dress is considered pure and in order to prepare this dress special precautions are taken. The dress should be woven only by a married woman and during menstruation period which is considered as an impure time for a woman, she should stay away from touching the loom.

[120] *Dopati* also has significant meaning and uses in a Koch married life. The word *dopati* consisted of two words: *do* and *pati* where *do* means number two and *pati* represents for mixing of souls. According to the Koch belief system, after the marriage, the soul of the bride is bind with the soul of the groom and she has to carry the responsibilities and duties towards her husband and this *dopati* is the representation of this philosophy of life. Along with the *patani* and *dopati*, she uses a decorated *sador/sadri* in red color as a veil which covers her head only.

with that, the groom takes a *seleng sador*[121] on his shoulder. The groom has to wear a *paguri* on his head. A ten hand long (from finger to elbow) *phali kapur* (cloth) is used to prepare the *paguri*.[122] The *phali kapur* for the *paguri* is always gifted to the groom by the father of the bride. Other than this, the bride wears a *murali* and groom wears a *mukut* at the time of marriage and both of these are made with *botla* (cork). Furthermore, in order to protect the bride and the groom from black magic and witchcraft, a *daab katri* (small knife) is tied down with one of the edge of a handkerchief (*rumaal*) and then some *jara behor* (charmed mustard seeds) are again tied down with the same *rumaal* and then tied down with clothes or given to keep with them all the time until the marriage ritual is over. As it is believed that the knife will protect them from the evil spirits and charmed mustard seeds have the power to protect them from witchcraft and magic, these things are always kept with them.

The ritual for marriage performance takes place at night. As soon as the groom's party arrives at the house of the bride, people from the bride's side goes outside for a ceremonial welcome which is known as *borai niya* or *bor borba jawa*. In front of the main entrance gate between the two banana plants, the groom is welcomed by the father of the bride.[123] After that, the bride is taken outside at the courtyard by the *boirati* of the groom's side. The bride then moves seven times around the groom and throws flowers at

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[121] This *seleng sador* used at the time of marriage only and is prepared specially for the marriage. A married woman, from the close relative, is given the responsibility to weave this cloth and she takes very much care and precautions at the time of weaving.

[122] The word *paguri* consists of two words: *pa* and *guri*. The word *pa* comes from Assamese word '*pua*' which means to get or to achieve and *guri* means the starting point. The word *guri* also used to mean as the root part of a tree which is heavier than its body part. So, according to the Koch belief, the word *paguri* indicates the starting point of his heavy duties and responsibilities of a married life towards his wife and family which he is taking on his head.

[123] Groom stands on a *pira* and bride's younger sister or cousin sister washes his feet with water, milk, and banana. After that, the father of the bride welcomes (*boray*) him with a pan-sati (a special lamp that is lighted on a betel leaf). At this, the groom is considered as god Shiva and the father welcomes him thinking him as Shiva. The father then gives him the ritual dress for marriage, clothes for *pagri* (headgear), and shoes with a pair of *guwa-pan* (areca nut-leaf). He then wears this dress and sits in front of the *biya mandap*. But in the eastern part this ritual of giving clothes is not practiced and the groom sits in the marriage ritual performance with their own dress. A *sailon bati* is moved around the groom by one *boirati* for three times and then he is welcomed inside after giving him *bisnir bao* (giving wind with the help of a hand fan) for three times. The groom then sits in front of the *mandap*.

the groom. The bride is then taken and sat near the groom and the priest starts the procedures for marriage.[124]

After the marriage rites are over, the newly married couple is taken inside a room where some rituals are observed. According to this ritual, an elderly woman takes a *duni* which is prepared by keeping rice, banana, betel nut-leaf, burning incense sticks and one burning earthen lamp on a bamboo basket and moves that *duni* around the couple for three times and by throwing rice from that *duni* she blesses them. This ritual is known as *ag saul diya*. After that some sweet dishes like *payokh* (rice pudding), various *pithas* are kept in front of them and they are then told to smell them and not to eat. But in some region especially in the north-eastern part, they are allowed to eat the sweets and in this way they break their fast. After that both the bride and groom are told to sit together facing the east side and they play different games in front of the members of the family, such as *pakha-jukha khela*[125], *angti khela*[126], etc. in order to see the compatibility of the couple as well as for enjoyment.

Once the games are over food is served to the couple and after the food ceremony, the farewell of the bride comes. In some places, before going for food, it is a compulsory

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[124] Generally, a priest is brought from the groom's family side and if the bride's family also organizes a priest then the priests from both parties sit together and work together. The father of the bride also sits with them and the priest performs the *hoom suba* (fire sacrifice) ritual. In between of the *hoom suba* ritual, some other rituals like offering *khoi* (puffed rice) in the fire is done by the younger brother of the bride. The *adhikary* (priest) is then put seven betel leaves in front of the *hoom* and put seven stones over that the leaves and told the bride to step down on that leaves or collect that leaves together with her legs. After that, the tying down of the *logun gathi* (marriage knot) between the bride and the groom is done by the father of the bride and the bride and the groom move seven times around the fire of the *hoom*. Finally, the groom puts vermillion on the forehead of the bride and they are declared as the husband and wife by the priest.

[125] Two small pieces of areca nut are taken and then wrapped in two areca leafs separately with a stick of bamboo which is called as *khili paan*. Literally, *khili* means lock and because it is made in such a way that the areca nut is wrapped with a paan and then locked with a stick is called *khili paan*. Then these two *khili paans* are placed on the palm of the bride, one in the east side and another on the north side without touching each other by any of the elder members. After that, the groom has to move these *paan* one by one from east to west and north to south. While moving these *paans*, the groom has to take precaution not to touch the paan from another. These are done for three times and once the game is over, the bride takes the north side's *paan* and groom takes the east side's *paan* and than sniff the *paan* and throws this on the backside.

[126] The game is played with the *angti* or ring of the groom's. For that, a big basket of rice is placed in front of the bride and the groom. After that, one of the members will hide the *angti* (ring) inside the rice and the bride and groom have to find the ring. It is believed that whoever finds the ring first have good luck and will dominate in their married life.

ritual to worship *Kani Bishori* with lighting an earthen lamp and incense sticks and to offer flower, *bel pat* (leaf of the wood apple tree, *bilva*, aegle marmelos) by the newly married couple. While taking her out from the house, she throws rice without looking back and the mother catches that rice either with a *gamsa* or with the edge of her *sador*. At this time the father of the bride returns and hands over the *bhar* (load) to the groom which is brought from the groom's family at the time of the *telor bhar* ceremony. According to the Koches, returning of the *bhar* means that the parents have handed over the responsibilities of their daughter to the newly married husband and the complete responsibilities of the bride now go to the groom. With the farewell of the bride, the phase of main marriage ritual comes to an end.

3.3.2.1.3: Post-Marriage Rites

After the marriage is over and the bride is taken to the groom's house, the couple is ceremonially welcomed (*boray niya*).[127] Soon after the marriage, the newly married couple is not allowed to sleep together until the *neotha* (a feasting ceremony) ritual is over. Once they are welcomed in the house, the couple is again welcomed by the *ag saul diya* ritual by the female members of the family. In most of the family, it is compulsory to offer *puja* towards the deity *Bishohori* by the couple soon after the ceremonial welcome is over. On the other hand, some family who does not conduct the *Marai puja* before marriage, organise the *puja* after the marriage. On the following morning of the marriage, some families follow a few more traditional rites and that is known as *basi biya*.[128] Within a few days, mostly on the second or third day, the groom's family organizes another ceremony known as *neotha* and invites their relatives, friends. It is basically a grand feast where the groom's family formally introduces the bride the family

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[127] For this purpose, a *pira* (low wooden tool) is placed at the entrance gate. Then she is told to stand on the *pira* and the younger sister-in-law washes her foot with a mixture of water and milk. After that, the *boirati* welcomes the bride with a *bisni* (hand fan made with bamboo) and she is taken to the main house and allows her to take a rest with her friends.

[128] For that, a structure called as *Bengur* is made using split bamboos and banana trees. Seven pairs of *guwa-pan* (areca nut-leaf) with vermillion on it is kept in front of the *bengur* and after taking a ceremonial bath the couple moves around the *bengur* for seven times. They start to move from the front where *guwa pan* is kept and each time they finish one round the groom takes the *guwa pan* and puts the vermillion on the hair parting of the bride from the *guwa-pan*.

and relatives. On the occasion, the bride is made to cook fried eggs, (rice cake or pudding in the eastern part) for the invited guests. In some places, the ritual is known as *randhon dewa*. With the cooking, she is formally allowed to enter the kitchen. There is an important thing to mention here that the *bhar* (load) which is returned by the groom's in-laws family when the time of marriage ritual is over is opened at the time of this ritual. Only after this ritual the bride is allowed to enter in the kitchen and is accepted as the member of the family and on that day the couple is allowed to sleep together and they are considered as husband and wife. After that on the eighth day, the bride's family organise a grand feast for the couple and they invite the couple for the feast. This is known as *athmongla*. In some places, it is also called as *path phirani*.

The ritual process of the Koch marriage ceremony is explained in the following diagram 3.3. The diagram is again shown in two phases where first phase will represent various ritual processes in the marriage system in three stages viz. pre-marriage, marriage day and post-marriage. On the other hand, the second phase will looked at the structure of the ritual where the ritual observances are analysed on the basis of the rites of passage model.

Diagram No. 3.5: *Biya* **(Marriage Ritual).**

Phases in Ritual	*Biya* **(Marriage Ritual)**	**Structure of the Ritual**

Pre-Marriage

1. Searching and selection a Bride/Groom is carried by a *Ghotok* (middle man).
2. Acceptance of the proposal by the family members. Both families visit each other.
3. Confirmation is given at the *Jopsira Diya* ritual. After that the date and month is fixed on the *Khata Kora* ritual.
4. At the bride's house *Guwa-pan kata* ritual is observed. Groom's family comes with a load of Guwa-pan (areca nut-leaf).
5. Preparation of marriage starts.
6. Before the day of *Adhibash, Panchini* ritual is observed at the bride's house. The groom's family comes with a load of materials.

Separation from 1 to 6

Marriage Day

7. Preparation starts from the early morning of the day of the marriage.
8. Both the bride and groom wear traditional dress. This signifies them as Bride and Groom.
9. The groom comes to the bride's house at night and the groom is ceremonially welcomed at bride's house.
10. The groom sits in front of the *Mandap* at the courtyard. Bride is taken outside and sits near the groom.
11. *Hoom Suba* ritual is conduct. The groom puts vermillion on the forehead of the bride. The priest declared them as husband-wife.
12. The ceremony of farewell of the bride conduct and the father hand over the *Telor bhar* to the groom.

Liminal from 7 to 13

Post-Marriage

13. At the groom's house, the couple is ceremonially welcomed and *Ag Saul diya* ritual is observed. The couple is not allowed to sleep together.
14. On either the second or third day after marriage, *Neotha* ritual is observed. On that day, the bride is formally introduced to the family and relatives and a grand feast is offered.
15. The bride fries egg or prepares rice cake or pudding and serves to the invitees. She is allowed to enter in the kitchen and accepted as the new member of the family. The couple is allowed to sleep together.
16. On the eighth day, another feast is given in the bride's house.

Incorporation from 14 to 16

Moreover, from the above discussion it is seen that like the birth ritual, the Koches also venerate various types of deities in their marriage ritual. Although, deities are worshipped asking for the happy and prosperous married life, simultaneously, precautions are also taken to prevent any kind of harm or bitter experiences done by the black magic or witchcraft. The deities, in a sense, play the role of the protector for the whole family and especially the newly married couple and therefore, blessings are much required from the deities that have become a part of their socio-religious life. Thus,

another diagram is prepared here to show the existence of supernatural beings that are venerated in the Koch marriage ritual phases. For that the diagram is similarly prepared as the above.

Diagram 3.6: Supernatural Beings related to the Koch Marriage Ritual[129]

Supernatural beings in Ritual	**Biya (Marriage Ritual)**	**Structure of the Ritual**

Pre-Marriage

1. After the acceptance of the proposal, the *Sura/Khara* Puja is observed to worship deity *Subasini* at the bride's house.
2. At the *Jopsira Diya* ritual, *Subasini* and *Baus Thakur* are worshipped at the bride's house.
3. At the bride's house *Guwa-pan kata* ritual, household deities like *Aideu, Bura-Buri, Subasini*, etc. are worshipped.
4. Offering are done to *Ai Basumati* and the guardian of the area from where the soil is taken to prepare the *Akha* (oven).
5. At the *Gon-tel bhaja* and *Sira-Khunda* ritual, *Agni deo* is worshipped.
6. At the *Panchini* ritual household deities like *Aideu, Bura-Buri, Subasini*, etc. are worshipped.
7. On the day of *Adhibash, Baus Thakur* and *Hari Thakur* are worshipped.

Separation from 1 to 7

Marriage Day

8. On the marriage day, several offerings to different deities are conducted. Such as *Marai Puja* to *Bishohori, Aideu puja, Ai Thansri Puja, Har-Gouri puja, Akha puja* along with ancestor worship in the *Propita puja* is done.
9. At the *Pani tula* ritual, the water deity and various spirits of water are worshipped.
10. The village deities like *Garja deo, Ai Thakurani*, etc. and household deities like *Bishohori, Aideu* etc are also venerated at the time of *Tel sora* ritual.
11. *Gao Bandha* rite is done in order to prevent witchcraft and black magic.

Liminal phase from 8 to 13

Post-Marriage

13. At the groom's house, again *Bishohori puja* is observed on the next day.
14. All household deities are worshipped at the *Neotha* ritual.

Incorporation 14

3.3.2.2: Analysis

So, we can see that the Koch marriage ritual goes through a very long process where the fulfillment of the desired norms plays major role. Moreover, once the acceptance is confirmed from the both sides, the bride's house worship deity *Subasini* asking for blessing for a smooth wedding without any accident or misfortune.

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[129] For more detail, see the tabular form of the deities at the appendix. Pp. 364-367.

In the Koch marriage rite, separation period stays for a long period from 1 to 6 in the pre-marriage phase as well as sequence 7 of the marriage day as shown in the diagram no. 1. The separation period starts on the pre-marriage phase when both families agree for the marriage. This starts various engagement rituals for the bride and the groom. Simultaneously, worship of household deities is also conducted during each ritual. Each ritual starts after the veneration of the household deities. This stage marks the separation of the boy/girl from their earlier stage as they are no longer in their puberty stage by attributing some dietary taboos to protect from witchcraft and black magic. They also take care of their behaviours as any rumor can spoil their character.

On the other hand, liminal period contains various ritual practices that are performed in the ritual day from 7 to 12 and also at the pre-marriage phase of 13. This period starts on the day of the marriage and lasts till they are incorporated in the society as a couple. The handover of the *telor bhar* by the father to the groom signifies that she is no longer a member the family and the groom no longer in his earlier stage. But both of them are not recognised as a couple in the society. The markers of the liminal periods are: throwing of puffed rice at the courtyard of the house without looking back, handover of the *telor bhar* to the groom by her father, welcoming ceremony while entering into the house of the groom, worshipping of the deity *Bishohori* at the new house, and sleeping separately from her husband. Although they are declared as husband and wife, but socially they are still in the liminal period.

The incorporation period appears at the post-marriage phase (from 14 to 16) where feasting becomes the main part to incorporate in the society. It stays for a short period as most of the rituals are observed in the liminal period that constructs their new identities. The first cooking at the *neotha* ritual incorporates the bride as a new member of the family and in the society. They are also recognised as couple as they are now allowed to sleep together.

3.3.3: *MORA SUWA* (DEATH RITUAL)

Death is the irreversible reality and the last ritual and rite in human life cycle ceremonies. Like other communities of the region, Koch people also follow certain rituals

and rites after someone is deceased. The Koch understanding of the souls are as the human who faced hardship in their journey towards heaven. For that, the family observed certain ritual for the deceased souls for their peaceful and easy journey to heaven. The rituals and rites followed by the Koches are quite similar to other Hindu communities of the region. According to Dwijendra Nath Bhakat and Labanya Bhakat, the death rituals and rites of the Koches of Assam can be divided into two ways: the Vedic way and the Folk way.[130, 131]

When a person is in his/her death bed, the family tries to inform or contact the family members who live outside and inform the *bhagi* (blood lineage relatives). Also the family arranges sacred water to drink for the dying person. For that the family prepared the sacred water with *tulsi* (holy basil) leaves and the dying person is made to drink that water with that *tulsi* leaf. Moreover, organising the reading of religious textbook in front of the dying man can also be seen among certain families and the name of Gods are whispered in his/her ears. This brings the belief that whispering the god's name will help the soul for his/her peaceful journey to reach heaven. The person is allowed to die in his/her bed of the room. As soon as the person dies, the family starts to prepare the de0ath rites. The Koches follows both the burial and cremation systems of the body. But, at present time, cremation of the dead body is practiced widespread. Among the Koch society, the dead body is generally burned, but in some cases, burying is also prevalent. If the person is died from diseases like cholera, small pox, or died from a snake bite or animal, unnatural death, children unattained puberty, etc. are buried. If a pregnant woman dies with her child in the womb, she is also buried along with the unborn child. Sometimes, the dead body is floated in the river also if the person dies from a snake bite. But nowadays most people prefer to cremate the corpse. Therefore, different stages of the rituals in the cremation of the body are discussed here.

Cremation of the body: Just after the family members confirm that the person is dead, the loud voice of lamentation naturally indicates the death to the public. One of the

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[130] Dwijendra nath Bhakat, *Asomor Koch-Rajbongshi Janajati*, Dubri: Ms Ananya Bhakat, 2008, p.114.

[131] Labanya Bhakat, *Rajbongshi Loka-Sanskriti*, Dhubri: Banamali Prakashan, 2014, p.85.

family members then informs their relatives, village people, and friends. Meanwhile, the body is taken outside of the room and is kept in the *kathi* (verandah) over a *dhara* (bamboo mat) until people gather. While keeping the body in the *kathi*, some of the family members and neighbours surround the body by touching the body and a *Saki* (earthen lamp) is lit near by the head of the dead body. According to the belief system, this will protect his/her soul from possessing other evil spirits and souls. When the neighbours, village members, close relatives, friends arrive; they help in preparing for the cremation and other rituals and rites.

Soon after the people are gathered, the dead body is taken in the inner courtyard. In the courtyard, possibly near the shrine, a place is selected. A female person from the family, then, wipes out the place with cow dung mixed with water by coming back from north to south and sprinkle holy water over the place. The *kamdhora* (eldest son who observes the death ritual) person will then draw a long vertical line in the middle of the wiped place from north direction to the south with the left corner a *kodal* (hand hoe) and with his left hand. Again, the line will be divided into three parts with the *kodal* which signifies the neck, waist and leg part of the body and draws three horizontal lines in the same manner. After that, a *dhara* (bamboo mat) is placed and a clean cloth is spread over the *dhara*. After that, the body is taken from the *kathi* and laid down over that *dhara*. Mostly the body is washed at the cremation ground only. But generally, new cloth like *gamsa* for the male and *patani* or *mekhela-sador* for a female is put on or tied with the body and the body is covered with a new white cloth. Oil is applied to the hair and combed. If a married woman dies and her husband is alive a *sindur phwta* (vermilion mark) is put on the forehead by her husband. If the husband dies, the *sindur phwta* of the wife is wiped by the first toe of the dead person and *sakha* (bangles) are broken by the family members.

The head of the dead body is always kept in the northern side and a *dharma-saki* (earthen lamp) is lit near the head of the dead body. It is believed that after the death the evil spirits come to take the deceased soul with them and the *dharma-saki* and the family deities like *Siva, Bura-Buri, Aideu* etc. protect his/her soul from that evil spirits. That is why the dead body is placed near by the family shrine and a *dharma-saki* is lit.

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Meanwhile, before taking the dead body to the *kathwlisali/sosan* (funeral ground) the relatives and village people prepare a *tarangi* (bier) with bamboos by using two long bamboo poles around nine hands long for male and seven hands long for female. These two long bamboo poles are called *bhati*. This *bhati* is tied down with nine split bamboos for male and seven for female that are around one and a half hand long. These split bamboos are called as *gori*. From one *kolor dingra* (banana trunk) they make three short pieces of *dingra* and divided these into half. From there, three half pieces of *dingra* are tied down in the bier believing the body's neck, waist, and leg. A *saki* (earthen lamp) is lighted and incent sticks are burned and placed near the leg of the dead body with a *Dona* (small bowl made with banana trunk) filled with a mixture of mustard oil and raw turmeric paste. One *Dona* with a mixture of milk and water with few basil leaves and another one with *aola/atop saul* (uncooked rice) is also placed along with the first. First, the *kamdhora* applies a little bit of this mixture of turmeric and mustard oil from head to toe. Then he puts a new cloth on that mixture of turmeric and oil and keeps that to tie down and bring the *asthi* (bone) of the dead person.

After that, the family members, *bhagi* (blood relatives) and *sagi* (near relatives) offer water, rice, and money and give respect to the dead person by kneeling down in front of him. The offerings are made first by the husband if the dead person is a married wife and vice versa and if the person is a widow and the eldest son makes the offering first. The family members, *bhagi* and *sagi* members, friends and relatives give and feed the dead person with water mix milk and rice with a *tamar poisa* (coin). This is called as *mukh dhuwani*. Once the *mukh dhuwani* ritual is done, the body is laid down in the *tarangi* with a branch of *tulsi* plant and fastened down with three *patar sellai* (jute cord) by wrapping the bamboo mat.[132] Then the *sangi dhora* (bier carrier) persons use their shoulders to carry the bier. But before taking the bier on their shoulders, the bier is turned anti clockwise. Moreover, after putting the bier poles on their shoulders they have to move clockwise. That means while carrying the body his/her legs should be kept on the

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[132] If the dead person is a male than the first *sellai* is tied on the neck part bringing from the right side towards the left side. The second *sellai* is tied down on the waist from the left side to the right sight and the third *sellai* is tight down on the leg part from the right side to the left side. On the other hand, if the dead person is female than the tying method is the opposite of the males.

front side and his/her should be on the backside, so that his/her face should not see the house while going. This is because, it is believed that the soul of the deceased also accompanies them by walking and if he/she sees the house, the soul will always remain in the house. Therefore, no one looks back towards the house while carrying the body. After that, they started to march by uttering *hari-bol* for three times and they take the body to the *kathwlisali/sosan* (cremation ground) situated particularly in the river banks. Generally sons, family members, and kith and kins carry the dead body to the *kathwlisali.* No women are allowed to take part in the procession to the cremation ground and at least one male member of each family of the village has to come to the cremation ground with the dead body. For the cremation ritual, they have carried different materials along with them.[133]

Other than these, each person carries one *dao* and at least one piece of wood or dry bamboo. It is believed that carrying of *dao* will protect them from other evil spirits of the cremation ground. On their journey to the cremation ground, an *oja* or *deuri* lead the procession holding a *ghot* (pot) and some cotton cord. Along with the other materials, fire is also carried in a long *kheror bhuta* (lighter). On the way to the cremation ground, a small piece of cotton or short or long piece of *awa suta* (cotton thread) is left by the *oja/deuri* believing that the soul of the dead person will follow the group seeing the cotton ball. These threads are called as *bondhoni*. Moreover, while crossing a river or stream, the *deuri/oja* will leave a long cotton cord from one side to another of the stream/river believing that catching this cord the soul can cross the river/stream. At that time the *sangi dhora* party is accompanied by a group of people called *gaoniya* who sings some mourning songs. In the Kokrajhar area, these songs are known as *mora-phela gaan* and in Gouripur area these songs are called as *morakhapa gaan*.

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[133] The materials which are necessary to carry along with the dead body are: Cotton thread, one *kheror bhuta* (a lighter made with paddy straw), *Tulsi* plant, new white clothes for the *Kamdhora* person, mustard seeds, mustard oil, turmeric, *Panca xosyo* (five types of crops), dub grass, *Xukati* or *narzi* (dried jute leaf), coins, *Guwa-pan* (areca nut-leaf), clay pot with water, uncooked rice etc.

When the procession reaches the cremation ground, the corpse is given a touch of *Ai Basumati* (mother earth).[134] After that, they offer and throw some uncooked rice in the surroundings and the guardian of the dead body buy a spot by offering coins and a *gua-pan jora* (a pair of areca nut and leaf) to the guardian of the soil. Then the pyre is prepared by digging four bamboo poles in the soil and then each pole is tied with a twig of a mango tree on the east to the west position. The system of the pyre and keeping the corpse on that pyre differs depending upon the sex of the corpse. If the dead person is a male then nine layers of wood is placed and in case of a female seven layers of wood is placed. Once the *sita* (pyre) is prepared body is placed on the pyre according to their position in the creation of a life. According to that, the male body is placed on the pyre by flipping the body with the face towards down, while in case of the female body face is kept towards the sky. But in both cases, the head is always kept either in the eastern or in the northern direction. After that everyone contributes either wood or dry bamboos that are carried with them and this is believed as the responsibility or duty of a person in his life.[135]

After that the eldest son takes a bath and wears white cloth and taking the *bhuta* (straw lighter) moves three times (in some area, it is for seven times) anti clockwise around the pyre. While he moves, each time he rubs the paddy lighter on the mouth of the dead for once. This is called as *mukaguni*, which is the local term of the word *mukhagni*. After three/seven times round, he then lights the pyre in the middle by facing east. To light, the fire quickly clarified butter or kerosene oil is used. After that few coins are also thrown on the pyre with the dead boy. According to the Koch belief, in his/her journey to the sky, the soul has to cross the river on a boat and while he/she has to pay to the person who will help him/her in crossing. So he/she will need money for that and that is why few coins are given with him so that he/she will not face any trouble in his/her journey to heaven.

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[134] That is because when a child is born, traditionally he/she is given a touch of *Ai Basumati* in the starting of hi/her life. So this should also be done at the end of his/her life. The saying "*matir hate asili, matite jaok*" reflects that philosophy.

[135] The saying "*morar name khori, rajar name kori*" which means 'dead means firewood and tax/money means the king' reflects that belief.

When the cremation is over and the body is burned completely, the *kamdhora* extinguishes the fire completely by throwing water on it. After that he collects and removes bones from the forehead and breaks it into nine pieces for male and seven pieces for a female person. The bones are then tied down in the cloth which is already prepared and brought from home and tied down on the neck if he/she is elder than the *kamdhora* and on the left arm if he/she is younger than him. Another person among the pole bearers then breaks a pitcher filled with water on the pyre. After that, the place is washed and cleaned by throwing the ashes and unburned wood/bamboos into the river and a *dhip* (alter) is made. The *tulsi* plant is then planted on that *dhip* on the east side of the *dhip* and on that, a canopy is made by erecting four bamboo sticks on the four corners of the *dhip* and tying a new white cloth on it. This is known as *sandowa diya*. After that, a *ghot* (clay pot) is placed on the *dhip* where a coin is kept and then filled with water. On that water filled pot, *baro sos* (twelve types of crops) are kept along with mango leaves and in front of the *ghot*, a *saki* (earthen lamp) is lit. The *sandowa* is then left like that and people returns from the *kathwlisali* (cremation ground). But in the case of a death that occurs on the night or day of an *Amabasya* (new moon) or *Purnima* (full moon) or in a *khorabar* or *sokhabar* (Tuesday or Saturday); the *sandowa* is removed and burned. It is done in order to restrict in doing witchcraft and black magic as this time spirits grow stronger.

Once all this rites and rituals are done, the family and well-wishers return to home along with the *asthi* (bone) and the burning *bhuta* (straw lighter). Moreover, while returning back, it is also believed that no one should look back. It is said that if at time of returning someone looks back the evil spirits will also follow them. The torch prepared by using paddy straw is also taken back and the fire is kept alive for ten days until the *daha/dasha* ritual is not over. It should be lit every time. The people who took part in the funeral rites take bath at nearby river or pond before entering into the home. After the bath, they are given a smoke by crossing a fire prepared by burning a bundle of paddy straw, dry jute leaves and a stone on it. This is known as *xeka diya*. This ritual is done in order to stop the evil spirits from entering into the boundary of the house.

Meanwhile, the people who did not accompany the party to the cremation ground keep a long twig/branch of bamboo on the place where the body was kept near the shrine.

Some people cover the place by making a boundary with bamboo splits. No one is allowed to enter that place as it is believed that the soul will come and take rest in that place for twelve days. The bamboo twig represents the soul of the dead. Sometimes a separate small hut is also built on the extension of this place. While the group returns from the cremation ground, the *kamdhora* keep the *bhuta* along with the bamboo twig and removes the *asthi* or bones from his neck or arm and offers *pithali* in front of the bamboo twig believing that he is offering that to the deceased soul. After that, he puts the bones with the cloth inside a *sunga* (bamboo pipe) and buries that either inside the hut or near the shrine. In some places, the bones are then buried near the plantain tree or kept inside the banana trees. A *saki* (earthen lamp) is then lit in front of that. On a pitcher, water is poured and a small hole is made in a way that the water drops from that hole slowly and is kept over the bone. If the water of the pitcher is finished then again the *kamdhora* has to fill the pitcher after worshipping that pipe only. This is done because; it is said that the soul gets thirsty until the *daha/dosha* is over. So in order to remove his/her thirst, he/she should be provided with water every time. This is done till the *daha* ritual is over and each day the bones should be removed and should be washed with a mixture of honey, milk, and water. Moreover, whatever the *kamdhora* eats like fruits, rice powder etc, he should offer the first food to the deceased soul.

Once the dead body is taken out from the boundary of the house, the family members and their relatives start to clean the house. They wash or throw the clothes and utensils of the deceased person. The relatives of the family then go to the kitchen and break the clay oven and clay utensil or clean the kitchen utensils and throw the broom. The house is then cleaned and washed with the cow dung mix with water *(gobor san diya)* and each person of the family takes bath. If the dead person is a male and his wife is still alive then she takes white clothes after taking a bath. On the other side, in the Koch society, the everyday activities are stopped from the moment of the death of the person and the whole family is considered as *suwa* or impure. From this day onwards the family undergoes certain taboos and restrictions.[136]

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[136] These are: (i) The family can't take any cooked or raw food until the *terati/soturtha* (three nights) is over. (ii) Until the *Saradho*, ritual is over and after *terati/soturtha*, they can eat raw food but not cooked food and that too only one time in a day before sunset. (iii) They are prohibited to take milk if the mother

The *terati* or *soturtha* ritual is observed once the three nights are over after the funeral rite is conducted. Until this ritual is over, the family members and the *bhagi* members (sometimes) do not take any kind of food. After this ritual, they start to take food. Basically, from this day, they have started to take *pithali* (rice powder) with milk (if the mother is alive) or curd and sugar or ripe banana (if the father is alive) and for that, the first batch of *pithali* (rice powder) should come from the married daughter's family. So, on the fourth day, in the early morning, the grandchild of the deceased person brings the *pithali* from their home and offers this to the *kamdhora*. The *kamdhora* offers the first handful of *Pithali* prepared with milk/curd and sugar/banana to the soul of the person by offering in front of the *asthi sunga* (bones that are kept inside the bamboo container). After that only he can take the *pithali*. Like this, he breaks his three days long fast. After this ritual only the members of the family start to take *pithali, akhoi/khoi* (puffed rice), *sira* (flattened rice) in the day time and in the afternoon before sunset takes the *hobish bhat*[137] after offering each part to the soul first before eating.

At the tenth day after the funeral rite is over, the *daha/dosha* ritual is observed in a very simple way. On that day, the family starts the pre-preparation for the ceremony from the early morning. For that, each family takes a bath. The entire ceremony is conducted by the *kamdhora* under the supervision of a priest. In the southwestern part of the region another ritual is observed known as *kheur*.[138] This ritual is observed on the twelfth day after the funeral. On this day a bamun (Brahmin priest) and a napit (barber) are called and along with them, the *kamdhora* goes to the near river or pond to offer the *pinda*. But before that, the *kamdhora* removes the *asthi* (bone) digging the *sunga* (bamboo container) where the bones are kept. After that one piece is again kept on that *sunga* and is kept on the main house near the shrine. On the other hand, the remaining

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dies and in the case of the death of the father, they are not allowed to eat banana. (iv) The *kamdhora* is not allowed to sleep on a bed. (v) The *kamdhora* is not allowed to sit over a *pira* (wooden tool) or any kind of stool or sofa. (vi) The sons are not allowed to cut hair or shave beard.

[137] *Hobish bhat* is the boil food where no oil and spices like ginger, garlic, onion, chilly, etc. are added. It is taken once in a day and that is before the sun sets.

[138] This is not observed in the eastern side of the region and whatever rituals are observed in the *Kheur* are similar with the rituals that are conducted in the eastern side on the day of the *Daha*.

bones are taken to the *daha* ceremony near the river/pond/stream. There, according to the *Bamun's* (Brahmin) supervision, the ritual is conducted. After that on a *kolor dona* (banana trunk) some uncooked rice, ripped banana, sugar, jiggery, etc are kept and is taken to the other side of the river or stream or pond or sometimes thrown in the water. But before that, an earthen lamp is lit over it which is covered by a white piece of cloth. The bones are also thrown in the water keeping them inside of a pot. By doing this, the soul is told to leave the village and to go where ever he/she wants to. After that, the sons shave their hair and trimmed of the nails and then in the river/pond or stream takes bath. In the eastern part of the region, cutting off the nail and shaving of hair by the sons are done at the *daha* ritual only. On the other side, female members of the family wash the clothes, utensils of the kitchen, etc. and clean the house both inside and outside with cow dung mixed with water. After that, they also trim down their nails and take bath. At the evening the family members take the last *hobish bhat.*

Saradho is the last death ritual to remove the impurity from the family and to incorporate them in the society. On the twelfth or thirteenth day, this ceremony is observed. There are two separate rituals conducted on this ceremony which are *Boitoroni* rite and *pinda diya*. *Boitoroni* is an imaginary river which flows in between of the mortal world and the sky. So, the soul has to cross the river to reach the sky or heaven. This is separately done in a separate place of the outer yard of the house. For that, an *adhikary* (traditional priest) or a Brahmin priest is called and offers puja to the soul by offering rice, banana, sweets, milk, etc. Further, a small drain is dug and then filled with water. This is represented as the *Boitoroni* and near hat, the ritual is conducted.

After that the *pindo diya* ritual is over, on the courtyard, another ritual is observed. In the supervision of the Brahmin priest, the *kamdhora* lits a pyre and performs the ceremony. For that sixteen *Dona* (banana stem) is prepared and over each *Dona* a handful of *atop saul*, peeled ripe banana, sugar, honey, ghee, milk, curd, etc are kept. All these are then mixed and made into the dough by kneading them together. These are called *pinda*. Then these *pindas* are offered to the soul of the deceased and ancestors from three generations from both mother and father sides. Once this ritual is over the members of the family and the invited guests take food. Sometime, the *masowani* or *bhoj* ritual is

conducted on the same day. But if the *masowani* ritual is postponed for the next day, the *kamdhora* and his family take fast for the whole night and only after the feast is over they start to take food. Generally, this ritual is observed along with the *saradho* ritual. But sometime the very next day, it is also seen to organise separately as an individual ritual. It is a feast ceremony which is known as *masowani* or *bhoj*. As the name suggests from this ceremony the family can take and cook non-vegetarian foods in their home and in certain level the *suwa* (impurity) is removed from the family. For the ceremony blood relatives, relatives and the village people are invited. In this ceremony, various types of food including meat, fish and the favorite foods of the deceased person's are cooked. On the day of the ceremony, no ritual is observed except for preparing some special items and offering that food to the soul of the deceased person.

A special item with *dheika* (fern), kolor dila (banana flower) and duck's egg are prepared. For that, the *kamdhora* first prepares a special oven separately in a suitable place out of the courtyard, basically on a *tini ali* (junction where three roads get together). To fry the item, in a *matir kholta* (pan made with clay) mustard oil is heated and fern, banana flower, and duck egg are both fried together or separately and prepared as an item. Other than this a *gore mas* is burned on that fire and along with the other cooked items like curry, meat, and fish, this fry item is offered to the soul first. For that, the *kamdhora* person along with two or three person goes to a *tiniali* (junction of three roads) and on that place, a *bherenda/bhenda thani* (stick from a wild shrub) is erected. On that stick, either a *bhanga kolsi* (broken pitcher) or a *harir kholtonga* (broken piece of the cooking pot) is placed and over there various types of meat, jute leaf curry, and various fried items are placed and on a banana leaf, the burned *gore mas* (snake head fish) is offered.

On the other hand, in the eastern part, for that, an *agloti kolpat* (front part of a banana leaf) is taken and each item is placed with rice on the leaf. On the backyard, a place is selected and cleaned with water. A *saki* (earthen lamp) is lit and the food plate is placed. For water a special *sunga* (container made with bamboo) is prepared which is different than the *sunga* given to a normal person. For a normal person, the *sunga* is made by cutting one internodes of the tree where the upper intra-node is cut and make open.

But for a dead person, the *sunga* is made by flipping the internodes upside down and cutting the intra-node of the lower part. Sometimes, some family member also offers rice beer (*mod/chokot*) to the soul. After that, the *kamdhora* will kneel down and pray to god for his/her soul. After that, he returns and no one is allowed to go or check the place until the next day. It is believed that the soul will come transforming himself/herself into any animal and will take the last food before his journey to the sky.

After this the invited guests, relatives, and family members take food. From that day, the family can cook in the kitchen and the *suwa* is removed and mingled with society. But in terms of organising any auspicious rituals like puja or marriage, entering into the temple or having food into another's house the family especially the *kamdhora* person is still prohibited.

When the death of a person completes one year, the family members organise a ritual called *bosorki*. The word *bosorki* comes from the Assamese word *bosorekia*, which means annual. This is a fest giving ceremony to the soul of the dead person and invites the relatives and village people which lead to the complete removal of the *suwa* (impurity) stage of the family. The ritual is done by Brahmin priest. Once this ritual is over, the *kamdhora* person is allowed to enter inside of a temple, organize or take part in any religious ritual or *puja*, can eat in another family or can organize the marriage ritual.

As it has been discussed earlier that the Koches do belief in the rebirth, the following diagram will explain the Koch's understanding of soul.

Diagram 3.7: Journey of the Soul through Rituals
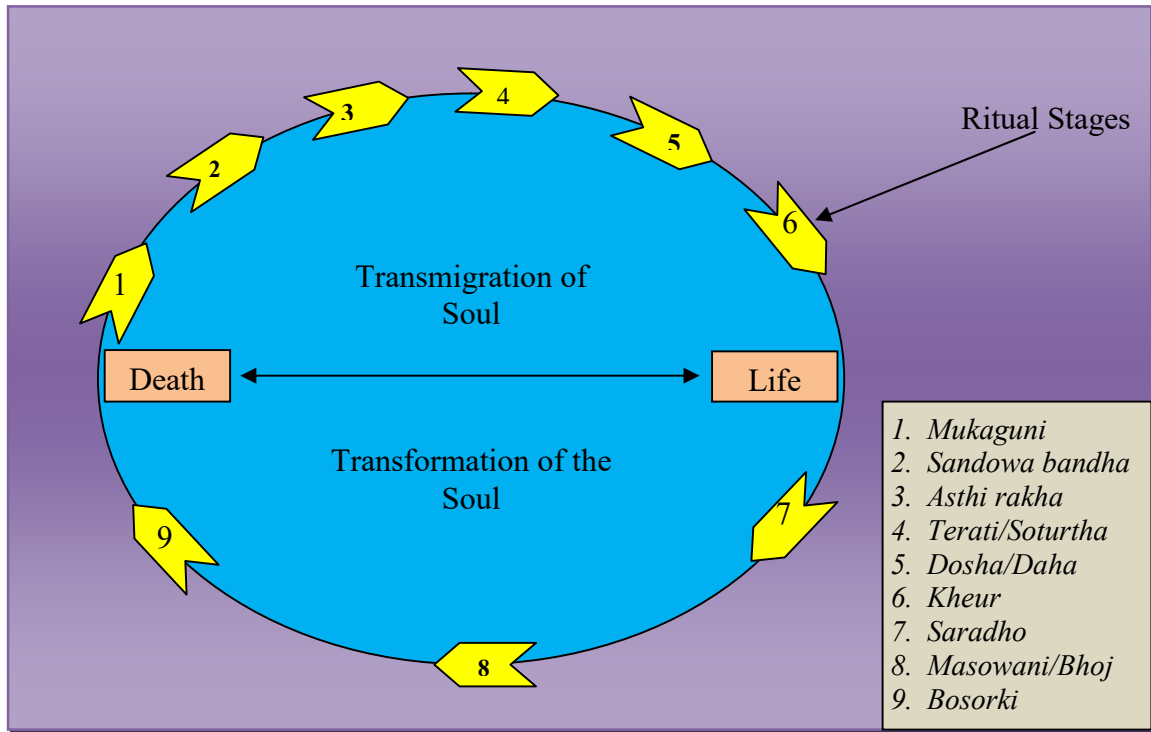
In the diagram, the journey of the deceased soul has been shown. The self starts its journey as a soul after the death. As we have discussed earlier, the soul of the death person lingers around the house until a certain period of time. At this time, the transportation of the soul has been accompanied with various stages of rituals. These rituals are performed by the *kamdhora*, where the soul is given water and food. Various do's and don'ts that are attributed to the *kamdhora* as well as the family helps the transmigration of the soul. On the other hand, after certain ritual like *saradho* and *masowani*, it is believed that the soul either goes with the ancestors' or he/she will reborn again as human, animals, or insects. This transformation of the soul into other being is also accompanied with the rituals.

Thus, as from the above discussion it can be noticed that the existence of deities and their venerations are very less compare to the association of spirits and ancestors. Therefore, the ritual phases and the existence of supernatural beings in the Koch death ritual are represented together in one diagram. In the diagram, a series of ritual process and the relation of supernatural beings are sequence wise numbered in the Phases of

ritual, while in the structure of the ritual the observances are interpreted from the structure of rites of passage.

Diagram No. 3.8: Ritual Process in *Mora Xokam* (Death Ritual).

Phases in Ritual	*Mora Xokam*/Death Ritual	Structure of the Ritual

1. After the death, the body is taken out from the house and kept in the *Kathi* (verandah) of the house. 2. Once people gather the body is taken out and is kept in front of the shrine of the inner courtyard keeping. A *Dharmasaki* (earthen lamp) is lighted to protect the dead soul from other evil spirits. 3. A *Tarangi* (bier) is prepared to the corpse at the funeral ground. 4. After the *Mukh Dhuwani* (washing of face and giving water) is completed, the corpse is tied down by wrapping a bamboo mat. 5. The body is carried to the cremation ground and *Suwa* (impurity) is attributed to the family.	**Separation period**
6. A pier is prepared at the cremation ground. The male body is placed on the pyre by flipping the body with the face towards down, while in case of female body face is kept towards the sky. 7. After three or seven times of round, the son then lighted the pyre in the middle by facing east. 8. Once cremation is over, the family members collected the *Asthi* (bone) and cleanse the pyre. On that place a *Sandowa* is prepared and left on that place. But in the case of a death that occurs on the night or day of an *Amabasya* (new moon) or *Purnima* (full moon) or in a *khorabar/sokhabar* (Tuesday or Saturday); the *sandowa* is removed and burned. It is done in order to restrict in doing witchcraft and black magic. 9. Once all this rites and rituals are done, the family and well wishers return to home along with the *asthi* (bone) and the burning *Bhuta* (straw lighter) without looking back. 10. *Suwa* (impurity) is observed for 13 days. 11. On the tenth day *Daha/Dosha* ritual and on the twelfth day *Kheur* ritual are observed.	**Liminal period**
12. With the *Saradho* and *Masowani* ritual at the thirteenth day, the *Suwa* is removed from the family after a feast. But for the *Kamdhora* (who observes the ritual) is not allowed to enter in the temple, to oraganise religious ritual, eating food to another house, etc. 13. On these rituals, the ancestors are worshipped and offered cook food to the deceased soul. From this day onwards it is believed that the soul will go with the other ancestors spirits. 14. Again after completing one year of death, *Bosorki* ritual is observed where ancestors including the deceased soul are offered food together. 15. From here the complete restrictions to family members, especially the *Kamdhora* person is removed.	**Incorporation period**

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3.3.3.1: Analysis

As we have seen in the above diagram, the separation period in a Koch death ritual starts soon after the death of the person as the corpse is brought out from inside of the room and kept in the verandah. Further, the deceased person is ritually separated from the other family members also by covering the corpse by a cloth, touching the dead body, wrapping the body with a bamboo mat and lighting of an earthen lamp in front of the corpse. At this time, the family members also try to protect the soul from other evil powers by placing the dead body in front the household shrine and lighting up the lamp. As it is believed that the soul of the deceased person linger around the house, the members show their love and care for the person by offering water, rice, coins, new garments and try to protect the soul with the help of the household deities. The *suwa* (impurity) is observed by the family members as well as the lineage groups. At this time, the family members try to avoid all kinds of normal activities including agricultural, religious, and social.

The cremation of the body brings the liminal period that stands till the *saradho* ritual. At this period no ritual activities are done. Only the soul of the dead person is fed and water is given to the *asthi* (bones) that are brought from the cremation ground. Hence, in the Koch death ritual from 6 to10 signifies the liminal period as the death is neither completely left nor accepted as a part of the family as he family members do not continue their normal daily activities. On the other hand, with the *saradho* and *masuwani* ritual, the family members are incorporated in the society again. As it is believed that after offering food and worshipping the ancestors, the soul will go peacefully and lived with the ancestors. Therefore, in the above diagram, from 11 to 14 is the incorporation ritual process where the ancestors are worshipped most. After one year at the *bosorki* ritual, the death soul along with other ancestors is offered food together.

3.4: Conclusion

To surmise the present chapter, we can see the continuation of various aspects of folk religiosity in the individual and family level rituals. The life cycle ritual corroborates the communal as well as individual identities by strengthening its members. It

distinguishes one's transformation from one stage to another to establish a new identity. The Koch life cycle rituals are an integral part in their religiosity that reflects the folk religious practice more than the textual. Furthermore, in almost all these rituals reveals some of the common characteristic features of a Koch puja. These common characters are the elements that are used for the puja like earthen lamps, making of altar, uses of vermillion, cotton thread, earthen pots, sacrifices of pigeon, betel leaf-nut, uses of crops and so on and so forth. Moreover, the use of holy water in order to sanctify of the places and materials is also an important aspect. This reflects the idea of purity and pollution in a Koch religious life. As Marry Douglas has understood the concept of purity-pollution as a shared symbol that "creates the unity in experience", the application of impurity and the transformation into the purity creates their communal identity. The religious belief in purity symbolises their social structure. Further, the existence of the fear also led the Koches to maintain that purity. Therefore, rituals are enacted where deities are venerated, offerings are done and sometimes various occult practices are used in order to withhold their fears. Magico-religious acts are associated to protect not only the novice, but also the unborn life from malicious spirits, ghosts and witchcraft. So, the enchanted chords, amulets, charmed water, charmed oil, etc. are the magical object of Koch community. These materials not only contain the magical power but also it creates a sacred world to connect the novice and the superior world. During the transition stage, the identity of the whole family or novice are not stand in the betwixt and between which is contrary to the concept of Victor Turner. Various religious acts and associated material culture defines the identity of the novice who is in the transition state.

Being part of the mainstream Hinduism, automatically led them to adopt various Hindu Vedic ritual in their rituals and ceremonies. But the age old religious belief system are still flawing in their blood simultaneously. Along with the Vedic rituals, the existence and belief in various spirits or various non-Vedic deities in their each and every life cycle rituals definitely opens up their folk beliefs in supernatural being and this is one of the important factors of their religious ideology. While it has been seen that the threatening of malevolent spirits and ghosts are far stronger in the birth ritual; the existence and the venerations of the household deities are more in the marriage, while at the death ritual the spirit and ancestor worship comes first. On the other hand, the belief in magic, witchcraft

and sorcery can be seen in each and every ritual. The death ritual of the Koches reveals their religious ideology very well. Further, the concepts of death, soul, heaven, hell etc. clearly carry their cultural heritage and worldview which can be identified as their own and which is still practiced orally. This individual religious construction ultimately related to their communal identity. In the communal level also the societal, cultural, religious worldview reflects their folk religiosity very well. This religiosity most of time is calendrical and like the life cycle ritual, these calendrical rituals are also cyclical. The next chapter will discuss various calendrical rituals that will ensure the Koch folk religiosity in their communal life.

Chapter: 4

CALENDRICAL RITUALS AS THE METAPHOR OF KOCH FOLK RELIGIOUS LIFE

4.1: Introduction

Other than the life cycle ritual that marks the changes in the social status of individuals a very good number of rituals and rites are calendrical. These calendrical events are based on a fixed period depending upon the day, week, month or season of the year. Calendrical rites offer social implication to the passage of time, creating a reoccurring cycle of weeks, months and years. The occurrence of calendrical rites is per

iodical and predictable that go with a series of seasonal changes that are fixed and depend on the Solar or Lunar calendar. The followers of the solar calendar observe the festivals on the same day of each year such as the New Year festival of the Gregorian-Lunar Calendar and others that follows the Lunar calendar falls under the different dates on each year such as the Chinese Lunar New Year. So, calendrical rites can be said to impose cultural schemes on the order of nature.[1] These calendrical rituals establish the communal cultural identity where the participants find themselves bound with the group harmony. This togetherness emerges from their common religious belief systems which is very much necessary to continue their mundane socio-cultural life. The religious identity of the community emerges through their common religious beliefs and ideology that marks their identity differentiating them from others.

Although like other communities of Assam, most of the Hindu religious festivals are also celebrated by the Koches, there are certain festivals and rituals that can be said to be the torch bearer of the true Koch identity. The Koches follow Assamese Lunar calendar and most of their folk festivals and fairs are confined to that calendar. A communal ritual is understood as the rituals and fairs that are observed in adoration of the

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[1] Catherina Bell, Rituals: Perspectives and Dimensions, 1997, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 102-103.

unseen supernatural beings for the protection and prosperity. The Koch understanding of rituals and fairs also carries the similar essences. Most of their rituals are attached with the veneration of the deities in order to protect from the unseen danger, to bring prosperity either be it communal or familial. Most of these rituals are basically observed at the communal level and each village observes it depending on their feasibility. Depending on the village to village the time and day may be varied. But the core idea of these rituals is to satisfy the village deities who will in-turn protect them from evil power and will bring prosperity to the village by guarding their cattle and agricultural field. These are purely religious in nature. Moreover, Koches do believe that every ritual should be observed at a certain time, but that understanding does not include a fixed calendrical date but rather a fixed period. These festivals are communal in one sense as the followers are only confined to the community members. Simultaneously these rituals also follow a particular calendrical month and season every once or twice in a year. It is cyclical. Among them, the most common and popular Koch religious ritual and ceremonies that are purely confined to the community despite its different regional settlement are (i) *Garja Puja*, (ii) *Thakurani Puja*, (iii) *Ai Puja*, and (iv) *Bash Puja.* Although there are certainly other important and popular religious rituals that precisely carries the Koch folk religious identity like the *Hudum Puja* do exist, but this ritual does not follow any calendrical time. It does observe on a particular season (rainy season) or a particular time (midnight) of a particular day, but the observation of this ritual depends upon the necessity of this ritual. It is also not observe on a yearly basis. It is observed only if there is a situation like drought occurs in the society that can affect the agricultural process. Agriculture is the main economy of the Koches and the livelihood depends on it. Therefore, protection and blessings are needed from the unseen power that controls the cosmos.

But there are the rituals which are solely observed depending on the agricultural calendar[2] of the Koches. Starting from the sowing to harvesting, there are layers of rituals and ceremonies that ensure the healthy life of the crops, cattle, and of course the human

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[2] For the Agricultural calendar see chapter 2, pp. 69-70.

being. Therefore, it becomes the responsibility of the human being to satisfy the deities, spirits, and ancestors to protect their fields, cattle and crops. Although there are religious sentiments, beliefs and practices are confronted with these rituals, but at its core lives the prosperity and protection of agrarian land, cattle and crops. These cyclical agrarian rituals are (i) *Bisuwa*, (ii) *Hal Jatra*, (iii) *Gosa Diya*, (iv) *Katigasa*, (v) *Ag Ana*, (vi) *Bhuita Deo Puja*, (vii) *Bura-Burir Bhar Phela,* (viii) *Noya Khawa*, and finally (ix) *Domasi/Pusuna*.

Moreover, it is already mentioned that a large stock of people of Koch community has already been converted and assimilated into Hinduism long before. So, the influences of Hinduism on the calendrical ritual are very much obvious. Like other communities of Assam, rituals and festivals like *Siva Puja, Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Lakshmi Puja, Holi, Diwali* etc. are also enthusiastically and adorably observed and celebrated by the Koches. Although these rituals are purely calendrical in nature, but these rituals do not opens up the peculiar aspects of Koch's religious lives. Furthermore, while collecting data from the field; the community members were not able to give any information regarding the folk involvement and forms of these rituals. Some local versions and variations of these rituals do exist but that too negligible and region specific. Even though, these festival celebrations show Koches' affinity for festivalising their life and openness towards accepting the Hindu religious practices of Assam. Therefore, in the present chapter, the classification of the calendrical rituals related to pan Indian Hindu deities are left intentionally.

Thus, on the basis of the nature of their beliefs, practices, times, and season the rites and ceremonies of the Koches can broadly be divided into two categories: **1. Communal Rituals** that include the territorial rituals which are observed to venerate the village deities, and **2. Agricultural Festivals and Rituals** that are annual and strictly follows the agricultural calendar. For a better understanding of the calendrical ritual life of the Koches, here, a festival calendar observed by the Koches is prepared and given below:

Table No 4.1: Details of Selected Calendrical Rituals.

Sl. No.	Name of the Ritual	Assamese Month (Lunar Calendar)	Gregorian Month (Solar)	Purpose Remarks
Communal Ritual				
1	*Garja Puja*	*Aghon* and *Bohag-Jeth* (Twice in a year)	November-December and April-May	Prosperity and protection for the family, crop, village and community.
2	*Thakurani Puja*	*Bohag-Jeth*	November-December	Prosperity and protection for the family, crop, village and community.
3	*Ai/Shitili Puja*	*Bohag-Jeth*	November-December	Protection from various diseases especially pox.
4	*Bash Puja*	*Bohag-Jeth*	November-December	Prosperity and protection for the family, cattle, crop, village and community.
Agricultural Festivals and Rituals				
5	*Bisuwa*	*Chot-Bohag*	April	New Year celebration
6	*Hal Jatra Porbo*	*Bohag*	April-May	Starting of ploughing
7	*Gosa Diya*	*Ahar*	June-July	First paddy transplantation
8	*Katigasa*	*Ahin*	October	Autumn crops/protection
9	*Ag Ana*	*Aghon*	November-December	First paddy harvest
10	*Bhuita Deo Puja*	*Aghon*	November-December	Worshipping the ghosts and spirits of the paddy field
11	*Bura-Burir Bhar Phela*	*Aghon*	November-December	Thrashing of the paddy
12	*Nowa Khawa*	*Aghon*	November-December	New rice eating
13	*Domasi/Pusuna*	*Puh-Magh*	January	Harvesting festival

Interestingly, the above said calendar shows how a particular time period i.e. the month of *Bohag* and *Aghon* is filled with many of these festivals that divide the year into two parts ritually and festive wise. This shows the importance of these two months in a Koch socio-religious life. Among the Koches *Bohag* is considered as the starting point

for *xali* cultivation. *Xali* is the main variety of paddy that helps them for survival. In the *Bohag* month the people actually prepares the land for cultivation. It is also the spring time when rain starts after the dry season. On the other hand, *Aghon* is the month when paddy is ready to harvest. So, these reflect their seasonal connection to the agriculture that enhances their religious traditions, beliefs and practices.

4.2: Communal Rituals

The term communal, refers to something that is "belonging to or used by a group of people rather than one single person."[3] Therefore, the concept of communal ritual offers the understanding of certain rituals and belief system that is shared by the whole community that can be used as the identity marker to differentiate them from others. These beliefs and practices are learned, taught and handed down orally by the community members and so have created a demarcation from the sacred to the profane. As it is already mentioned that communal rituals include the rituals and festivals that are performed and celebrated to worship various deities for the protection of the community members. Religious ideology plays an important role in these communal rituals.

Every community has its own particular deities that are adored and venerated communally every year. Koch communal rituals are also a mass gathering of the deities that are believed to have certain specific characters and functions. The ambivalent nature makes these deities unpredictable. Their binary character of benevolent-malevolent makes people organise their beliefs to act according to their nature. The understanding of these deities as benevolent if they are pleased and malevolent if they are not satisfied reveals the common perception of their folk mind. Therefore, to safeguard their life and to protect from various calamities the community tries to appease these deities through several rituals throughout the year. Among them some the communal rituals are described below:

4.2.1: *Garja Puja*

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[3] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/communal

Garja, in some area also known as *Garam Thakur*, is considered as the most powerful village deity among the Koches of Assam. Although the actual meaning of the word *Garja* is not clear, it is said the name of the deity *Garja* comes from the word *gaor raja* i.e. the king of the village.[4] Another meaning of the name of the deity *Garja* is said to come from the word *arja* which means to earn. As *Garja* is worshipped to earn the blessings from the deity for good health, wealth and protection from the evil eyes, the deity is termed as *Garja*.[5] *Garja* is also an important religious ceremony for the Bodo people of Assam and the proper meaning of the name *Garja* is also not clear among the Bodos. Bhaben Narzi has defined the term as to get *niskriti* in Assamese i.e. to make free from sin or danger. As a reaction to that Kameswar Brahma says, "Expulsion of the word is also not clear to bear the actual meaning of the word *Garja*. It may be probable that the *Garja* word itself bears the meaning of expulsion; (*Garja* or *Garjanai* or *Garnai* means expulsion or discharging anything in Bodo) and during the *Garja puja*, some evil gods are expelled or discharged from the area of a village."[6] Like the *Garja puja* of the Bodods, Koches also expel their evil gods, by satisfying them.

Although the Koches do not follow a fixed date for the *Garja puja*, the ritual for the *Garja Deo* is observed twice in a year; once in the Assamese month of *Bohag* (April-May) and another in the Assamese month of *Aghon* (November-December). According to the Koch folk belief, observing *Garja Puja* at the starting month of the year which is the *Bwisag* (*Bohag*) month will remove all the calamities, diseases and misfortunes from the village for the whole year.[7] The notion of impurity is a general concept in every society. The Koches belief that the participants of the village at the annual festivals or seasonal festivals make the village impure through the intermixing of the people, merrymaking process, walking together, and eating from one house to another. So, the Koches perform

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[4] Informant: Buddheswar Ray, Male, Age: 56, Kokrajhar. Interview date: 04/05/2016.

[5] Informant: Dhananjay Barman, Male, Age: 53, Kokrajhar. Interview date: 04/05/2016.

[6] K. Brahma, Aspects of Social Customs of the Bodos, Guwahati: Bina Library, 2008, p. 74.

[7] Informant: Buddheswar Ray, Male, Age: 56 and Dhananjay Barman, Male, Age 53, Kokrajhar. Interview date: 28/03/2018. Amarendra Ray, Male, Age: 65, Chandrapara, Kokrajhar. Interview date: 08/04/2018.

Garja puja in order to purify and ward of the evils from the village. Therefore, at the day of the ritual each and, every family of the village expels the impurity called as *sua phela* by cleaning every nook and corner both inside and outside of their house.[8] The Bodo people also have a similar belief system and they do perform the *Garja puja* for the same reason of purity and sacredness. This *Garja* is also called as *Bhausani/Bhasani Garja*.[9] The name *Bhausani/Bhasani* comes from the word that means to immerse in a river or stream. Though *Bohag/Bwisag* is the starting month of the year, the *Garja Puja* of the *Aghon* month is considered as the starting point of this communal ritual.[10] This *Garja* is performed after the first new rice eating ceremony is done during the Assamese month of *Aghon*. This *Garja* is also called as *Lokkhi Garja* as the Koch people have worshipped the goddess of wealth *Lokkhi* (Lakshmi) for the prosperity of the village and welcomed her in the village. The lives of the Koch people are fully depend upon agriculture. At the Assamese month of *Aghon* after the paddy have matured and harvested, the *Nowa-Khawa* ceremony is celebrated. *Bura-Buri* who is the ancestral deities of the Koches is given the first rice at this ceremony. Only after that people start to eat rice cultivated from the season.

Garja is the combination of various gods and goddesses that are regularly propitiated by the Koches. Although it is very tough to identify the exact number and names of the *Garja* deities as the number and names of the deities varies and fluctuates from village to village. But the main and central deity *Garja Deo* remains the same. This *Garja* is the combination of eighteen types of different *Garja Deo*. Other than the *Garja Deo*, *Kubir, Bura-Buri, Tong-bura-Tong-buri* etc. are some of the most important and common gods and goddesses. At the time of *Garja puja,* along with the *Garja* deities

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[8] Informant: Tulika Ray, Female, Age: 47, Chandrapara, Kokrajhar. Interview date: 08/04/2018.

[9] Informant: Amarendra Ray, Male, Age: 65, Chandrapara, Kokrajhar. Interview date: 08/04/2018.

[10] In many villages, the *Garja Puja* is observed only once in a year at the month of *Aghon*. The *Garja puja* of the *Bohag* month is not considered as *Garja puja* also as it is a continuation of the *Garja puja* of *Aghon* month. Further, it is also termed as either *Bhausani/Bhasani puja* or *Ma Thakurani Puja* or *Bhogowoti Puja*, but not as a *Garja puja* and therefore I will discuss this ritual as a separate communal ritual in the following.

various other deities both benevolent and malevolent, spirits, ghosts, rivers, lakes, ponds, hills, stones etc are also worshipped. The deities are placed in the *garjashali*[11] according to their status and are placed starting from the northern part to south serially. In some villages, the central deity i.e. *Othoro Garja Deo* is seen to be placed at the centre of the *garjashali* also.

4.2.1.1: The Ritual Process

Once the offering of the new rice to the ancestral deity *Bura-Buri* at the *Nowa-khawa* ceremony is over in each household of the village, the community prepares for the *Garja puja*. For that, the community members cleaned and purify the *garjashali* with holy water. Generally, the *garjashali* is situated in a lonesome place in the middle of every village. It is surrounded by various tree and bamboo groves and everyday basis worship is not done in the *garjashali*. Only at the time of *Garja puja* the place is cleaned. This *Garja puja* is considered very much auspicious among the Koch people. The Koch people worship all the *Garja* deities for the general welfare of the family and village as well as the community from various evil powers that can create epidemics, diseases, natural calamities.

4.2.1.1.1: The First Stage of *Garja Puja*:

Once, the date for the ritual is fixed all the families in the village start to prepare their household by cleaning it. This is called *suwa phela* which means removal of the impurity. The day before the main ritual, the members of the village go and clean the *garjashali*. In the evening, the *deori* along with few other people go to the *garjashali* and lightens the *gosa* (earthen lamp). Before that the place is purified by *shanti-pani*[12] (Holy Water) prepared by an *oja*. After lighting the lamp and offering of flowers, the *deori*

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[11] *Garjashali* is the permanent sacred place where annually *Garja puja* is conducted. The term *shali* refers to the sacred area where puja is conducted and normally used as a suffix. Therefore, the term *Garjashali* means the sacred compound or area where worship is done to the *Garja* deities.

[12] Enchanted water that is prepared by mixing water with raw milk, uncooked rice, and a touch of gold and silver ornament and then this mixed with a bunch of dub grass and tulsi leaf by the Oja rounding his hand while chanting some magical mantras. This is considered to have the power to purify everything.

invites all the deities to be present at the ritual. This ritual is known as *jagani / gono / jageya thowa* (to call for the deities or to awaken the deities). Once the ritual is over, the *deori* goes to each and every household with the *shanti pani* and purifies each and every house. Until that no one at the village cooks anything. On that day, every member of the village takes a fast and only *hobish bhat*[13] is taken.

On the main ritual day, everyone in the village is engaged in the preparation for the necessary items. The *puja* is conducted by the *deosi* and all the preparation is taken place at the house of that *deosi*. At the *garjashali*, each and every deity along with the main *Garja deo* has been given their own place. There are no images used to represent the deity. Instead huts and altar are temporarily built to represent them. The huts are built with *eula kher* or *kali kher* (kind of wild long grass). For the central deity i.e. *Othoro Garja Deo*, big hut is prepared and eighteen pieces of cloths are tied in eighteen bamboo sticks. This is called as *Nisan* and among these eighteen *Nisan*, nine are red coloured cloths and nine white coloured cloths are tied. The white colour represents the male deity and the red colour represents the female deity. The other Koch folk deities, Hindu deities and spirits are represented with other small huts. For *Tongbura-Tongburi*, a *Chang-ghor* which is a storied house is prepared with small steps to climb the house. For the minor deities, spirits and the attendants of the major deities no huts are built. Instead small altars are built for them. For the spirits and ghosts that are related to the water sources, a small replica of river is dug. Further, for the spirits of hills, a small mound like hill is prepared. Inside each hut and altar, seven blocks are drawn with rice powder. Over these blocks, seven *pathali*[14] is placed. Offerings are made with a pair of betel nut and areca leaf, flower, and *Prasad* prepared with mixing rice, ripe banana, sugar and milk. These offerings are then placed over each *pathali* and in front of them an earthen lamp and incense sticks are lightened.

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[13] *Hobis bhat* is prepared by boiling rice and vegetables. No oil, onion, garlic, ginger and other spices are added. This is especially taken at the time of ritual only.

[14] Kind of plate prepared with either plantain tree or leaf.

Generally, *Garja puja* is performed by the *deosi* worshipping them till the end facing the eastern side. After worshipping *Othoro Garja,* the *deosi* starts to worship other *Garja* deities one by one. For each deity, animals are sacrificed. Animals like goats, tortoise, duck, pigeon, fowl and sometimes pigs are also sacrificed. Along with the sacrifice, banana fruits, areca nuts and betel leaves are essential for the *puja*. For the Aryan deities like *Ghor-Gosai, Jagannath, Baro-Gopal, Baro-Gopini, Ganesh* etc. instead of sacrificing the animals like goat or a pair of pigeons are set free.

During the *Garja puja*, from placing the deities on their allotted altars to sacrificing animals and distributing *prasads* are done by the *deosis* of the community and he is guided by the *deodha*. Also, there are two or three helper *deoris* also help him in the rituals. For the propitiation of the Muslim deity like *Madar* and *Pir Sahab,* another *Deosi* is engaged and for the propitiation, he has to wear a *lungi* which is the traditional dress for the Muslim people of that area. As a part of the ritual for these deities, sacrifices of fowl is done by the *deori*.[15]

To understand the position of various *Garja* deities a diagram has been prepared and given below. The diagram has been prepared from the data that is gathered from the field study done at the Dhauliguri village of Chandrapara region of Kokrajhar district.[16]

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[15] Informant: Amarendra Rai, Male, Age: 65; Tulika Rai, Female, Age: 47, Chandrapara. Dated: 08/04/2018.

[16] Informant: Amarendra Rai, Male, Age: 65; Tulika Rai, Female, Age: 47, Chandrapara. Dated: 08/04/2018.

Diagram 4.1: Placement of the *Garja* Deities

E

N ← → S

W

Othoro Garja Deo
15

16   17   18   19   20   21   22   23   24   25

26

Ganesh Thakur

1. Kamdeb
2. Jogannath
3. Pateswari-Bijoya
4. Bura Soddar-Buri Soddarni
5. Gabu Soddar-Gabu Soddarni
6. Bidyagaya
7. Dudhnakha
8. Bura Bherali-Buri Bherali
9. Dhorom-Korom
10. Sonarai-Ruparai
11. Kasaikhai
12. Rajakhatila
13. Sib Thakur
14. Bishohori/Podda

Othoro Garja Deo
1. Lokkhi Garja
2. Ashu Garja
3. Gao Garja
4. Songwe-Songwe Garja
5. Songwe-Songwe Porja Garja
6. Garja Sibsing
7. Garja Dipsing
8. Maoria Garja
9. Saoria Garja
10. Semsemali Garja
11. Dasmali Garja
12. Samoramo Garja
13. Khalo-dano Garja
14. Nelo-dano Garja
15. Dura Garja
16. Molan Garja
17. Tiya Garja
18. Ghugu Garja

16. Khojobura-Khojoburi
17. Tongbura-Tongburi
18. Bokorbura-Bokorburi
19. Kubir Deo
20. Patal Deo
21. Akash Daini-Patal Daini
22. Khokla-Khokli
23. Bishali-Kapali
24. Nala-Nali
25. Jhora-Jhori

Attendants

Ish Kubir, Bish Kubir, Dhon Kubir, Jol kubir etc.

Jomun Deo

27

Mech-Mechini
Kuch-Kuchini
Danguwa-Danguwani

Attendants

⌂ : Small Hut   ⌂ : Storied Hut
□ : Altar   ○ : Replica of pond or stream by digging
✚ : Road junction at the boundary of the village.

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The above diagram shows the placement of various *Garja* deities at the *garjasali*. The *Othoro Garja deo* is the central deity who is placed at the centre of the main *pujasali*[17]. This deity is considered as eighteen different types of the *Garja* deities where nine is considered as male (white colour) and nine is considered as female (red colour). On the northern side of the *Othoro Garja deo*, major deities (in the diagram from 1 to 14 number) are placed and on the southern side, all the minor deities (from 16 to 25) who are basically spirits and ghosts get their place. Most of the time one shrine represents a cluster of spirits and ghosts. Further, in front the *Othoro Garja deo*, another shrine is built which represents the god *Ganesha* (number 26 at the diagram). All these deities including various deities, spirits, ghosts, and witches are considered as the attendants of the *Othoro Garja deo*. Finally, at the completion of the ritual, another ritual is observed to venerate the ancestral deities like *Bura-Buri, Kuch-Kuchuni* and *Danguwa-Danguwani* at the boundary of the village (number 27, shown in the diagram). The ritual description of this stage is given next.

4.2.1.1.2: Completion of the Ritual of the First Stage:

After completing the offerings and sacrifices, the *deosi* or an older person of the present community kneel down (*athu kara*) and finish the ritual uttering a long *mantra* (chant). The *mantras* that are uttered in this ritual are completely in Rajbansi language. Once the utterance of the mantras is done, all the members of the village prepare a communal feast at the *garjashali*.

At the evening, after the feast is over, the members prepare themselves for the final ritual which is known as *Garja deor bor niya* (taking the blessings of *Garja* deities). As the first stage of *Garja* ritual is especially concerned with the prosperity of the community members, the idea of blessing also sticks to that. Therefore, the *deosi* bow down again in front of the *Garja* deities and facing the east to the deities throw a mix of rice, paddy, flower, egg and coins from the offerings without looking back. The devotees

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[17] The meaning of the term *pujashali* is similar with *Garjashali*. See the reference no. 11, of this chapter, p. 179.

try to catch those offerings with the clothes as the bare hand is considered disrespectful to the deities. Those offerings are considered as the blessing from the deities and the members tie these in small cotton cloth and keep it either in the corner of the kitchen or at the corner of the *bhakhri/mashang* (granary) of the house.

Once this is over, the main *deosi* along with the *oja*, the helper *deosis* and with one aged man offers another ritual at each boundary junction of the village. For this ritual one pair of *musukha* (human figure made with paddy straw) is prepared and worshipped as *Bura-Buri, Mech-Mechini, Kuch-Kuchuni, Bhut-Bhutuni* (ghost), *Jokh-Jhokhini* (evil spirits) by sacrificing pigeons. According to the belief, this last step of worship through sacrifice helps to satisfy the harmful ghosts and spirits, and ancestral deities like *Bura-Buri, Mech-Mechini,*and *Kuch-Kuchuni* will provide a barrier against such evil spirits.[18] This ends the first stage which is the *Garja puja* of the *Aghon* month and it leads to the second phase of the *Garja* ritual. .

4.2.1.1.3: The Second Phase of *Garja Puja*

After the first phase or *Garja* ritual in the month of *Aghon*, second stage of the ritual is conducted at the month of *Bwisag/Bohag*. This is the ending phase of the *Garja* ritual process. The ritual process in the *Bohag* month's *Garja puja* is same as the first stage of *Garja puja* i.e. the *Aghon* month's ritual. But in this second stage, before worshipping the *Garja* deities first there is another communal ritual is done venerating towards *Ai Bhogoboti* who is also known as *Ma Thakurani*. It is believed that at this stage if people do not worship *Ma Thakurani* prior to the ritual she gets offended which will bring various calamities to the community.[19] One of the most interesting features of this ritual is that at the time of this *puja*, the uses of *bhel*[20]*,* where the sacrificial materials are kept inside the *bhel* and let to float. The name *bhasani puja* also comes from this which means the act of immersion in the water. *Bhasani pujā* is done in the name of *Ai Gosani,*
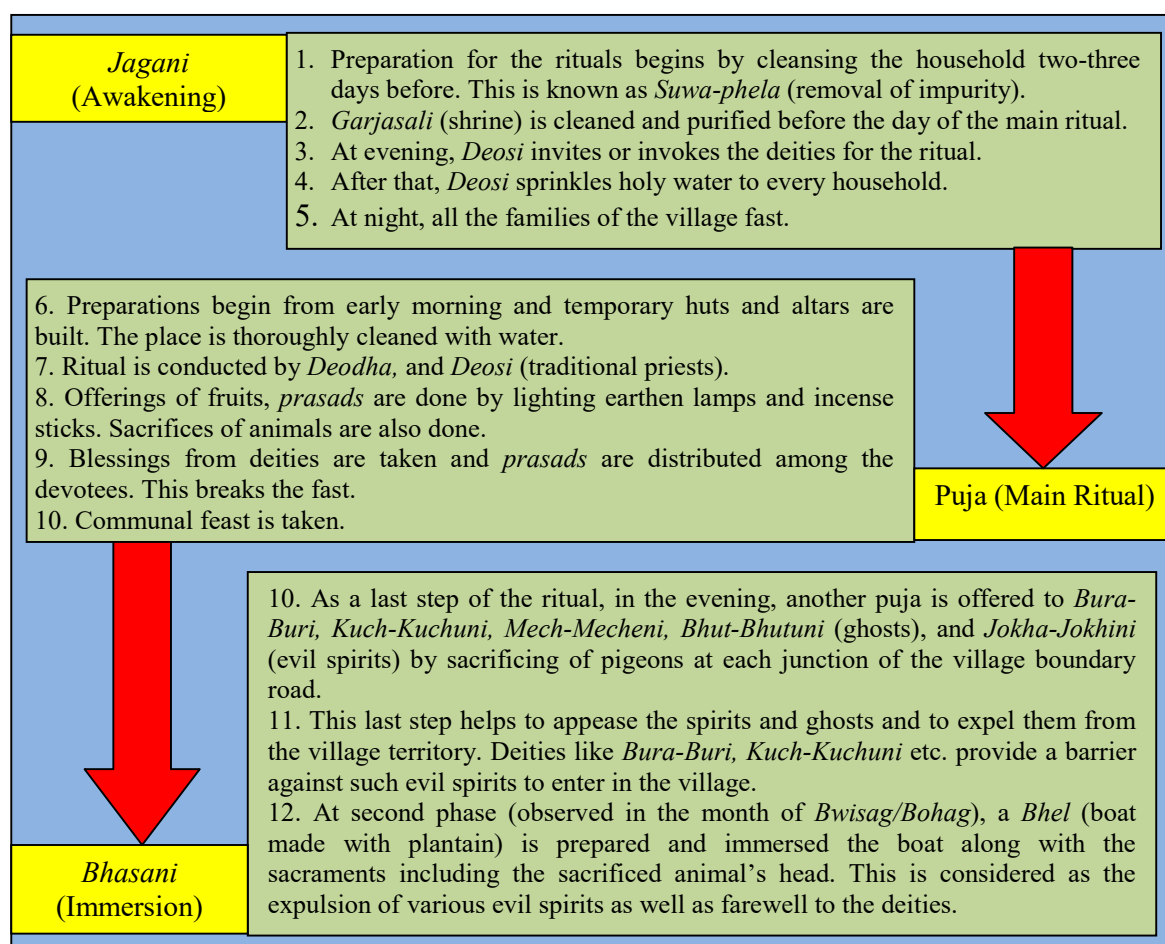
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[18] Informer: Amarendra Ray, Male, Age: 65, Chandrapara, Kokrajhar. Interview date: 08/04/2018.

[19] Informer: Tulika Ray (47), Female, Age: 47, Chandrapara, Kokrajhar. Interview date: 08/04/2018.

[20] It is a small boat like structure that floats. It is made out of banana trunks.

Kali, Ai Thakurani, Mahamaya, Durga, Kasai-khai, Sakhati, Masangkali, Bhadrakali, Lali-Kali, Chandi, Buri Thakurani, Gabu Thakurani, Pateswari etc. They are worshipped by giving sacrifices. The offerings and the head and blood of the sacrifice animals are left in the river to float keeping them inside the *bhel*. Taking the ritual model of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner as the base, the following diagram has been prepared to interpret and analyse the ritual phases of *Garja puja* from the perspective of both the society as well as the deities.

Diagram No. 4.2: Ritual Process of *Garja Puja*.

Jagani (Awakening)	1. Preparation for the rituals begins by cleansing the household two-three days before. This is known as *Suwa-phela* (removal of impurity). 2. *Garjasali* (shrine) is cleaned and purified before the day of the main ritual. 3. At evening, *Deosi* invites or invokes the deities for the ritual. 4. After that, *Deosi* sprinkles holy water to every household. 5. At night, all the families of the village fast.

6. Preparations begin from early morning and temporary huts and altars are built. The place is thoroughly cleaned with water.
7. Ritual is conducted by *Deodha,* and *Deosi* (traditional priests).
8. Offerings of fruits, *prasads* are done by lighting earthen lamps and incense sticks. Sacrifices of animals are also done.
9. Blessings from deities are taken and *prasads* are distributed among the devotees. This breaks the fast.
10. Communal feast is taken.

Puja (Main Ritual)

10. As a last step of the ritual, in the evening, another puja is offered to *Bura-Buri, Kuch-Kuchuni, Mech-Mecheni, Bhut-Bhutuni* (ghosts), and *Jokha-Jokhini* (evil spirits) by sacrificing of pigeons at each junction of the village boundary road.
11. This last step helps to appease the spirits and ghosts and to expel them from the village territory. Deities like *Bura-Buri, Kuch-Kuchuni* etc. provide a barrier against such evil spirits to enter in the village.
12. At second phase (observed in the month of *Bwisag/Bohag*), a *Bhel* (boat made with plantain) is prepared and immersed the boat along with the sacraments including the sacrificed animal's head. This is considered as the expulsion of various evil spirits as well as farewell to the deities.

Bhasani (Immersion)

Victor Turner has mentioned the separation period as a transition period, where the novice or the ritual performer travels from his/her earlier existed stage in a given cultural or social structure or sometime both. In the *Garja puja*, the community members

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are separated from their earlier cultural settings and social structure where all the community members unite in one place for a communal ritual. For the society, the separation period starts two-three days before the ritual with the removal of impurity from their house and compound by cleansing. This purification process is the first stage towards their separation that last till the day before the main ritual. Further, on these days members also take special care of their behavioural conducts like food, quarrel, beating, stealing, killing of animals, etc. This changes their normal routine through certain restrictions and taboos. Moreover, many families have also started their preparation by preparing or buying offerings in the give in the *puja*. So, they are separated from their daily life in order to make the place suitable for the deities by purifying and creating a sacred environment (Number 1 and 2 in the diagram).

At the evening time of the day before the main ritual, the *deosi* along with few elder person of the community invokes the deities at the *garjashali* (the main ritual place) by lighting earthen lamps and sprinkling holy water. This holy water is then sprinkled to each household. From that, the members of the community fast for the whole night. This starts the liminal period for the society. Victor Turner sees the liminal period as a period of confusion, where the identity of the ritual person reflects the ambiguity that posses nothing. They are "betwixt and between". But interestingly, for the Koches, the process of invocating the deities and the sprinkling of holy water in each household identifies them as devotees. So, the new identity of a devotee has been constructed at the liminal period only. Hence, this period reduces their structural identity to a devotee who is venerating the *Garja deities* for the prosperity and productivity of the community. This carries the strong brotherhood as the community member among them as well as with the supernatural beings. In this stage they represent the sacred bond of communitas where they are bounded into brotherhood through the rituals. The liminal period lasts till the end of middle stage of the ritual (from 3 to 8).

But opposite to the structural model, it has been seen from the above diagram that for the deities, the incorporation period appears first in the Koch *Garja* ritual. Cleansing and removal of impurity from the household and the village are the first steps in order to

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incorporate various deities in their daily life. Although, this stage stays for a very brief period, but this stage continues through the phases of invoking of the deities with lighting the earthen lamp to sprinkling of the holy water on each household and fasting (ritual phase 1 to 4). On the other hand, in the *Garja* ritual, ritual phase 5 to 9 signifies the liminal period. In this stage, the devotees worshipped the deities without knowing that they are appeased or pacified through the rituals.

Therefore, it can be said that, although as mentioned by Turner the community members stand in a "betwixt and between", but opposite to him they are identified with their new identity of devotee. They are in a liminal period with their approach.

Finally, the incorporation period for the community members starts by breaking their fasts (in the diagram, from number 9 to 12 of the last stage). It is the period where they travel to their old identity that allows them to engage with their routine works. These rituals include the taking of prasada, taking of blessings, communal feast, and finally immersion or expulsion of the deities. On the other hand, for the deities this period represents the separation period. In the *Garja puja,* this appears at the end of the ritual when the spirits and deities are expelled or ward off from the village boundary. As Victor Turner has described, the separation period is the phase where the individual is separated from the former juncture of its social structure or sometime from their cultural background through certain symbolic behaviour. In the diagram it is appeared from 10 to 12. It is the phase Koch people are separated from their religious structure of being devotee by expelling the deities or immersing them in the water.

4.2.2: *Ma Thakurani Puja*

Ma Thakurani puja[21] is one of the festivals that are worshipped among the Koches of Assam. The puja is conducted every year at the first *Morahi* (New Moon) *Tithi* of the year. According to the Koch belief, *Mao Thakurani* is a form of deity *Kasakhai*. There

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[21] In many villages, the ritual for this *Puja* is observed separately and not as a part of the *Garja* ritual as there are particular temples dedicated to the deity. The present ritual description of *Thakurani Puja* is collected from the field visit at Boripara village of Chirang district and Mamugaon village of Bongaigaon district.

are some myths exist among the people regarding the origin of the ritual. The story that has been collected from the field visit at the Boripara village of Chirang district tells us about how Koch people have started to observe this ritual. Kripasindhu Ray and Balen Ray informed that they have heard about the origin of the puja from their grandparents.[22] According to the story:

Narrative No. 4.1: Origin of *Thakurani Puja*

> **"Many days before, at the eastern part of the present *Thansali* (the area of the temple) there were Nepali speaking Hindu people lived. In the western side, there are Koch families inhabited. They lived in peace and harmony. But because of some reason, the Nepali speaking people left the place and that place slowly turned into a jungle. After a few years, the Muslim people came to live in that place and suddenly after that there was an epidemic of disease started. Many Muslim people died because of that. This incident became traumatic for them and slowly the rest of the Muslim people started to leave the place. The place again turned into a deep jungle and people stopped to visit there out of fear of evil spirits.**

> **Many years passed and one day a person from Koch community from the western side village saw a dream of the deity *Mao Thakurani*. In that dream, she told the person to worship the goddess on day of *Morahi* (*Amavasya*) after *Buddha Purnima*. He asked the deity where and how he should worship her. Then the deity made him to see a different scene where an elephant was worshipping the deity with a *Ranga Joba* (red jujube flower). Keeping the flower in his trunk, it bowed in front of the deity where the present earthen alter is situated. The dream was broken at that moment.**

> **The very next day morning, he told to the village people about his dream. Few people went to that place to see what was there and to examine the validity of his dream. When they reached the place they saw the same red flower and the mark of the elephant's leg. When people found the relation of the reality with the dream, they decided to build a temple there and to conduct the puja after the *Buddha Purnima*. And this is how the ritual began."**

The puja is completely done in Tantric ritual and without sacrifice, the ritual is considered as incomplete. There is no image of the deity present at the temple. A square

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[22] Informants: Kripasindhu Ray, Male, Age: 48 and Balen Ray, Male, Age: 44, Patiladaha. Interview date: 25/05/2016.

size of the earthen altar (*matir dhip*) is prepared where one small erected bamboo pole installed to represent the deity and her abode. So, the visualization of the deity is in an abstract form and no community member has a clear idea about how she looks. It is the folk construction about the deity that most of the time it is transferred through folk narratives where fear and trauma generates dreams and the dreams leads to certain witnessing accounts which strengthen the belief them to practice. According to the narrative,[23]

Narrative no. 4.2: Dream Story about *Ma Thakurani*

> **"Once, a man whose house is nearby the *thansali* of the temple went for fishing at night. He likes fishing very much and it becomes a habit for him to go and check his fishing nets at night. The river is at the backside of the temple and for fishing, he has to cross the *thansali*. Once at the rainy season, as usual, he went for fishing and when he returns it was midnight. While he was crossing the temple, suddenly he heard the roaring sound of a horse. When he searched the source, he saw an old lady with a completely white dress was sitting over a white horse. The horse was eating grass. The lady was completely white, her hairs are long and pure white and it was open. He was a little bit afraid and without looking back he ran. According to the village people, she was *Mao Thakurani*."**

4.2.2.1: The Ritual Process

To conduct the main ritual, three *deosis* are selected out of which one will be the main *deosi* and the other two will work as his helper. The preparation for the puja begins five to six days prior to the ritual. As a part of the ritual, the villagers start to clean the *Thansali* or the area of the temple as they do not visit the place on a regular basis. One day before the puja, they try to invoke the deity by offering sacrament and lighting the earthen lamp. They ask her presence and blessings to conduct the ritual peacefully and without any mistake. This process is called *jagon* or *jagani*. Then from that night till the end of the puja, the whole village fasts.

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[23] Informant: Kripasindhu Ray, Male, Age: 48 and Balen Ray, Male, Age: 44, Patiladaha. Interview date: 25/05/2016.

The very next day, the puja begins inside the temple. For that one or two Brahmin priests will be called to conduct the *hum suba/hum pura (Yagya)* ritual inside the temple. Although it has been started by the Koch people, now a days, people from other community also takes part in this *puja*. Along with the *Yagya*, simultaneously the *Ai naam* (songs dedicated to goddess *Ai*) is also sung by the elder ladies of the village. Once the *Yagya* is over, the *deosis* who are from the Koch community perform the sacrificial ritual. For that, they worship the swords for sacrifice with an earthen lamp, a pair of betel leaf and betel nut and with incense sticks. Once it is over they sacrifice the goat, duck and pigeon one by one. According to Balen Rai,[24] at the time of sacrificial ritual, the *deosis* notice the earthen lamp lighted inside the temple. At the time of sacrificing the animal, the light should be stable. If the light is shaking then it is believed that the animal will create trouble. After the sacrifice, the head along with the blood is carried inside the temple near the deity.

The people believe that *Mao Thakurani* is as an active (*Jagrata*) deity. So, they believed that whatever offerings are made to the deity should be given that with devotion and dedication. Therefore, the animals that are offered as the sacrifice should be unimpaired. If someone unknowingly offers animals which have been wounded earlier then that animal will not be accept by the deity and it is impossible to sacrifice them in just one hit.[25]

4.2.2.2: Completion of the Ritual

As already mentioned, this ritual is also known as *bhasani puja* due to the ritual immersion of all the sacraments in *bhel* in the river or stream. Therefore, two *bhels* are prepared out of banana trunk. Among these two *bhels,* one is dedicated for Siva and another is for Kali. Siva's *bhel* is decorated with white flower and white *nisan* (marked with white cloth) and Kali's *bhel* is decorated with red flower and red *nisan*. The heads of the sacraments of pigeon, duck, goat etc. are kept inside of the Kali's *bhel*. The heads are

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[24] Informant: Balen Ray, Male, Age: 44, Patiladaha. Interview date: 25/0652016.

[25] Informant: Kripasindhu Ray, Male, Age: 48, Patiladaha. Interview date: 25/05/2016.

considered as the symbol of diseases, epidemics, and drought. By immersing them in the flawing water, they belief that the diseases, epidemics, drought etc. will not do any harm for the rest of the days. Along with the sacrificing materials, they also keep a pair of living black pigeons. If the pair of pigeon fly and take shelter to someone's house it is believed as a blessing from the deity.

Once the ritual for *Thakurani puja* is completed, *Garja* deities are worshipped with flower, *tulsi,* lighting of the earthen lamps and incense sticks. After that, the *deosi* prepares the *bhel* (boat). For that, the *deosi* has to take precautions while he carries and leaves the boat on the water. The two helpers carry these boats on their head and while carrying them towards the river or stream they are not allowed to look back as it is believed that if he looks back the spirits will come back and remain in the village. Once they have reached the required distance i.e. the water level is till the waist, the main *deosi* will immerse the boats facing the south direction to float on the water. It is believed that no one should try to stop or show disrespect towards this banana boat with the sacraments and sacrifices and if someone does so something bad will happen to him/her. There is a story which has been passed down orally narrating such repercussions: [26]

Narrative No. 4.3: Experience Story

"Once, during the last stage of the ritual all materials along with the sacrificial offerings and sacraments were placed on a boat and immerse on the river to float. Generally people with their hands make waves in the water to push the boat. There was a young boy, who used his legs to makes the wave and touched the boat with his leg. Suddenly he felt that someone grabbed his leg inside the water. When he came out of the water he saw a black mark on his leg and slowly it started to pain. After a few hours later the leg has swollen up a lot and the pain also became unbearable for him. Then he came to the deity and apologised for his misconduct and promised never to do like that. Slowly his pain was gone and his leg became normal."
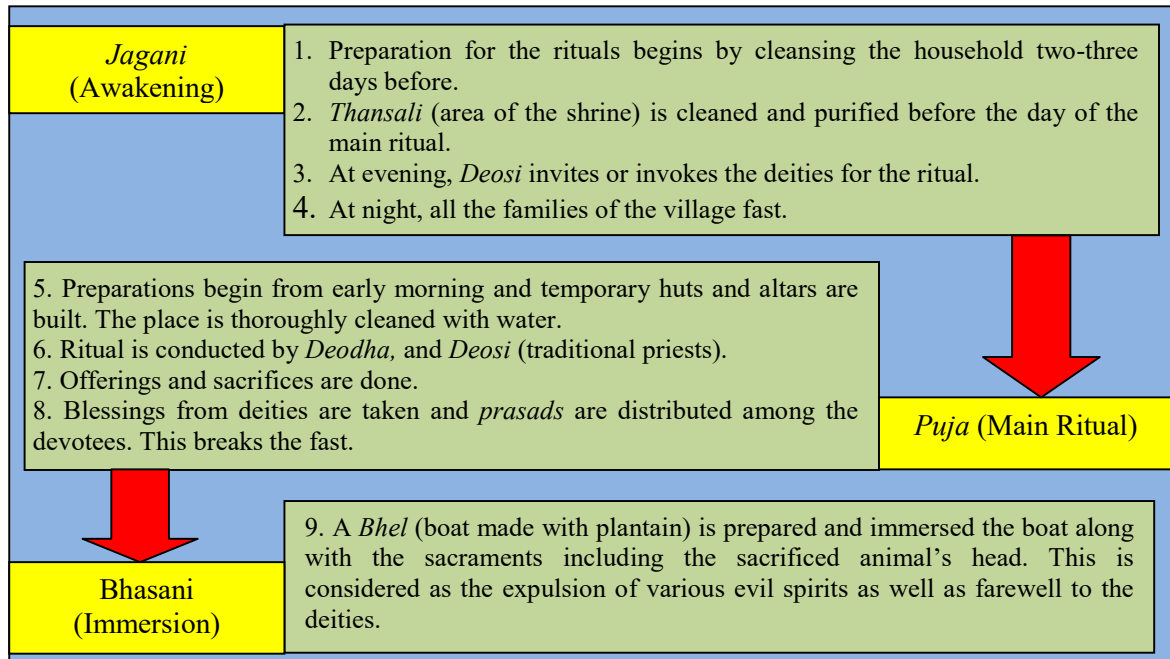
After that, he took a bath by diving in that water and come back to the shore. Everyone take feast at the *thansali* and return home. While returning, people should not

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[26] Informant: Kripasindhu Ray, Male, Age: 48 and Balen Ray, Male, Age: 44, Patiladaha. Interview date: 25/05/2016.

say *jang so* (let's go) as it is believed that this will make the ritual incomplete.[27] Further, according to belief, no one should look back or talk while returning home and should use a dark path on coming back from the ritual. Through this ritual, the people urge the deity to bless them with a prosperous life and the protection for their crops. The following diagram is included to analyse the various phases of *Thakurani puja*.

Diagram No. 4.3: Ritual Process of *Thakurani Puja*.

Jagani (Awakening)	1. Preparation for the rituals begins by cleansing the household two-three days before. 2. *Thansali* (area of the shrine) is cleaned and purified before the day of the main ritual. 3. At evening, *Deosi* invites or invokes the deities for the ritual. 4. At night, all the families of the village fast.
5. Preparations begin from early morning and temporary huts and altars are built. The place is thoroughly cleaned with water. 6. Ritual is conducted by *Deodha,* and *Deosi* (traditional priests). 7. Offerings and sacrifices are done. 8. Blessings from deities are taken and *prasads* are distributed among the devotees. This breaks the fast.	*Puja* (Main Ritual)
Bhasani (Immersion)	9. A *Bhel* (boat made with plantain) is prepared and immersed the boat along with the sacraments including the sacrificed animal's head. This is considered as the expulsion of various evil spirits as well as farewell to the deities.

Like the *Garja ritual, Thakurani puja* also follows the same ritual phases. The analysis part is also similar with the *Garja puja*.

But as far the data is collected from the field, it is confirmed that there is another form of *Ai Bhogoboti* or *Ma Thakurani* is worshipped which is a part of the bigger *Thakurani Puja*. It is the small pox deity who is known as *Ai* or sometime *Ai Bhogoboti* in the eastern part and *Shitili* in the west. Moreover, the recitation of the *Ai naam* (songs dedicated to *Ai Gohani*) at the *Thakurani puja* is another fact that prove the links between the deities. Therefore, it is felt important to give the ritual description of *Ai Puja* as an individual ritual which is another important part of the Koch communal life.

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[27] Informant: Kripadhar Ray, Male, Age: 54, Patiladaha. Interview date: 25/05/2016.

4.2.3: *Ai Puja*

Ai puja is worshipped on the rainy season especially in the Assamese month of *Bohag - Jeth* on yearly basis. *Ai* is believed as the deity of the various kinds of poxes and the puja is organized to discharge or expel those diseases from the village. There are two spheres of this *puja*, one is conducted on the individual or familial level and another is on the social level. But both have a relation to each other. On the social level, the neighbourhood families come together to organise this *puja*. But before that each family organise *Ai puja* in a familial level, where the ritual is done on the *gohali* (cowshed) by the *ojani*. Once, all the individual families of the neighbourhood have conducted this *puja*, only then *Ai puja* is organised socially. It is because the people believe that offering *Ai puja* within the family will first eliminate the diseases from their family and the homestead. Once all the neighbourhood families complete the ritual on the family level, the last step to eliminate the diseases from the village is to organize the *Ai puja* on the social level. Therefore, the social sphere of *Ai puja* is also called the *bidaki* which means to give farewell. Once the social sphere of *Ai puja* is conducted, it is prohibited to organise the *puja* within the family level. The main devotees of the *puja* are basically female members of the neighbourhood. The main ritual for this puja is also conducted by *ojani* (female priest) who is assisted by two female *pali*. For the *puja*, they select a place which is generally near the corner of the road of the neighbourhood junction. There is no permanent shrine or sacred space dedicated to the deity. Rather it is a temporary place where puja is conduct. For the *puja*, the female members of the neighbourhood start their preparation a week or more before by forming a committee to divide the work and to collect the money from each family for the *puja*. The amount of the money actually depends upon the members of the committee and on the cost for the *puja*. Some family also willingly offers materials like rice, milk, sugar etc. for the *puja*.

According to belief, *Ai* is not a single deity but cluster of various deities. They are called as *Baro Boini* which literary means twelve sisters. The names of these *Baro Boini* (Twelve sisters) are *Dangar Ai, Maju Ai, Xoru Ai, Kumthia, Dumuria, Jolabandha, Xiteli, Poteli, Pormeswari, Joleswari, Haguri, Kahuli, Lutiputi, Khismisi, Ukibati, Bonmala,*

Rongmala, Khongmala etc. Sometimes they are also called as *No Boini* (Nine sisters), *Xat Boini* (Seven Sisters) and *Tini Boini* (Three Sisters).[28] Although, they are twelve sisters who basically control different types of pox, but in the *Ai* songs,[29] it seems more than twelve deities. According to the *ojani*, they are the daughters and grandchildren of *Sib-Parbati* where *Ai* means an unmarried woman.[30] These *Baro Boini* are the deities of twelve types of pox that generally attacks children and to protect the children and other family members from the diseases the Koch people worship and try to please them.

4.2.3.1: The Ritual Process

For the *puja*, two types of *bhog* are offered as a sacrament and they are called the *kasa bhog* (raw sacrament) and the *poka bhog* (cooked sacrament). Because of the nature of the disease (pox), they don't offer any sacrifice. The *kasa bhog* is completely uncooked sacrament prepared with the raw ingredients like rice powder made with *awla rice*[31] or simply soaked *awla* rice, *manohar banana* (a variety of banana), unboiled milk and sugar. One the other hand, the *poka bhog* is the cooked sacrament prepared with milk, *joha* rice (jasmine rice) and sugar. Other ingredients that are very much necessary for the *puja* are pairs of betel nut-leaf, bananas (both ripe and unripe), cucumber, *dubri* grass (dub grass), *ulu* grass[32], *kathonda* flower, *kainha* flower and banana leaf.

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[28] Informant: Kunjabala Das, Female, Age: 78, Bakharapara. Interview date: 29/04/2015.

[29] Ai songs are the devotional songs are the devotional songs that are sung for the Ai deities. The songs describes their nature, names and depicts how these deities come to the puja ground and takes the offerings. The songs are sung as a part of the Ai ritual and only female can sing this song. According to the *Ojani*, Kunjabala Das, she is not allowed to share or teach these songs to others as they are very much sacred. The deity herself will teach the person in her dream.

[30] Informant: Kunjabala Das, Female, Age: 78, Bakharapara. Interview date: 29/04/2015.

[31] There are two kinds of rice is used in Assam to eat i.e. the *Awla* and the *Uha*. *Awla* rice is prepared by grinding the paddy soon after drying on sunlight and *Uha* rice prepared after the paddy is per boiled and then drying on sunlight. Among the Koch people, only *Awla* rice is used for each and every ritual, rite and festivals.

[32] This is a kind of long grass that is basically used to make the roof of the house. Generally, this grass grows nearby river or pond.

The day for the *puja* is fixed on any day of the Assamese month of *Bohag-Jeth* based on the availability of the family members. Therefore, holiday is considered as the best day as each of the family members will stay at home and can take the blessing from the deity. On that the *ojani* or the female priest may have three to four *puja*s to conduct on the different neighbourhood of the same village. On that case, she started the *puja* from the northern corner of the village as Koch people considered north and east direction as very much sacred.

On the day of the *puja*, two or three ladies wash and clean the place of worship and smear the place with mix of cow dung and water or simply with the water. On the other hand, in one of the household other members prepare the sacrament and *poka bhog* in two ways. First, the pudding which will be offered to the deities are cooked with *joha saul* (jasmine rice), sugar and milk in a container separately and the other pudding which will be distributed to the devotees are cooked with general rice in a separate container. The pudding is only cooked in the cowshed of any household and the purity of that house and sacraments are strictly followed. Therefore, the family members clean the cowshed and smear the place with a mixture of cow dung and water. Only after that the sacraments are prepared.

The main *puja* starts once the *ojani* comes and she starts the preparation. The *pali* or the assistant starts to mix the *kasa bhog* (raw/uncooked sacrament) with ripe banana, rice, sugar and unboiled milk. The *ojani,* on the other hand, started to make the *xolita* (wick) with cotton thread. These threads represent the families that are there in the neighbourhood. For example, if there are sixteen families in the neighbourhood, *ojani* will remove sixteen threads in a circular motion from north to south and will make the cotton wick to light up the earthen lamp. After that one banana leaf is taken and measured on one hand (*ek haat*) and cut. A *pali* mixes up the *xendur* (red vermilion) with mustard oil and draw a big dot on the banana leaf and put the lamp on it. This lamp with the leaf is covered with a *khorka*. *Khorka* is made with the stems of a banana tree in a circular shape where a hole cut in the middle of the stem. Four vermilion dots are given in four directions and another banana leaf is placed on top of the *khorka*. The lamp with *khorka*

is considered as the deity and in front of it, the main *axon* or *ashana* is prepared. The ashana is prepared by cutting four banana leaves. Two leaves are measured with *ek hat* from elbow to the fingers and another two are measured with *ek jole* (from wrist to fingers). The first leaf, with a full hand measurement is placed near the *khorka* in a horizontal way. One pair of betel leaf and betel nut, one unripe banana and one cucumber are kept over that leaf. After that they placed the *kathanda* and *kainha* flower. The flower has to be white in colour. They also lit incense sticks in four directions. The other three banana leaves are put in a vertically straight. The first leaf which is cut in half a hand (*ek jole*) placed on the north side. This is again decorated with a mark of vermilion-oil mix and put a small amount of *kasa bhog* and *poka bhog* placed on the leaf. Small pieces of unripe banana, cucumber and betel nut and leaf are also given with the *bhog*. After that a *kathanda* flower is placed over the top of the *bhog*. The central leaf which is cut in one full hand and the third one which is cut half a hand is also decorated in the same way. But for the central one, three vermilion dots are given on the top of the leaf and one at the bottom. The *bhog*s are also divided into twelve parts placed in four lines and in each line three portions of *bhogs* are given. At the bottom of the middle banana leaf, one *ghoti* (pot) is placed with a mixture of raw milk, water and *aula* rice and a bunch of *dubri boon* (dub grass) are kept on it. The first banana leaf is dedicated to Lord Siva, the middle one is dedicated to the pox deity *(Ai) Baro Boini* and the last one is dedicated to Goddess *Parvati*. As these *Baro Boini* are the grand child of *Siva* and *Parvati*, they are also given a part of the offerings. Once, everything is prepared, the *ojani* and her *pali* start to sing songs praising the deities. They believe that while they are singing the song, the *Baro Boini* will come and will play over the flowers that are put in the leaf. In the end, they will eat the *bhog* and return to their place. One interesting fact of this *puja* is the use of the colour white. For the whole ritual, only white colour ingredients are used and even the devotees who come to the puja wear white colour dresses. According to the *ojani* Kunjalata Das, the deity *Ai* is a *Kumari* deity (unmarried). Her hairs are white in colour. Her favourite colour is white and always wears white dresses. She loves to chew betel

leaf and areca nuts.[33] Therefore, white colour ingredients and the betel leaf and nuts are the main offerings to the deity.

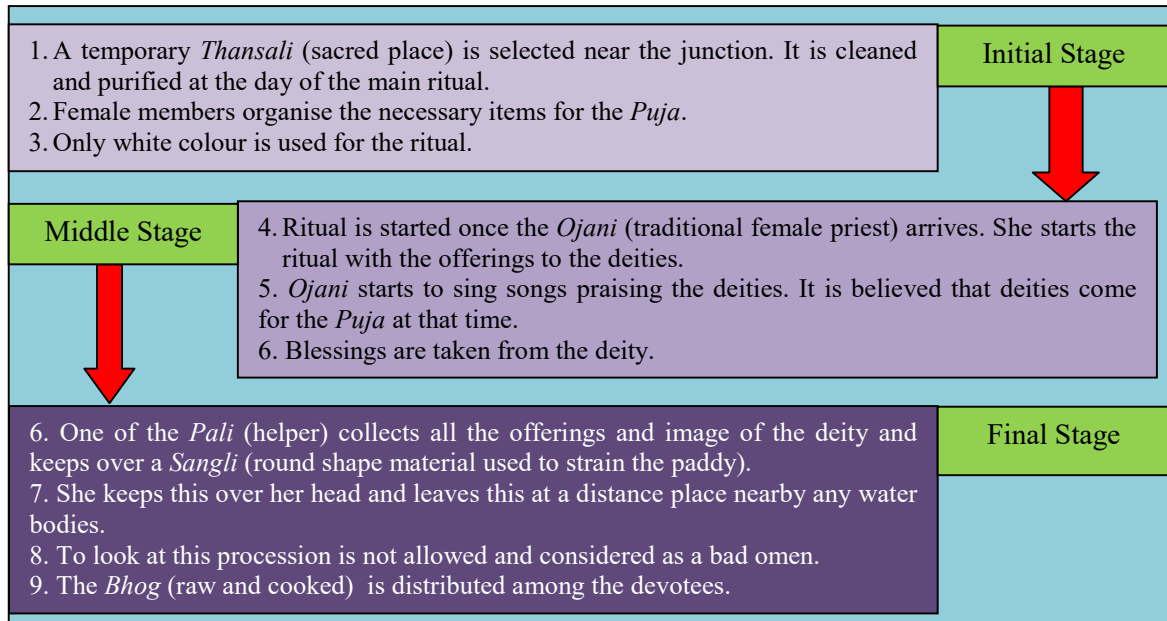### 4.2.3.2: The Completion of the Ritual

After the *puja* is complete one member will distribute one *ulu* grass to each of the people present. They placed this grass on their shoulder from behind and will take it is a blessing from the deity. After that in the last stage of the *puja,* they collect all the grass from everyone and put it with the *bidaki*.[34] The *bidaki* is prepared by keeping the *khorka* which is the representation of the deity and the offerings that are given to the deity are placed over a *sangli* (a round shape material made with bamboo). The *bidaki* is taken by a member over her head to a distant place near a river or pond. While carrying this *bidaki*, looking at that procession is prohibited. It is believed that if someone looks at that the spirits will return back to the village and he/she will definitely attacked by diseases. After that procession, the sacraments are distributed. Women are allowed to go to the kitchen and cook only after the sacraments are distributed. The following diagram represents the anylysis of *Ai puja.*

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[33] Informant: Kunjabala Das, Female, Age: 78, Bakharapara. Interview date: 29/04/2015.

[34] Once the ritual is over, everything including the idol, offerings and all the sacraments are placed over a sangli (sieve). This is called Bidaki.

Diagram No. 4.4: Ritual Process of *Ai Puja*

1. A temporary *Thansali* (sacred place) is selected near the junction. It is cleaned and purified at the day of the main ritual. 2. Female members organise the necessary items for the *Puja*. 3. Only white colour is used for the ritual.	**Initial Stage**

Middle Stage	4. Ritual is started once the *Ojani* (traditional female priest) arrives. She starts the ritual with the offerings to the deities. 5. *Ojani* starts to sing songs praising the deities. It is believed that deities come for the *Puja* at that time. 6. Blessings are taken from the deity.

6. One of the *Pali* (helper) collects all the offerings and image of the deity and keeps over a *Sangli* (round shape material used to strain the paddy). 7. She keeps this over her head and leaves this at a distance place nearby any water bodies. 8. To look at this procession is not allowed and considered as a bad omen. 9. The *Bhog* (raw and cooked) is distributed among the devotees.	**Final Stage**

In the above diagram, the separation of the society starts from the selection of the place and cleaning and purification of that place. But the preparation for the ritual starts one day before. The members take care to keep the sanctity of the puja by fasting from the morning, and taking bath. This marks their separation from their daily routine. In the diagram 1 to 3 marks the separation phase in this ritual. On the other hand, the arrival of the *ojani* marks the liminal period as she starts the ritual. Like the *Garja puja* and the *Ma Thakurani puja*, the members are identified as devotee at this stage. Phase 4 to 6 reflects the liminal period. Finally the incorporation period starts for the community after the blessings are taken. The *prasads* are distributed which helps the members to incorporate into their earlier stage. This stage is shown in the diagram from 6 to 9.

On the other hand, in terms of the deity, the initial stage reflects the process to invoke the deities for the ritual. This process is done through offerings and singing devotional songs praising the deities. Therefore, the initial stage reflects the liminal period as they are neither here nor there. So, the liminal phase includes the rituals not only in the initial stage, but also some phases of middle stage. In the diagram, it is shown from 1 to 4. Further, the phase 5 and 6 shows the incorporation of the deities to the

devotees. Lastly, these deities are separated from their deities at the end of the stage, from 6 to 9. This is different from other communal ritual that have been analysed above.

4.2.4: *Bash Puja*

In many Koch villages along with *Ai Bhogoboti* or *Ma Thakurani Puja* people also worship *Bash Puja* which is also as a part of their village ritual. This ritual of *Bash puja* is also connected with the *Garja puja* as *Bash* is also not a single deity but a cluster of deities and spirits. All the *Garja deities* are worshipped in this ritual, but the difference of this ritual is its length. As per the ritual, the *puja* can run from one day to the four days. The four day long ritual is known as the *purna puja* (complete ritual). As per the time of this ritual, this puja is observed at the first *morahi tithi* (Lunar New Moon) of either in *Bohag* or *Jeth* month. As the name suggests the term *Bash puja* itself means the worship of bamboo. Moreover, *Bash* is considered as a symbol of fertility amongst the Koches and the main aim of this ritual is to ask the deity for protection of the land, crops, cattle, human being and to increase the fertility and productivity.

4.2.4.1: The Ritual Process

The whole ritual process of the Bash Puja is a cluster of different rituals and each ritual has been to be followed one after another. Starting from the day one to the last day of the ritual, community members try to follow and continue its sanctity as well as their surroundings including the household. Each ritual of the *Bash Puja* has been briefly summarised one by one for a better understanding of the Koch religious life.

Like any other Koch communal ritual, Bash Puja also has the ritual of *jagani* or awakening of the deities. So, on the day of *jagoni* which is at the day before the main ritual, the *deosi* with his two helpers known as *paitol* and some of the village members go to the *thanshali* at the evening time and invoke the deities by offering *prasad* with lighting of the earthen lamp and incense sticks.[35] They offer three *joba phool* (Jujube flower) and invite the deities for tomorrow's ritual by kneeling and bowing down. The

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[35] Informant: Mahendra Choudhuri, Male, Age: 58, Boitamari. Interview date: 22/04/2018.

first day of the ritual starts with the *bash kata porbo* which means cutting off the sacred bamboo. One of the important aspects of this ritual is the day. According to the belief, the ritual should start at any *sokhabar* or *khorabar* (Tuesday or Saturday) and the ritual should end on next *khorabar* or *sokhabar* (Saturday or Tuesday).[36] On that day, *deosi* along with the *paitol* and the community members gather at the *thansali* and the *deosi* then lights an earthen lamp. This earthen lamp is called as *ghai saki* (the central lamp) and according to the belief this lamp should be lit for the whole ritual starting from the first day to the last. After lighting the lamp, the *deosi* offers another three *joba* flowers and then the gathered members proceed to cut the sacred bamboos for the ritual. The selection of the bamboos is done by observing the position of the bamboos. The selected bamboos represent the deity. Therefore, it should be grown in a pair and the top part of these two bamboos should be bending towards the southern direction.[37] Once the bamboos are selected and cut, they are carried to the courtyard and welcomed with a *sailon bati*[38] and heavy traditional music of *dhol-korka*[39] by the *gidal* (musician) and *mareya* (family). Like this, all the bamboos are cut, collected and cleaned and then they are carried to the *thanshali*. The number of bamboos depends upon the village to village, but the central deities remain the same.

At the *thanshali* those bamboos are again cleaned and all the members who are engaged with the ritual trimm and cut their hair. A *khur* (shaving tool) is also used for the bamboos to symbolise the shaving of the deities. For that, a *Napit* (barber) is called. After that, the bamboos are cleaned and washed with water. Once the bamboos are purified with the water, the *deodha* comes and selects which bamboo will represent which deity. Every village has its own *deodha* who performs the ritual every year. It is said the *deodha*

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[36] Informant: Maheswar Barman, Male, Age: 92, Boitamari. Interview date: 22/04/2018.

[37] Informant: Mohini Mohan Khetri, Male, Age: 65, Boitamari. Interview date: 22/04/2018.

[38] A sailon bati is a Sangli (bamboo sieve) with some lighted earthen lamps and these lamps are than covered by round shape banana trunk. Sometime a bunch of paddy is also kept. This is considered as very auspicious.

[39] Traditional leather instruments.

has the power to communicate with the deities and with his shamanistic power; the *deodha* will utter the name one by one while touching the bamboos.[40] The *Deosi* with the help of *paitols* and *bashua*[41] (selected male members to carry the deities) decorate the bamboos with cloths, *sowar* (yak tail whisk) and *kodomful* (bur flower made with pith or cork) is tied to the bamboo. The dresses and colour differs according to the deities; for a male deity the cloth will be in white colour and for a female, the colour will be in red and for the Muslim deity they will add blue colour.

The *deodha* will then place the deity one by one according to their position starting from north to south. Although, there is no exact number of the deities worshipped in the *Bash puja* and it varies from village to village, it is believed that the number of the deities should be in odd number rather. Some of the names of these deities are *Garja deo, Bura Thakur, Kali, Bhagoboti, Madan Kam* etc. are the common one. Before installing the deities into the main sacred space, the place is purified with sprinkling of holy water from *bhandara*[42]. Once the deities are placed, an earthen lamp and incense sticks are lighted and flowers and *prasad* are offered to the deities. The placement and the names of the deities are given below in the diagram:[43]

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[40] Informant: Mahendra Choudhuri, Male, Age: 58, Boitamari. Interview date: 22/04/2018.

[41] *Basuwas* are the young boys who hold the bamboos at the time of the ritual of *Magon maga* (asking for alms). They are also a part of the ritual.

[42] Bhandara is clay pot where holy water is kept. It is a necessary part of the ritual.

[43] Informant: Buddheswar Ray, Male, Age: 52 and Anil Barman, Male, Age: 54, Kokrajhar. Interview date: 25/04/2018.

Diagram No. 4.5: Placement of the Deities at Bash Puja.
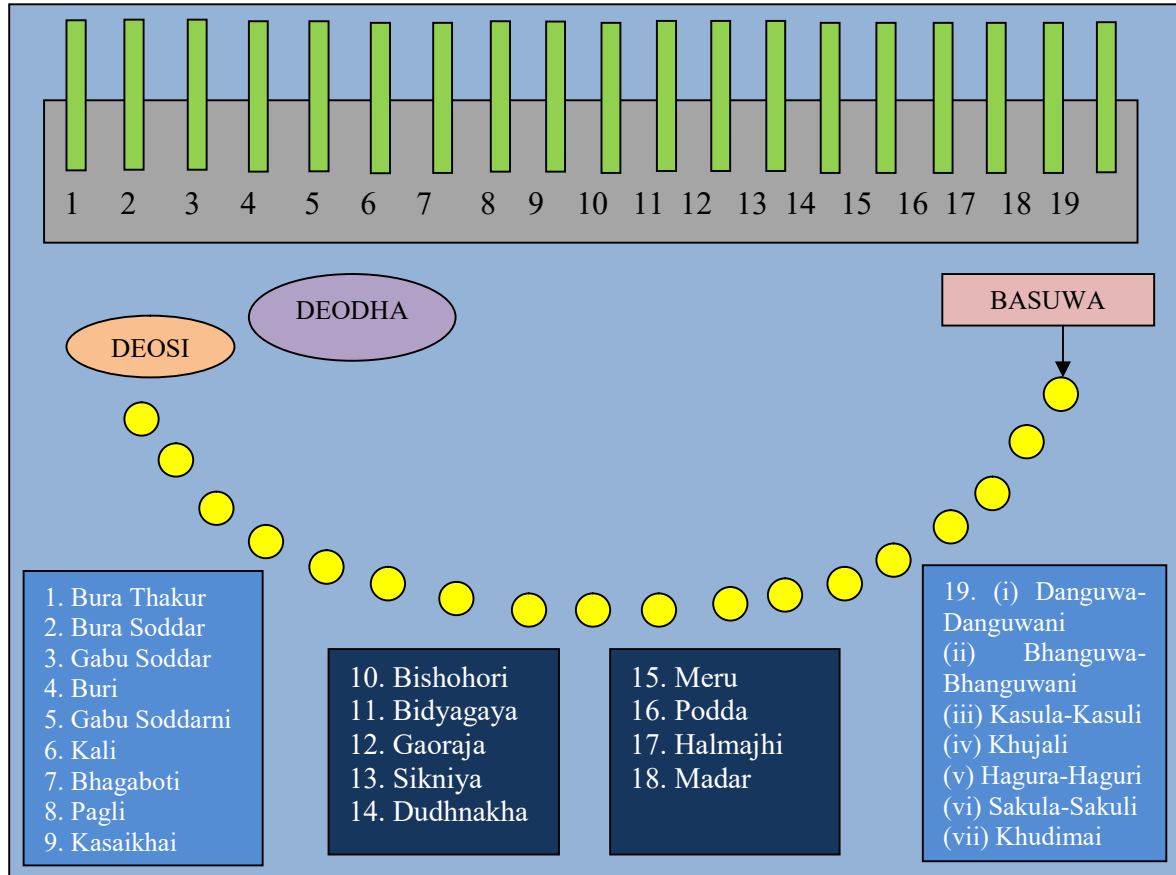
On the second and third day of the ritual, the *basua* along with *deodha* and the *gidal* go to each house asking for alms. This is known as *magon* which is an important part of the whole *Bash puja* ritual. During the day time, the *basuas* take the bamboos from *thansali* to ask for alms. Once asking for alms is done for the day, the *basuas* again installed them in their allotted place. At that time, *deodha* sprinkles holy water to the deities from *bhandara*. In the evening, the worshipping and offering to the deities starts. The *basua* and the *deodha* start to dance on the beat of the instruments played by the *gidal*. While dancing on the beat of the music, the *deodha* becomes possessed by the deities. This is known as *dhamal tula*. At the *dhamal tula*, when the *deodha* touches the bamboo, he starts to shake his body. This indicates that he is possessed by the deity. Generally, the *deodha* first touches the bamboo that represents *Bura Thakur*. At the time when the *deodha* is possessed by the deities, he starts to predict the good, the bad, the

problems, and the productivity of the village. When *deosi* asks about the remedy he utters some precautions or remedy for the problems. While the *deodha* is possessed by the deities, he imitates the characters of those deities, like meek, furious, anger, like an old man and so on and so forth. He also calls someone from the devotees and by sprinkling the rice and water from the *bhandara* he starts to predict the future of that person. This happens till midnight and at midnight it is said that the most furious and malicious deities possess him. At that time he becomes ferocious and becomes very much strong and powerful. At that time he tries to go out in search for the blood and soul. Therefore, the *deosi*, *paitols* and *basuwas* try to restrict him by making a barrier with bamboos to go out of the boundary from the main area. It is also said that at midnight, if the devotees present at the *thansali* fell asleep, her/his soul will be taken away by the deities at that moment and he/she will never awake.[44]

4.2.4.2: Completion of the Ritual

On the last day which is the fourth day, the *bhasani* ritual is observed. For the *bhasani* ritual, in the morning, the *deosi*, the *paitol* and few other community members complete their preparation by making a boat with the banana trunk. At that boat, a bunch of banana is kept. This is done at the bank of the river or near the stream. *Dhips* (altar) are prepared and all the deities are worshipped by offering *prasad*, flower, earthen lamp etc. On that day also the *deodha* gets possessed and starts to act like the deities. Sacrifices are made in front of him as he becomes the deity. The *deodha* then makes the deities to enter inside the boat. The clothes are removed from the bamboos and are tied all together on a bigger cloth. The bamboos are also tied together and immerse on the water. Finally, the already prepared *bhel* (banana yacht) is decorated with red and white *nisan* and the sacraments are kept inside that boat. The boat is then immersed in the water and this makes the end of the ritual. The following diagram Koch communal ritual process presents the analysis of their communal ritual:

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[44] Informant: Mahendra Choudhuri, Male, Age: 58, Boitamari. Interview date: 22/04/2018; Buddheswar Ray, Male, Age: 52 and Anil Barman, Male, Age: 54, Kokrajhar. Interview date: 25/04/2018.

Diagram No. 4.6: Ritual Process of *Bash Puja*

| *Jagani* (Awakening) | 1. Preparation begins by cleansing the household.
2. *Thanasali* (shrine) is cleaned and purified before the main ritual.
3. At evening, *Deosi* invites or invokes the deities for the ritual.
4. At night, all the families of the village fast or takes boil food. |

5. On the first day, bamboos are cut, cleaned and decorated. *Khur* (shaving blade) is used at the bamboos to symbolise as the shaving of their hairs.
6. *Deodha* selects which bamboo represents which deity by touching them one by one.
7. Second and Third day, these bamboos are carried to each household and blessings are given to the families. Alms are taken.
8. Every evening, the worship of the deities is done by the *Deodha*. He was possessed and predicts the good, bad, problems and productivity of the village.
9. Every day sacrifices are done in front of the deities

Puja (Main Ritual)

Bhasani (Immersion)

10. On the fourth day, a *Bhel* (Boat made with banana trunk) is prepared and decorated.
11. The *Deodha* is possessed again and veneration is done to the *Deodha* considering him as the deity. Offerings and sacrifices are done.
12. All the sacraments including the head and blood of sacrificed animals are kept inside the *Bhel*.
13. The *Bhel* is immersed in the water.

So the above diagram is also similar with the other two diagrams i.e. *Garja Puja* and *Ma Thakurani puja*, but different from the *Ai Puja*.

Hence, from the above description of the rituals observed by the Koch people as a part of their communal calendar, reflects the interlinking nature of one ritual to another. Moreover, all these rituals are the village level rituals which marks their territorial boundary and where all the same deities are worshipped in the name of three different rituals. But what is important to note is that, these are the rituals where the community people gathers, venerates, and celebrates. This reflects their communal identity as well as social solidarity. These are purely religious festivals and hence, rituals are done by offering and sacrificing in order to satisfy them seeking protection, fertility and good health. As the interpretation and analysed is done followed by the ritual model of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, it has been noticed that in the liminal period only the identity of the community forms which is opposite to Turner. They are betwixt and

between in their own way. Further, while looking from the deities' perspective, a different model has been arrived.

Additionally, every Koch calendrical ritual (*Garja, Bash, Ai puja*) has a structure (starting to ending), in which the idea of *communitas* proposed by Victor Turner is also visible. In the whole ritual process, every individual member feels a connection with the other community members and family. The sacred attachment of communitas appears through the whole ritual period. In this state, every members of the community represents as a devotee who is equal in front of the deities. This is different from their normal social structure where *Gaoburha* or the village head and the head of the families placed in the higher position. Most importantly, in the communal ritual this structure is replaced by unity where all the community members shared brotherhood in front of the deities. A sacred bond of the community members has been appeared in these rituals despite of various social, political or economic classes. Interestingly, the presence of deities along with the community is so strong that they are also considered as a part and parcel of the community. That is why during the process, they also follow a model of incorporation, liminality and separation. In the life of the Koches, although, the presence of the deities is not visible, but their very existence can easily feel in their rituals. They are the part of their life. In ritual context, deities and the devotees become one. The symbolic deities get a life through the acts of purification and offerings which is shrouded with the thick beliefs of the community.

Further, being an agricultural community, the Koches do have a relation between these communal rituals and agricultural prosperity. Thus, various religious beliefs also have an impact on their primary mode of the economy i.e. the agriculture. We can see the association of various deities and spirits in their agricultural calendrical ritual. Therefore, the community members try their best to appease them by organizing various rituals seeking protection for their land, crops and cattle. In that way, agricultural festivals and rituals are very much part of the Koches life.

4.3: Agricultural Festivals and Rituals

As already mentioned, in Assam, Koches are one of the most important and populated agricultural communities. Agricultural is the main source of economy for their survival and most of their calendrical and communal rituals are agricultural based. As agricultural production follows a certain season and month, therefore, most of these rituals are also termed as seasonal rituals. As it is already discussed in the second chapter, their main agricultural production is paddy and the whole agricultural calendar depends upon the cultivation of the *xali* or *hemoti* paddy.[45] As agriculture is the main source for survival, they follow various rituals and festivals related to agriculture which are much loved and valued. They treasured their age-old ritualistic tradition. These are carried orally and are performed every year without any fail in order to make their life happy, prosperous and peaceful. For that, obviously, deities of village and family as well as the ancestors are venerated and respected during these days. Starting from the land preparation to the crop harvesting, the Koches strictly follow a particular calendar and these rituals are performed as a part of their agricultural festival. Further, these agrarian calendrical rituals are observed in order to celebrate for their hard work and the production and to honour the deities and ancestors for protecting and giving a good crop. For the Koches the main cultivation process starts once the New Year begins and they celebrate their seasonal festival called *bisuwa*. Although, this is considered as a seasonal and New Year festival, but the preparation for the cultivativable land for seedling after this festival carries the relevance of this festival as an agricultural festival. Therefore, following are the agricultural rituals and festivals observed by the Koches which include the worship of deities, ancestors and the cattle as a part of their agricultural calendar.

4.3.1: *Bisuwa*

The seasonal and agricultural rites observed by the Koches can be divided into the spring festival, the autumn festival and the winter festival. The most common and popular spring festival is *bishua*. The features of this spring festival is similar to the

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[45] See the Agricultural calendar in the second chapter of the present thesis, pp. 69-70.

features of *Bohag* or *Rongali Bihu*, especially among the Koch people of the eastern and middle part of the Goalpara region. The importance of the festival *Bishua* among the Koch people can easily be inferred by the fact that the Koch king Biswa Singha, originally belonged to the Chiknajhar and before he carries his Sanskritized name, he was known as Bishu as he was born on the day of *Bishua.*[46] Like the *Bohag Bihu* festival celebrated by the other communities of Assam, Koch people also celebrate *Bishua* for seven days. But the names and related rituals differ as it becomes the essence that carries the Koch identity. *Bisuwa* is celebrated for seven days and starting from day one to the seventh day each *Bisuwa* is dedicated to a certain thing or work. The names of these seven *Bisuwas* are: *Goru Bisuwa* (*Bisuwa* of Cow), *Mansi Bisuwa* (*Bisuwa* of Human), *Gusti Bisuwa* (*Bisuwa* of Guests), *Satsaki Bisuwa* (*Bisuwa* of eating seven herbs), *Baho Bisuwa* (*Bisuwa* of Fishing), *Sikar Bisuwa* (*Bisuwa* of Hunting) and *Deo Bisuwa* (*Bisuwa* of Deities).[47]

Although, this starts the beginning of the New Year celebration and is celebrated as a seasonal festival rather than an agrarian festival, the preparation of the land for *Xali* cultivation starts after this festival links with the agricultural calendar. Further, the rituals that are observed for the good health and protection of the cattle which helps in the cultivation process also connect it with agriculture. Moreover, in this festival, various rituals connected with various deities, spirits, and ghosts are observed to seek prosperity, health and protection. Cattle are the most important part of agriculture and therefore, at this time they celebrate various rituals asking for protection and good health for the cattle to the deities.

The first day of *Bisuwa* which is during the *Sankranti* of *Chot* month is known as *Goru Bisuwa*[48] and is dedicated to the cattle. On this day, the cattle from each household

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[46] Dr Biswanarayan Shasttri (ed.), *Darrang Raj-Vamsavali*, Guwahati: Lawyer's Book Stall, p. xiv.

[47] Informant: Raghunath Choudhary, Male, Age: 54, Futkibari. Interview date: 21/04/2018.

[48] As per the belief system, on the day before the *Goru Bisuwa* the world gets polluted and is infected by spirits. Therefore, various types of pains and aches started to panic human body. In order to get rid of those pains, at evening, the Koches keep a combination of *pani laur pat* (leaf of bottle guard), *nim titar pat* (neem

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are taken to the nearby pond or river and each cow is given a round type garland made out of pieces of raw turmeric, bottle-guard, eggplant etc. Each cow is given a bath with a stalk of *dighlati* and *maikheti/makhiyoti* plant and special song is sung while bathing the cattle[49]. The garlands are exchanged with other families and are kept in the cowshed for the whole year. After that the Koch people observed the *Lakhol Puja* remembering the deity *Lakhol Thakur* to protect the cattle from various diseases. *Lakhol Thakur* is considered as the deity of the cattle and a sacred space is dedicated to this deity in the north-eastern corner of the cowshed.

Before the bathing ritual of cattle, early in the morning the young boys go to the jungle and collect various wild herbs and keep them in front of the *Aideu Than*. Combining all these herbs they make a bouquet and hang it at the house, at the cattle-shed, at the granary, at the backyard, on the weaving tools, on the wells and at the entrance gate to the compound. It is believed that it keeps the ghost and bad spirits away and protects the family from diseases and any kind of natural disaster and this is known as *Ap-Jhap*. [50] According to the Koch belief each wild herb has its own medicinal values that will protect them from various things like:[51]

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leaf), *okrar pat* (a wild thorny shrub), *bis deikar pat* (fern), *bis kutulir pat* (a wild herb) and one *kasi* (sickle) are kept under the mattress of the bed. Further, before sleeping they also keep pieces of *angra* (wood charcoal) at the kitchen, with the kitchen utensils, clothes, at every room, etc. Informant: Raghunath Choudhary, Male, Age: 54, Futkibari. Interview date: 21/04/2018.

[49] The song is like this:
"Dighlotir dighila pat
Goru kubang jhat-jhat
Mao xoru – bap xoru
Toy hobi dangar goru."
- Literary this means that *dighloti* has the long leaves and with this, we will beat you, your mother and father may be small and weak, but you will become huge and healthy.

[50] For pictures see the photograph section, p. 392.

[51] Informant: Raghunath Choudhary, Male, Age: 54, Futkibari. Interview date: 21/04/2018.

1. *Keturir Phool* (flower of wild ginger): Remover of *Jokh-Jokhini* (Evil spirits).
2. *Goruber* (a wild flower): Remover of Snake fear.
3. *Betor Kata* (thorn of cane): Remover of Ghosts.
4. *Bagh-Asura* (wild thorny creeper): Remover of Ghosts.
5. *Keowa phoolor Kata* (thorny wild shrub): Remover of Ghosts.
6. *Bhetemali* and *Makhiyoti* (together): Protect the house from various diseases to enter in the house.
7. *Dighloti*: Destroyer of body stiffness.
8. *Bihlongoni* (a wild plant): Protects the family from the evil eye.
9. *Bi-dheika* (wild fern): Remover of venom.

On the other hand, after cleaning the cowshed the female members of the family keep the cow-dung on a broken *pasi* (round basket made with bamboo). Along with it, one old *banni* (broom) and leftover *ap-jhap* are also kept in that *pasi*. This *pasi* is then kept in front of the road of the house. This carries the belief that keeping the broken basket with cow-dung, broom and *ap-jhap* will shield the house from evil spirits, and ghosts.[52] *Tita-khawa* is another kind of ritual that is celebrated in the morning of the *Bishua* day. Juice extracted from various kinds of bitter leaves like *baska* or *bahaka* (a bitter shrub), cane shoots, raw turmeric, and tender pineapple leaves is drunk on an empty stomach in the morning.

On the second day which is the first day of the New Year i.e., *Bohag* month is celebrated as the *Mansi Bisuwa*. One that day, the children and young men go to the house of the *oja* to bring *senkoi* or *foi*. The *senkoi* or *foi*, is tied around on either the hand or leg of the children and young people in the morning of the *Mansi Bisua. Senkoi* or *foi* is a white string dyed yellow with the fresh raw turmeric and it is believed as a precaution against a disease called *choitali-bao*. This *senkoi* or *foi* is also believed to be as the protector from the evil spirits and ghosts. On the other hand, the third day (Date second

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[52] Informant: Funul Barman, Female, Age: 45, Dimalgaon. Interview date: 03/05/2016.

of the month *Bohag*) is celebrated as the *Gusti Bisuwa* and on that day guests and relatives are invited for a feast. On the fourth day (date third of the month *Bohag*), the ritual of eating nine different kinds of leafy vegetables is another important ritual observed in the *Bishua* day and is known as the *sat-saki* or *sat-sukati*. The women folk of the village go out in a group to collect nine different kinds of wild leafy vegetables and prepare a special meal for the family members. The fifth and sixth day of the month *Bohag* is celebrated as the *Baho Bisuwa* and *Sikar Bisuwa* respectively. On the *Baho Bisuwa* people goes for communal fishing and on the *Sikar Bisuwa*, the male members go for hunting. The practice of community fishing is still observed everywhere. It is said that earlier among the Koches, the ritual of going out on a hunt on the *Bishua* day had existed, but at present this custom is very rare or has almost died out.[53]

The last day of the *Bisuwa* is celebrated as the *Deo Bisuwa*. On that day, every household deity is worshipped. Communally also on this day worship for the various deities are done. In the undivided Goalpara district, one of the most important aspects of the *Bisuwa* is the *Pahar Puja* which is the hill worship. On these days, deities like *Raja Thakur, Bura-Buri, Siva, Mahamaya, Bageswari* etc are worshipped in the form of a hill. Some of the examples are:

1. *Mahamaya Pahar* of Bogribari for Goddess *Mahamaya*.
2. *Bhumiswar Pahar* of Atugaon for *Raja Thakur*.

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[53] "On the last day of the month of Choitra (March-April) a spring hunt is arranged by the Rajbansis. It is called Bisua or Bisuba. During the whole month of Choitra, the Rajbansis eat or drink a decoction of some bitters, e.g. Brihati, Basak (Adhatoda Vasica) etc. On the last day of Choitra, none will eat rice. They eat fries (bhadza-bhudza), this contains fried chura, curds and fried dal (lentils). While eating fries, it is a custom to spit out the first morsel without swallowing it. This means that an enemy is to be killed. On the Bisuba day, all able-bodied Rajbansi males go out for a hunt with any weapon he can get hold of, e.g. bamboo pole, spear, sword, katari (dao), gun, etc. They must kill an edible animal and eat its meat either roasted or cooked in the forest. If they fail to kill an animal the Rajbansis believe that the coming year would be bad for them. This spring hunt gradually being abandoned due to the restrictions imposed by the Forest Department of the Government and also due to the impact of the new civilization.

In the same night of the hunt, a Garam puja is held. The Mahadev, the presiding deity in the nearly bamboo grove in a hut, is worshipped in order to drive away any evil spirit that may cause disease in the village and bless villagers with a good crop in the field. No woman is allowed to attend this ceremony." – see C. C. Sanyal, *The Rajbansis of North Bengal*, Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1965, p.144.

3. *Shakati Pahar* of Sapotgram for *Mao Shakati*.
4. *Bura-Buri Pahar* of Salkosha for Deity *Bura Deo-Buri Deo*.
5. *Mahadev Pahar* of North Salmara for Lord Siva.
6. *Lungai Pahar* of Abhayapuri for Siva.
7. *Pahar Puja* of near Sipansila, Bongaigaon district for *Bura Deo-Buri Deo*.
8. *Pahar Puja* of Sipansila for *Pateswai Mao*. Etc.

4.3.2: *Hal-Jatra Porbo*

Once the *Bishuwa* festival is over, a Thursday is selected as the auspicious day for the ritual of *hal-jatra*. Early in the morning of the selected day, the male member of the family after taking bath reaches the field with his *nangol-jungol* (traditional plough and yoke) and the cattle. The wife of the farmer also goes to the field with her husband. She also takes a bath and wears a new *patani*. There she prepares a small *dhip* (altar) remembering *Ai Basumoti* at the north-eastern corner of the field. This *dhip* represents deity *Ai Basumoti*. There she worships *Ai Bosumoti* by lighting a *saki* (earthen lamp), *dhup-dhuna* and with white flower. After that the *xona-rupa pani* (holy water) is prepared with mixing milk, water, uncooked rice, dub grass, *tulsi* leaf, and a touch of gold and silver ornament. This holy water is then sprinkled over the earthen altar, plough and yoke, the pair of cattle and to the farmer in order to purify them. This *xona-rupar pani* is considered to be very sacred. After that, the couple kneels down in front of the deity and asks for her blessing so as to finish the ploughing process without any problem. Only after the ritual is completed, the farmer starts his ploughing.

4.3.3: *Gosor Gona/Gosa Diya*

The *Gosor Gona* or *Gosa Diya* is the ritual to celebrate the beginning of the *ruwa gara* which is the transplantation of the *xali* seedling. For that, an auspicious day is selected by the cultivator for the plantation. This day should not be on *khorabar* or *sokhabar* (Saturday or Tuesday). Most preferably it is selected on a Thursday as it is considered very auspicious and dedicated to the *Ai Thansri*.

On the selected day, the housewife purifies the house by cleaning all the materials from the kitchen and mopping the house, courtyard etc. early in the morning. After the purification process of the house is done, she takes a bath and prepares the holy water. On the other hand, the husband fasts starting from the morning. After taking a bath, he goes to the field which is already ploughed and make suitable for the seedlings. Along with him, he carries paddy seedlings, one *tulsi* plant, one black arum plant, banana sapling, earthen lamp, incense sticks, mustard oil, white stock and green jute plant. In one of the corner, preferably on the north-eastern corner of land which is already prepared for seedling plantation a temporary *dhip* (altar) is prepared. He purifies the altar by sprinkling the holy water. On the altar he plants the *tulsi* and the black arum plant. In front of these plants, he places one banana leaf and lightens the earthen lamp and the incense sticks. After that he kneels and bows down in front of the altar facing the east and asked the deity for blessings.

He then starts to plant the first seedling either three or five *gosa* (bunch) with his left hand. But before planting the seedling the cultivator rub mustard oil on that seedling as it is believed that rubbing mustard oil on the seedling will increase the production of the crops and the paddy will shine brightly. After that, a pair of *guwa-pan* (betel nut and leaf) is offered to *Ai Thansri* and requests her to protect and give a good crop. On that day, at home, black lentil with *khar* (alkaline) and *dudh-kosu* (a kind of arum plant) is consumed as lunch as it is believed that these are the favourite foods of *Ai Thansri*. Moreover, on that day they won't give help to the guests, neighbours or beggars with either rice or paddy or money. According to the belief, doing this, they would lose their prosperity.

4.3.4: *Katigasa*

Like Bodo, Rabha and Hajong community of lower Assam, Koch community also celebrates *Katigasa* or *Katidol* festival during the *Sankranti* of month *Ahin-Kati*. It is an autumn time festival when the paddy starts to bear fruits and at this time the attack of diseases and harmful insects to the paddy starts. Therefore, the Koches observe this ritual

to venerate the deities and the ancestors for protection and good health of the crops. It is basically a one-day affair where the most important ritual is the lighting of lamps in the evening. The Koches also believes in the number five which is called '*panchatatva'* and according to the Koch philosophy, the *ou* fruit or the elephant apple (Dillenis indica) which has five cells is considered very much auspicious and pure because it reflects the five emotions and elements of the human being.[54] As a part of the ritual of the festival, the lamps made out of this *ou* fruit are placed in the paddy field, in the granary, in the cattle-shed, in the backyard, at the entrance and beside the *tulsi than*.[55]

In the evening, the male member of the family goes to the paddy field and lights the lamp and offers *prasad.* The *prasad* is made with uncooked rice soaked and strained and mixed with sugar along with ripe banana. Along with the *prasad,* betel nut and leaf are also offered to the spirits and the deities inhabiting the paddy field. After that, he bows down and asks for blessings and protection for the crops until it is ready for harvesting. He also starts to sing rhymes. As a part of the celebration, after lighting the lamps the member of each family recites same rhymes or songs in the paddy field and at home. Although region wise these rhymes have different versions and variations, the rhymes starts with the chanting of the words '*ada dol dol dol'* or '*kati dol dol dol'* or sometimes simply '*dol dol dol'*. The rhymes are basically related to the cattle or agriculture and the wordings of the verses change depending upon the place where they are lighting the lamps. The following verse is sung when the lamps are lightened in the field:

<div align="center">

Dol dol dol,

Lokor dhan aul-baul,

Amar dhan malkhar saul.

(Others rice will have full of chaff, but our rice will be full of grain.)

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[54] The belief in five and their worldview has been discussed in the last chapter which is chapter 6 of this thesis.

[55] In the courtyard, the *Tulsi* plant along with a ginger plant is planted only for the ritual of the festival day only and like the other parts of Assam, it does not seem to occupy the same exalted position in the ritual.

Simultaneously at home, the other members of the family also light lamps in other areas of the house. As *Ai Thansri* is considered as the *Ghor Gohani* or *Grihadevi* (main household deity) and her place is always inside the kitchen, another lamp is offered in front of her shrine by the female member of the family. She is also offered flowers, various types of seasonal fruits, uncooked rice mixed with sugar. The female member then lights the lamps for all the deities resides inside the homestead. Another lamp is offered in the name of their family ancestors also. They light lamps everywhere including in front of the granary, cattle shed, backyard courtyard etc. and started to sing rhymes/songs. For example: when they light the lamps in the cattle-shed, they sing like this:

Dol dol dol,

Oinnor goru lera-thengra,

Amar goru bhoiser pera.

(Other's cows will be short-statured and crippled, but our cattle will be like male buffalos).

Beside the betel-nut tree of the backyard of the house:

Dol dol dol,

Lokor tamul dhona-mona,

Amar tamul bel-xona.

(Other's betel nut will be small, but our battle-nuts will be as big as like the *bel* fruit.)

Basically, it is believed that lighting the lamps in the home and paddy field will protect the field and family from the evil eye and will give the blessings of *Ai Thansri* and the paddy cultivation will flourish. Moreover, it is also believed that singing or reciting the rhymes will also influence and increase growth and productivity.

4.3.5: *Ag Ana*

This is the ritual to celebrate the bringing of the mature paddy from paddy field to the home and it is the first sacred ritual before the harvesting of the paddy. The term *Ag*

literally means the upper part of the crop and *Ana* means to carry or to bring. Therefore, this is the ritual done to bring the upper parts of the crops and for that *ek mutha* (one handful) of paddy crops are brought. On the first week of the month of *Aghon*, when the paddy starts to mature and ripe, an auspicious day is selected and for that Monday or Thursday is considered as the best day of the week. If *Purnima, Ekadashi* or *Amvashya* falls on that day, then there is a prohibition to conduct the ritual. Generally, this ritual is performed during the first half of the day i.e. before noon.

On the fixed day, the family starts to purify the house by cleaning and mopping on every corner of the house and sprinkling holy water. Further, the *sotal* (courtyard) and *bhakhri/mashang* (granary) are smeared with cow-dung. As a part of the preparation for this ritual, one *agloti kolpat* (upper part of a banana leaf), some more banana leaf, *sailon-bati*, earthen lamp, few flower, mustard oil, incense stick, vermillion, pounded rice powder, *jatra siju pat* (leaf of *siju* plant), *kasi* (sickle), pair of *guwa-pan*, one pot of holy water, *kula/dala* (winnowing fan) etc. are collected. Once this is prepared the performer of the ritual gets ready. Anyone can perform this ritual, but a widow is not allowed to do this ritual. Before going to the field he/she gets ready with new dresses (*patani* for the woman and *aosa* for the male) after taking the bath. He/She also has to hang one *angsa* (traditional short towel with yellow colour) on their neck. Once he/she is ready, then over the *Kula* (winnowing fan) one *anakata kapoor*[56] is placed and over that, every necessary material are kept.

Once he/she reaches the field and places the materials *tini gosi dhan* (three bunches of paddy) are selected and carefully tied down separately. Nearby the selected paddy bunches, three box shape designs are drawn with rice powder. Over that design,

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[56] *Anakata* is kind of clothes which is used and prepared only for the rituals. It is considered as sacred. The literal meaning of the word is *ag nakata* means which is not cut. Therefore, when the weaving of this kind of cloth is finished the front and the end part is not cut by any metal or steel instrument. Rather, one or two stone is used to cut the thread by smashing the thread with stones. In the process to prepare an *anakata* cloth, the person who is given the responsibility also has to take many precautions as it is considered very much pure and sacred. If the in charge woman for the cloth is in her menstruation period, she should avoid weaving the cloth; even she should also not touch the cloth. Moreover, the responsibility for this kind of clothes is given only to a married woman whose husband is still alive and who has given birth to a child.

one banana leave is placed and flower and *prasads* are kept on the banana leaf. Following this every item is given a vermillion mark and after that one earthen lamp and incense sticks are lighted. Then he/she mixes the rice powder with water and sprinkles this with the help of *jatra-siju* leaf. Once this is done, he/she kneels down in front of *Ai Thansri*. He/she holds the selected paddy bunches with his/her right hand. At that time he/she cuts the paddy with a sickle held left hand uttering '*Katong katong katong kat'* (I will cut, cut cut and cut) and keeps the paddy over the winnowing fan. After that he/she returns home taking that winnowing fan over the head. While returning the performer takes very much precaution and cares the earthen lamp not to off until he/she reaches home. Moreover, while returning talking and looking back is also prohibited as it is believed that the Goddess will not enter the home.

Once he/she reaches home, a glass of water is thrown to the roof of the house and he/she has to enter under that dripping water. Moreover, it is also considered a good sign if that water falls on the paddy carrying winnowing fan. After entering inside the house the door should remains open. According to the belief, if they close the door, *Ai Thansri* will try to run away from that house. After the paddy bunches with the winnowing fan is kept in front of the shrine of *Ai Thansri*. In front of the deity, the paddy bunches are kept over the *doon* (a traditional basket to measure paddy) which has been already kept in front of the deity. Here again the same ritual is observed and once the ritual is over all the members of the family take the blessing by kneeling in front of the deity for blessing, and prosperity of the family. In the end, the *prasads* are distributed to each and every family member and also to the neighbours also.

4.3.6: *Bhuita Deo Puja*

Another Koch ritual related to the paddy cultivation is the *Bhuita Deo Puja*. As the name *Bhuita Deo* suggests, this is a ritual dedicated to the ghosts and evil spirits of the paddy field. According to the Koch belief, the paddy field is the abode of various kinds of maleficent deities, harmful spirits and ghosts. If these spirits and ghost are not worshipped before harvesting, they can create problem at the time of harvesting.

Therefore, a Puja is offered to the evil spirits, ghosts etc. so that they can complete the harvesting process without any hardship or harm. This ritual is observed in order to satisfy them a few days before the harvesting of the paddy cultivation. This ritual is done at the evening or at dusk. Basically, the male person of the family performs this ritual and for that, he fasts from the morning. On the other hand, the female members of the family prepare special types of food item for the ritual. These items are an integral part of this ritual. One of them is the *bhoot gura*, prepared with uncooked rice by half frying and then pounding it. This is kind of half powdery substance which has a nice smell when it is soaked in hot tea or milk. According to the belief, *bhoot* or ghosts like this smell very much. Another food item is *bora sira* which is again prepared with *Bora Saul* or sticky rice by soaking in water for a few hours. After that, the rice is spread in a towel to strain the excess water and then half fried and pounded. For this ritual uncooked item like fruits, lentils etc. or completely cooked item are not used as an offering. In the evening the male head of the family along with some other people goes to the field and offer the food in the name of *Bhuita deo*. Once all the ritual is over, he spreads the offering all over the field for the spirits and ghosts to eat. The leftover offerings are then consumed by the groups at the field only, as carrying back the leftover offerings are considered as a bad omen for the family. Moreover while returning from the field no one is allowed to talk or look back as it is believed that doing so will bring the ghosts and the spirits of the field to the home. The performer of the ritual will not have any thing on that day.

4.3.7: *Bura-Burir Bhar Phela*

This is a small ceremony which is conducted after the harvesting process of *xali* paddy is completed. Once the *marna-mara*[57] process is completed, the present ritual is observed. For this ritual, a handful of paddy is taken and kept inside of two *nura* (kind of container made with straw) and one *topla* (wrapping in paddy straw) which are made

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[57] Marna-mara or in Assamese it is called as Morona Mara which is the process of thrashing of the paddy. For that the male members spread a thick layer of the paddy with straws from the *Dangri* (the big bunch of paddy) at the courtyard and a pair of bullocks is driven over this paddy for several times which led the paddy to fall from the stem.

with the thrashing paddy straws. One young boy takes those *nuras* on *bhar*[58] on the shoulder and another boy takes the *topla* on the head and both of them move around the thrashed paddy for seven times. Here the two *nuras* are prepared and dedicated for the deity *Bura*. The *topla* is dedicated for his consort *Buri*. After seven rounds, the two boys leave them on the side of the road. Once this is over, the female member of the family then takes one *duni* of paddy from there and places in front of *Ai Thansri*. There she lightens one earthen lamp over the paddy and offers flower, fruits etc. to the deity and asks for blessings.

4.3.8: *Noya Khawa*

Once the *xali* paddy is harvested, thrashed, dried and pounded, the ceremony of *noya khawa* is observed. It is a rice eating ceremony where food is prepared from the freshly harvested *xali* crop and enjoys a meal with family, relatives, and neighbours. Only after this ceremony, the people start to eat new rice regularly. Although it does not have any fixed date, this ceremony is generally observed at the month of *Aghon* and should not extend for the next month which is the *Puh* month. As the Koch belief says in the month of *Puh*, *Ai Thansri* also faces many problems and even her *bahon* (vehicle) leaves her. Therefore, in this month this ritual is not practiced by the Koches. In some places, this ritual is accompanied by the *Deo Puja*. The *Deos* or the supernatural beings that are worshipped in the ritual varies depending upon family to family. For this ceremony, one auspicious day of *Aghon* month is selected. A day before the main ritual, the head of the family lights earthen lamps in front of all household shrines and invites them for the ritual. On that day, the members take vegetarian food for dinner.

On the morning of the main ritual day, the female members purify the house by cleaning and mopping the whole house. Purification process completes after that sprinkling of the holy water. Everyone wears new clothes and the females pound the new rice with *sam-gahin* (traditional mortal and pastel). The newly pounded rice is only used

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[58] *Bhar* is a traditional equipment to carry materials. For that two basket is tied down on a bamboo pole and keep at the shoulder.

for the rituals. Once the preparation is completed, the household deities and ancestors are worshipped. The whole ritual is conducted and takes care by the head of the family. The names of the household deities differ and it depends upon family to family. But most common deities are *Bishohori, Ai Thansri, Bura-Buri, Aideu, Sipsin-Dipsin, Bagh Raja, Lakhol Thakur, Bura Bhengli-Buri Bhengli,* and *Podda*. The first offering and worship is given to Goddess *Bishohor* and only after that other deities are worshipped one after one. The sacrifice of duck, pigeon, goat etc. is also done. Once the sacrifice and offerings of *Prasad* to the deities are finished, a *Puja* towards the ancestors of the family is also conducted. They finish the puja by thanking for giving a good crop, food and for the protection of the family, cattle and crops. They offered the prepared food to ancestors and the cattle first. Finally, the members and the invitees take their meal.

4.3.9: *Domasi*

The *domasi* or *pushna* is the winter festival that is celebrated for three days and is more earnestly celebrated throughout the community of the region. The first day of *domasi* is called the *gorur domasi*, the second day is known as the *mansir domasi* and the third day is known as *pokhi-pitamor domasi*. This day is dedicated to the domestic animals, birds and also to the ancestors.[59] The rites and ritual associated with the day like burning of fire, feasting and preparing of various kinds of delicacies constitute a very important part in the festival. It is similar to the rites that are celebrated by the other communities of Assam.

The preparation to celebrate this festival starts in advance. Young boys go to the jungle or nearby hills to collect dry woods, bamboos and other fuel for the ceremonial fire. They also go to the paddy fields to collect hay. With the firewood, bamboo-stumps and hays that are collected earlier, they prepare a big stack which is called *bhelaghor* in an open field. On the first day of *domasi* festival which is in the *Sankranti* of month *Puh* (December-January), the young boys perform *Sonaray Puja. Sonaray Thakur* is another

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[59] Upen Rabha Hakacham (ed.), *Bor Axomor Bihu Xonskriti*, Guwahati: Bani Prakashan, 2010, p.78.

popular and interesting deity that is admired by the Koch people of the Goalpara region. He is actually considered as a tiger deity and is mostly worshipped and celebrated by the cowherd boys and young men. According to Birendranath Datta, "Sonaray 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."[60] As an independent deity, it is very hard to find a shrine dedicated to this deity. He is given a seat at the time of *Garja puja* and a place is assigned to him in some of the *dasjaniya dham* (community shrines). *Sonaray Thakur* is mainly related to the *Sonaray puja* which is basically an additive to *pushna* or *domashi* festival. As the protector of the domestic animals from diseases, *Sonaray Thakur* does not appear in a dreadful nature and in the present time, the *puja* for the deity is celebrated in a joyful way rather than ritualistic.

As the *Sonaray puja* is counted as an attachment to the agriculture festival *pushna* or *domashi* which is also a winter festival, *Sonaray puja* is also celebrated in winter during the *Sankranti* day of the Assamese month *Puh* (December-January). But the preparation for the *Puja* begins from the beginning of the *Puh* month. The whole procedure of the *Sonaray puja* can be divided into two parts i.e. *magon* and *puja*. The males make the *Sonarayar dor* which is very much essential for *Sonaray puja*. The *dor* is prepared with the three, five or sometimes seven *modhuar kathi* (branches of a plant) and tied together with the jute. Then the *dor* is decorated with flowers made with jute fibers and hang them from top to the end the *dor*. To paint the flowers only red, blue and white colours are used. Placing the *dors* across their shoulders, the group of the cowherd boys and young men sing and collect *dokkhina* (alms) travelling from one house to another. The process of the collection of alms is called *magon*. To accompany the singing, they carry *mukhbashi* (a kind of flute), drums and cymbals. Sometimes, one or two boys dressed like a girl and dance with the songs to make the performance more enjoyable for the member of the family they visit. The songs are known as *Sonarayer Gan*. These are basically the rhymes traditionally delivered in the course to collect the alms. Through the

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[60] Birendranath Datta, A Study of the Folk Culture of the Goalpara Region, Guwahati: University Publication Department, Gauhati University, 1995, p. 88.
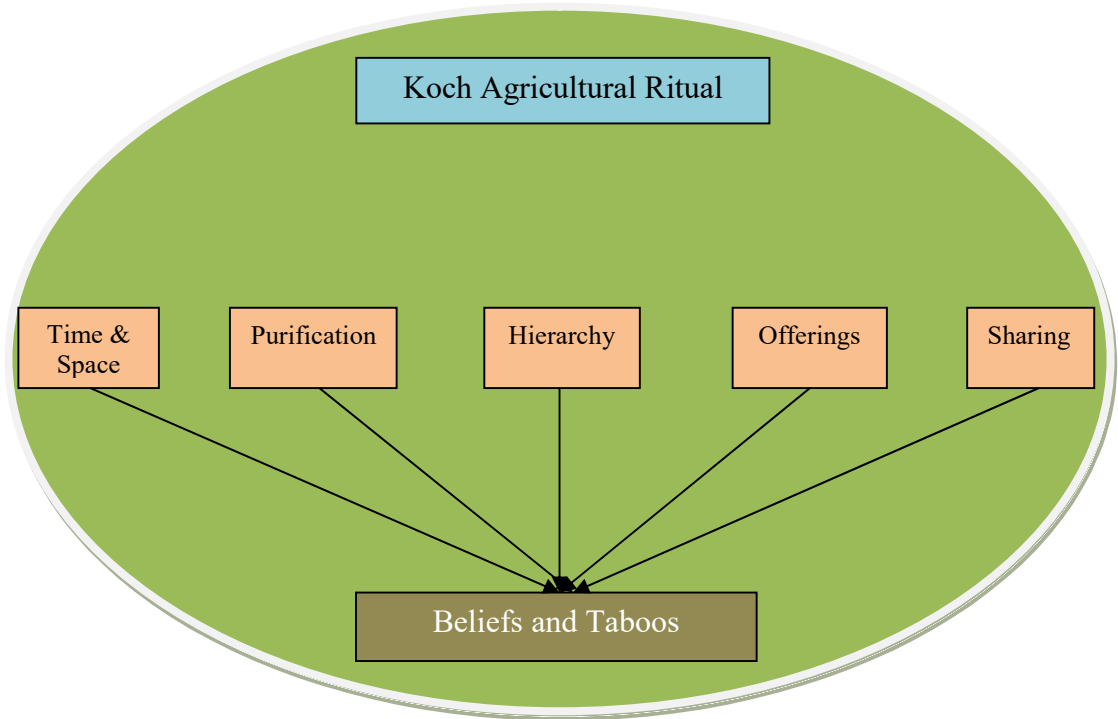
song the young boys who ask for alms encourage the family to contribute in the *Sonaray puja* with a handful of rice and other things and some time with money. In the song it is said that if the family gives a handful of alms, in return the god will bless them with wealth, offspring, cattle and prosperity.

After the collection of the alms throughout the *Puh* month, on the day of *pushna* or *domashi* festival which is the last day of the month of *Puh*, the cowherd boys go to the bank of river or in a paddy field and make an altar with mud. They plant the *dors* on the altar of mud and keep it erect. This represents the *Sonaray Thakur*. Then the group of young boys performs the *puja* with some informal rites. In the *puja*, no priests are used and the recitation of the *mantras* are also absent. At the end of the informal rites, the group prepared a feast with collected materials which are called as *‘Lakhol Bhog’*. After the function is over, the group immerses the *dors* in the river or any water body. The *puja* is performed at the night of *domashi*. After the ritual is over, the groups spend their night nearby the *bhelaghor* in a temporarily erected hut and prepare the ceremonial fire call as *dhuni*.

On the *domasi* day i.e. the first day of the month *Magh*, early in the morning before the sunrise everybody wakes up and take bath. They gather near the *bhelaghor*. An elderly member of the family set fire in the *bhelaghor* and takes blessings from the fire. The prepared cakes, snacks and other edible things are first offered to the fire. On the same day, as a part of the festival, the elderly people tie each fruit-bearing tree with a *tengol* (bamboo cords). They believe that doing this ritual will increase the fruit-bearing capacities of the trees. Further, every house is also tied with a cotton thread. For this, the tying of the thread starts from the north east corner of the house for three times. According to the belief, tying of the thread will protect the house from evil spirits, ghosts, any type of malicious supernatural things.

From the above discussion of the above said agricultural ritual of the Koches has revealed some basic elements. This is shown and analysed through the below diagram:

Diagram No. 4.7: Basic Elements in Koch Agricultural Ritual.

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                    ┌─────────────────────────┐
                    │ Koch Agricultural Ritual │
                    └─────────────────────────┘

  ┌──────────┐  ┌──────────────┐  ┌───────────┐  ┌───────────┐  ┌──────────┐
  │ Time &   │  │ Purification │  │ Hierarchy │  │ Offerings │  │ Sharing  │
  │ Space    │  │              │  │           │  │           │  │          │
  └──────────┘  └──────────────┘  └───────────┘  └───────────┘  └──────────┘

                    ┌─────────────────────────┐
                    │    Beliefs and Taboos    │
                    └─────────────────────────┘
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To begin with, in almost all agricultural ritual of the Koches, time and space plays a major role. The use of certain particular day to conduct the ritual has located to be symbolically significant. In most of the rituals Thursday is considered as the suitable day. Thursday is selected to conduct the ritual like *hal jatra, gosa diya, ag ana* etc. This is because, the Koches believe that Thursday is the most auspicious day of the week and is the day of Goddess *Thansri*,[61] who is the deity of prosperity and wealth. Koches try to avoid the day or time like *Saturday, morahi (Amavasya), punni (Purnima)* or *ekadashi* as they are believed when evil spirits grow strong. Moreover, the timing is an also important matter to conduct a ritual for the Koches. As we have seen, all communal as well as agricultural ritual is conducted before noon i.e. at the morning as morning is considered as pure. As it is believed that human being remains pure at the morning time most and after noon the impurity level starts to grow. On the contrary, the evening time is

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[61] Informant: Dimala Ray, Female, Age: 50, Khusksigao. Interview date: 19/05/2016.

considered as the most impure phase of a day as it is believed that at this time evil spirits and ghosts grow stronger. That is the reason for selecting the evening time to conduct the *Bhuita puja* where offerings are in the name of various evil spirits and ghosts of the paddy field. But after the offerings, the performer of this ritual fasts at that night as it is a common belief that fasting purifies the body and the soul. So, purification is also an important element in these rituals. Therefore, fasts are kept before going for any puja and holy water is sprinkled.

Many of the ritual phases also reflect the hierarchy of the Koch society and family. Most of the time, the authority to perform the ritual is given to the elders. As we have seen that the elders play an important role in not only the social structure or decision making capacity but also in the life cycle rituals. That is also reflected in their communal as well as agricultural festivals equally. Further, in each ritual, lighting of earthen lamps, offerings of *prasada* and finally sharing of that *prasada* with deities and other neighbours can be seen as a common act. This reflects their communal feelings with fellow community members as well as their acceptance of the deities as a part of their life. All of these elements ultimately connect to the beliefs and taboos which is the most important aspect of their agricultural festivals. The attribution of superstitions, taboos and restrictions is attached in order to ward of various evil forces, fears, and misfortune. It is a common act in their socio-religious life. In other word, Koches perceived their life surrounding by various supernatural agencies. That is why in order to protect their life Koches venerate them and try to appease them sometime directly or sometime with the help of deities.

Further, the discussion of the Koch agrarian festivals reveal the relationship of its economic dependency on agriculture with various religious beliefs and practices. Almost all agricultural festivals are always accompanied with the veneration of certain deities. Therefore, a list of the deities that are worshipped in every agricultural ritual has been prepared and given below.

Table No. 4.2: Deities and Spirits in Koch Agricultural Festivals.

Sl. No.	Festival	Associate Deities and Spirits
1	*Bisuwa*	Household deities, Ancestors, *Jokh-Jokhini*, evil spirits, ghosts and communal deities like *Mahamaya, Siva, Mao Sakati, Ai Thakurani, Pateswari* etc.
2	*Hal Jatra*	*Ai Basumoti* and spirits of the paddy field
3	*Gosa Diya*	*Ai Thansri, Ai Basumoti*
4	*Katigasa*	Ancestors, Household deities, and Spirits of the paddy field
5	*Ag Ana*	*Ai Thansri*
6	*Bhuita Deor Puja*	*Bhuita deo,* Ghosts, Evil Spirits of paddy field.
7	*Bura-Burir Bhar Phela*	*Bura-Buri*
8	*Noya Khawa*	Household deities like *Bura-Bura, Bishohori, Ai Thansri, Aideu, Sipsin-Dipsin, Bagh Raja, Lakhol Thakur, Bura Bhengli-Buri Bhengli, Podda* and Ancestors
9	*Domasi/Pusuna*	*Sonaray Thakur, Agni Deo*, various Evil spirits and ghosts.

The association of various supernatural beings to each ritual is the symbol of their deep religious values and beliefs that shapes the Koch identity. The continuation of the agricultural calendar gives a chance to the community members to prepare their lands, cattle and crops for a better cultivation. Agricultural is the main source of survival for the Koch community. Therefore, community members venerate the supernatural beings or try to appease them in order to protect their land, crop, and cattle. The above table has revealed that a Koch agricultural life is just a mirror of its vast religious belief system. It reflects their worldview, their belief system and the dependency on various supernatural beings for a hassle free life.

4.4: Conclusion

Thus to summaries, through the calendrical ritual, the Koch society carries their identity as an individual as well as a member of the community that helps the sustenance of their communal life. This communal awareness and identity appear their religious beliefs and practices. All the communal and agricultural festivals reveal the interlinking nature of religion to its socio-economic life. From the above discussion, it is observed that the supernatural beings that are venerated by the Koch people surround three forms i.e. (i) Deities, (ii) Ancestors and (iii) Evil spirits and Ghosts. Moreover, the offerings of various items turn out to be an important aspect of a Koch ritual. The offerings to the supernatural beings include three forms i.e. (i) Raw, (ii) Cooked and (iii) Half fry or burn. The communal and household gods and goddesses are always offered the raw food items like fruit, uncooked rice, milk, soaked mung bean and chickpeas etc. On the other hand, while cooked foods are normally offered to the ancestors or terrestrial deities and spirits, half cooked or burn foods are offered to the souls, ghosts or any evil spirits. This depicts the hierarchical nature of supreme beings in the Koch religious life.

Moreover, each ritual carries the belief for the welfare of the family, the crops and ultimately to the community. Actually these annual rituals have the cyclical pattern which is very much similar with the life cycle rituals. It is kind of never ending. Moreover, as an agricultural community, the cyclical pattern of ritual observation and its relation with the agricultural products signifies a lot for their socio-economic as well as their religious life. The rhymes and songs symbolize the hope for the family and the community. Further, the lighting of the lamps and its flame which is an integral part of each ritual carries the protection, prosperity, productivity and welfare of the lives by expelling evil eyes and evil spirits. That is why the existence of supernatural beings can feel in each ritual. Moreover, the number of the Koch deities so huge and to explain the type of their religious nature we have to dive in more on their understanding of deities. Therefore, the next chapter is dedicated in order to understand the concept of the Koch deities and their typological studies.

Chapter 5

FOLK DEITIES OF KOCH COMMUNITY: A TYPOLOGICAL STUDY

5.1: Introduction

In the previous chapters, we have seen that a Koch ritual life, including private and public, has mostly governed by several supernatural powers. The reflections of various folk deities and their associated belief system metaphorically reveal the existence of their folk religious practices in the ritual life. The religiosity of a particular community mostly identified by the numbers of the deities that are worshipped. Generally, a deity or a god/goddess is understood to be the supernatural being personified as the supreme force having the power to control either various aspects of life or a different part of nature. Even the most fundamental definition of religion forwarded by Edward Burnett Tylor as the belief in supernatural beings is an all accepted phenomenon. In general concept, supernatural being is something which cannot be understood or explained. They are believed to be beyond the control and limits of a human being. It is above all the natural laws and conceived as higher and sacred than the life around us and these beliefs give birth to theism.

Theism talks about the existence of at least one supreme god. While monotheistic religion considers the existence of one supreme god, polytheistic religion believes in the existence of several deities. Although, there are several variations existed on the idea of a deity, Oxford Dictionary of English identifies a deity as a god or goddess (in a polytheistic religion like Hinduism) or a creator or Supreme Being (in a monotheistic religion such as Christianity) who has a divine status, quality or nature.[1] In general, a deity is considered as something that has supernatural power and superior to the human being. In many spiritual traditions, deity or god is a term for a sacred reality that is mysterious and unknown.[2] According to C. Scott Littleton, a deity is a "being with powers greater than those of ordinary humans, but who interacts with human, positively

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[1] Angus Stevenson (ed.), Oxford Dictionary of English, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 461.

[2] Jodi O'Brien, *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society*, Volume 1, Los Angeles: Sage, 2017, pp. 190-191.

or negatively, in ways that carry humans to new levels of consciousness, beyond the grounded preoccupations of ordinary life".[3] Although the concept of the deity is varied from culture to culture and there is no universal acceptance about the concept of deity,[4] Huwe Parri Owen states that, "the word god or deity and its equivalents in other languages have been used in a bewildering variety of senses"[5], which can be applied from a "transcendent, infinite being who is Creator and Lord of the universe" to "any finite entity or experience which possesses special significance or which evokes special gratitude" to sometime "many gods whom they have conceived as magnified human beings existing in a supra-mundane real" and "large number of usages".[6]

Folk deities are one of the greatest constructions of the religious beliefs and philosophy of the people and society. As Jodi O'Brien has stated that the deities "often serve as a guidepost for acting and relating in the world. In some traditions, deities are imaged with human qualities and personalities possessing consciousness, emotions, and desires. Some deities are thought to be distant and inaccessible to humans, but others are to be believed to be invisible but omnipresent. Some believe that deities reveal themselves to people or manifest in human form. In many religions, people feel obligated to deities and believe that the purpose of life is to serve them. Deities can be peaceful and auspicious or menacing and wrathful, and they are often portrayed as engaged in a battle for supremacy. The battle between deities is a metaphor for the human inner struggle to conquer ego and selfish desire."[7] They are an inseparable unit of the folk religion. The factors and experiments with a particular region and environment lead the group of people to emerge the idea of deities. Every deity has a special nature or a specialised feature that illustrates the socio-cultural life of the belonged community. They helped the community to fit in the spiritual environment in a small sphere. Like R. S. Mann has mentioned the impact of religion on the masses saying, "religious elements are helpful in

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[3] C. Scott Littleton, *Gods, Goddesses and Mythology*, New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2017, p. 378.

[4] Jodi O'Brien, *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society*, Volume 1, Los Angeles: Sage, 2017, pp. 190-191.

[5] Huwe Parri Owen, *Concepts of Deity*, London: McMillan and Co. Ltd., 1971, p. vii.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Jodi O'Brien, *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society*, Volume 1, Los Angeles: Sage, 2017, pp. 190-191.

curing diseases, creating healthy conditions, lengthening the life span, begetting children, in better germination of seed and growth of crops, in getting good husbands, in going to heaven after death, in achieving material gain, in cattle protection, in bringing rains and in avoiding calamities like famine and epidemic."[8] Overall, these deities play an important role in dominating their life and activities.

Like other folk religion, in the Koch religion[9] as well deities play an important part to provide the symbolic appearances of their behavioral pattern and worldview of the Koches. The number of Koch folk deities is a very extensive one and most of these folk deities carry their tribal origin instead of having any Vedic relation. Moreover, a good portion of those deities have some connection or are borrowed from their Hindu neighbours. Most of the deities that belong to the Koch community have very similar essence in terms of practice, nature, and functions. Only the difference comes to their names and mode of worship. Therefore, a typological study of these deities will assist us to dig deep to understand various aspects of Koch folk deities and their significance in the life of the Koches.

5.2: Typology of Koch Folk Deities

Understanding and study of Koch folk deities by examining and categorizing according to their various aspects reveal their social values and norms, perception, socio-cultural meaning, religious hierarchies as well as their understanding of the metaphysical world from their physical world. The reverence of the people towards the deities is one of the fundamental activities that express the sense of sacredness, faith, fear, etc. These emotions bring a platform to communicate their metaphysical and physical world. Each activity is performed in a way to appease, satisfy or please their deities asking for blessings and protections in their life. Rituals, venerations on a regular basis towards the deities make sure the people for a better and peaceful life. So, naturally, there are various functions and attributions are connected with the deities with whom the community

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[8] R. S. Mann, *Social Structure, Social Change, and Future Trends*, Jaipur, Delhi: Rawat Publications, 1979, p. 203.

[9] By the term Koch religion, here refer to the traditional religion that carries by the people of Koch community outside the official forms of religion.

members are dealing with. The classification of deities may be done from the relationship of the people with the deities itself or from the social relation made by the people associating with various belief systems with the deities.

In a field base study, the interpretation and analysis of data depend upon the information that is collected and then their categorical classification. Generally, typology is a process of categorizing things that are related but have distinct points of difference to another. Such an idea of categorization into similarity and difference serve a system to connect and to unify knowledge about the world. Here, the term typology means the classification of the same trait or classification of deities according to their nature and character, existence, and association with nature, spirits, and living beings. Moreover, typology is directly related to the mode of veneration towards the deities by practicing various ritual performances. The typology of deities is based on the function and purpose of the worshipping by the people in which context is more important to study the nature of the deities. Typology is not only a simple method that helps to classify the deities after observing and experiencing their nature of existence but the practical activity which can connect the intimate relationship with the human activities. The incorporated belief systems make them follow certain cultural practices to the people that signify their values towards deities in their socio-cultural life. As the typology is understood being as the analysis of the categorical classification that exists in the social system, structure, function or culture of a particular community, the categorical study of folk deities can easily break down to help us in order to understand the hidden expressive behavior and worldview of that particular community that lies on their cultural products. Hence, a categorical study of folk deities can reveal the community's social structure and belief system that makes their distinctive identity from others.

Hence, the present chapter mainly concentrated to understand how the folk deities of Koch endure the core identity of the communal religiosity and how the structure and function of the deities mirrored their social structure and cultural values and norms. Based on various aspects, the Koch folk deities have been categorised based on its geographical division, their associations, character, function, sacred space of worship, mode of worship and their visualisation. Even though this categorization of the Koch folk

deities is not an effort to establish an unambiguous classification, there are various deities do exist among the Koches that overlap into more than one category or can be distinguished into other categories as well. This classification of the deities is collected from the field data and is considered as an example of the belief system that deeply rooted in their religious beliefs on supernatural beings that is the primary foundation for most of the classifications.

5.2.1: Terminology for Koch Deities.

As the Koch social, economic and religious live has been influenced by the various rituals and religious oriented performances, the members of the community have tried their level best to observe and carry those rituals without any fail. Being a polytheistic community, a traditional socio-religious Koch life is noticeably influenced by various deities of different natures. The vernacular attribution of the deities also reveals their understanding of supernatural powers. According to Sibendra Narayan Koch, the Koches have no fair idea about their gods and goddesses though they belong to both the sexes.[10] Generally, in order to refer the Supreme Being, Koch people use the word *Isshor* that comes from the Sanskrit word 'Isvara' and other terms like *Bhogowan, Gohai, Gosai* are used to refer a God or Goddess in the whole region. Further, in general, *Mao*, *May* or *Ai* that carries the meaning of 'mother' is attributed to a female deity. But still, there are some differences and confusions do exist in terms of the attribution in order to differentiate a spirit from a god.

In the Koch religious life, a deity is termed either as *Deo* or as *Thakur*. But the most widely used term *Deo* is carrying an unclear understanding of meaning and concept with it. In the whole region, *Deo* is used to identifying any supernatural being. Although the term *Deo* comes from Sanskrit word *Deva* or *Devta* for Gods, the Koch people of Assam uses the word *Deo* for both a spirit and for gods and goddesses. On the other hand, the term *Thakur* is mostly used in the western part and in the eastern part it is completely negligible. In comparison to the term *Deo* that carries a dual idea, the term

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[10] Sibendra Narayan Koch, "The Koches of Garo Hills", *Garo Hills: Land & the People*, Gauhati/New Delhi: Omsons Publication, 1984.

Thakur used to designate only to the deities. But while the term *Deo* is used in the whole region, the popularity of *Thakur* only in the western part makes it region specific. Generally, in the western part a deity is most popularly referred to as *Thakur* that comes from Sanskrit word *Thakkura,* means a lord, idol or god[11]. The uses of the word *Thakur* is prevalent to both gods and goddesses, and sometimes the attribution of the word *Thakurani* to the female variant of the deities is also seen. Further, *Thakur* is also used to mean the hierarchical position in the socio-cultural life as in the Zamindari system the term *Thakur* is used to designate the local landlords. As the Zamindari system has an impact on the western part of the Goalpara region, the assimilation of a socio-political hierarchical position into the religious sphere is significant. But still, there is obscurity regarding the uses of the term is seen among the people.

Scholar Arup Jyoti Das has shared his view by saying that both the term *Deo* and *Thakur* convey the same concept of deities. He further says, while *Deo* generally reflects the deities that are believed as outrageous and malevolent in nature and character, *Thākur* carries the idea of benevolent and politeness.[12] But the problem arises when sometime *Deo* is also used as a suffix after a benevolent spirit and some of the deities who are very much generous in nature. For example, the term *Deo* is always used with deity *Garja* who is believed as one of the most benevolent communal deities and protector of the village. On the other hand, deities who appear with some uncertain tempers and are very much easy to take offense also called as *Thakur*. Moreover, the term *Thakur* also applied to both gender without any differentiation, such as *Kali Thakur*. She is a goddess with furious temper who is worshipped to prevent the outbreak of diseases like cholera. Further, while C. C. Sanyal has considered both the *Bhoot* (male spirit) and *Pettani* or *Poiri* (female spirit) as *Deo*[13], Birendranth Datta understands the term *Deo* as it is used "indiscriminately to designate any supernatural being, benevolent or malevolent, belonging either to the celestial or to the terrestrial world; and in the folk pantheon of the

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[11] http://dsalsrv02.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/contextualize.pl?p.2.hobson.860853 and https://www.ancestry.co.uk/name-origin?surname=thakur

[12] Informant: Arup Jyoti Das, Male, Age: 46, Guwahati. Interview date: 24/05/2018.

[13] C. C. Sanyal, *The Rajbansis of North Bengal*, Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1965, p. 160.

district take their places side by side."[14] So, the Koches have used the term *Deo* to every supernatural power to identify them separate from the living being.

It is also noticeable that the uses of the term *Deo* is equally popular in the whole region. But, sometimes it has been noticed that the term *Deo* is basically used towards the minor folk deities and spirits, *Thakur* is popularly used in the western part for the major folk as well as Hindu deities to reflect its hierarchical positions like the term *Gohai* is used in the eastern region. Thus, other than the hierarchical position, there is no such strict difference between epithets like *Deo*, *Thakur* or *Gohai* to carry the Koch religious beliefs. Here, the important thing is that all these terms carry the same idea about the supernatural powers that control the life of an individual as well as the community. It is just a matter of regional differences and influences from other superior cultures like Assamese and Bengali that give birth to the different variant terms that are used overlapping to one another and are used simultaneously and interchangeably. But the term *Deo* can be said as the original Rajbongshi term that carries their idea about deities and spirits as the Koch term *Wai*. Both of these terms do not have any clear ideas and is used to designate both the deities and spirits as well as to both genders.

5.2.2: Geographical Distribution of Koch Deities

As we have already discussed that the Koches are the dominant Hindu community that plays a major role in forming what we today known as *Goalpariya* culture. As the community population is widespread in the whole region and not confined to a particular geographical area, the geographical division of the Koch inhabitant Goalpara region seems to be very tough. Noted Assamese folklorist and scholar Birendranath Datta has divided the region into eastern, western and middle part by saying "eastern parts have a much closer cultural affinity with the districts of undivided Kamrup and present Darrang. The western parts, because of the intermixture of various cultural flows from the contiguous areas, offer a more challenging field of inquiry and have been given greater attention for the study. Roughly, the eastern zone consists of the areas covered by the

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[14] Birendranath Datta, *A Study of the Folk Culture of the Goalpara Region of Assam*, Guwahati: University Publication Department, Gauhati University, 1995, p. 56.

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present Goalpara district while the western zone by those covered by the present Dhubri and Kokrajhar districts. The middle portion roughly comprising Bongaigaon district incorporates cultural elements from both sides."[15] So, his division of different zone is not based on a particular community, rather on the cultural variations of the whole region. As the community is scattered in the whole region, the chapter will examine the differences really do occur for the Koch deities or not. For that, Kokrajhar and Dhubri districts will be considered as the western zone as per the criteria are drawn by Birendranath Datta. But here Chirang and Bongaigaon districts are not kept as a middle portion; rather this area is incorporated with Goalpara district as eastern zone because of the same similarities. Thus, a map of this zonal division has been drawn and given below:

Map No. 5.1: Goalpara Region: Zonal Division

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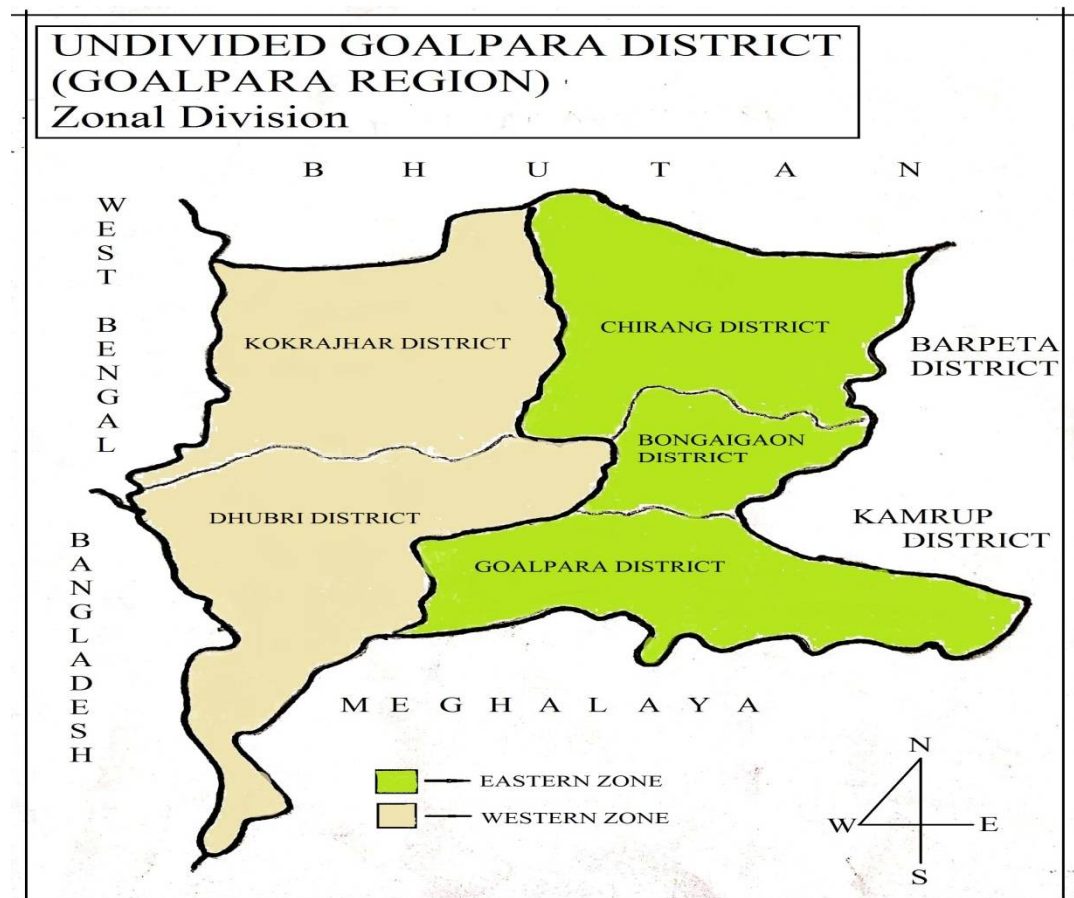
[15] Birendranath Datta, *A Study of the Folk Culture of the Goalpara Region of Assam*, Guwahati: Gauhati University Publication Department, 1995, p. 5.

Regarding the physical aspect of the region, most of its areas are plain and the mighty Brahmaputra dissects the region at the lower part. Small ranges of hills are mostly seen in Bongaigaon district and the mountain ranges from Garo hills can also be seen in the Goalpara district. B. C. Allen has also mentioned the same by saying, "The northern and western portions of the districts are absolutely flat. On the east, there are several low ranges projecting from the Garo Hills, which reach right down to the river near Goalpara town….. Immediately north of the Brahmaputra, these hills again appear, but they here attain a higher altitude."[16] Here, what Allen has mentioned about the hills that are at the 'north of the Brahmaputra' is actually situated at the present day Bongaigaon district which is in the eastern part of the region. Therefore, this makes the eastern region as a hilly area and the western zone as a plain area. Further, the western part of the region is very much dry, humid and hot area compare to the eastern. The district of the eastern region i.e. Bongaigaon, Chirang and Goalpara are the wet areas of the region, while the west and northern part of Kokrajhar district and southern part of the Dhubri districts are the dry areas of the region.

Based on the above zonal division of the region, a table has been prepared with the data collected from the field survey. The percentage of that data has also been shown through a pie chart below.

Table 5.1: Zonal Division of Koch Deities and Spirits.

Sl. No.	Peculiar to Eastern Zone	Both Zone	Peculiar to Western Zone
1	*Eklapukhri*	*Sib-Parbati*	*Saitol*
2	*Solsoli*	*Bura-Buri*	*Bhandarni*
3	*Rajacharang*	*Pagla Thakur*	*Dhouli Māi*
4	*Ultakhunda*	*Tulsi Thakur*	*Nirkali Thakur*
5	*Dholua Deo-Dholuwani Deo*	*Hari Thakur*	*Ajangar*
6	*Bouna Gohai*	*Lokkhi Thakur*	*Pedi Kumar*
7	*Uka Bhoot*	*Bastu Thakur*	*Sikna Raja*
8	*Ukni Buri*	*Ai Thansri*	*Gogona Thakur*

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[16] B. C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers: Goalpara/The Gazetteer of Goalpara*, Calcutta: The City Press, 1905, p. 2

9	*Dimamala*	*Aideu*	*Dokhina deo/Gohili*
10	*Masoti Deo*	*Manasa*	*Mogor*
11	*Ali Bura Deo*	*Subasini*	*Corok*
12	*Dewari Mao*	*Madan Kam*	*Saleswari*
13	*Sanamoyi*	*Kali*	*Radhika Thakur*
14	*Gangarani*	*Chandi*	
15	*Badiyarani*	*Mahamaya*	
16	*Rabhani*	*Bageswari*	
17	*Kaltani*	*Sanyasi Thākur*	
18	*Hukuma*	*Raja Thakur*	
19	*Lukuma*	*Kora-Kori*	
20		*Dhel Khawa Thakur*	
21		*Dhumsiā*	
22		*Ai Bosumoti*	
23		*Dharma Thakur*	
24		*Othoro Garja Deo*	
25		*Kati / Katika*	
26		*Hudum*	
27		*Kamakhya*	
28		*Kasaikhai*	
29		*Ai Bhogowoti*	
30		*Ai/Shitli*	
31		*Ma Thakurani*	
32		*Sonarai*	
33		*Ruparai*	
34		*Lakhol Thakur*	
35		*Tong Bura-Tong Buri*	
36		*Kuch-Kuchuni*	
37		*Mech-Mecheni*	
38		*Dangdhora-Dangdhari*	
39		*Gabu thakur-Gabu Thakuraniani*	
40		*Bura Soddar-Buri Soddarini*	
41		*Bhangua-Banguani*	
42		*Bidyagaya*	
43		*Jokha- Jokhini*	
45		*Pagili*	
46		*Abala Thakur*	
47		*Doodh Nakhawa*	
48		*Gornath*	
49		*Dakait Thakur*	

50		Luka Thakur	
51		Masan	
52		Kubir	
53		Nala-Nali	
54		Jhora-Jhari	
55		Akash Daini-Patal Daini	
56		Pettani/Petni	
57		Khetor	
58		Bak	
59		Nengta deo	
60		Poiri	
61		Bira	
62		Hawaimari	
63		Joka	

From the above table, it has been seen that the names of the major Koch deities are basically found in the both regions. Only the difference comes in terms of the minor deities and spirits. The percentage of the present table is given below through a pie chart.

Pie Chart No. 5.1: Zone wise Percentage of the Deities.
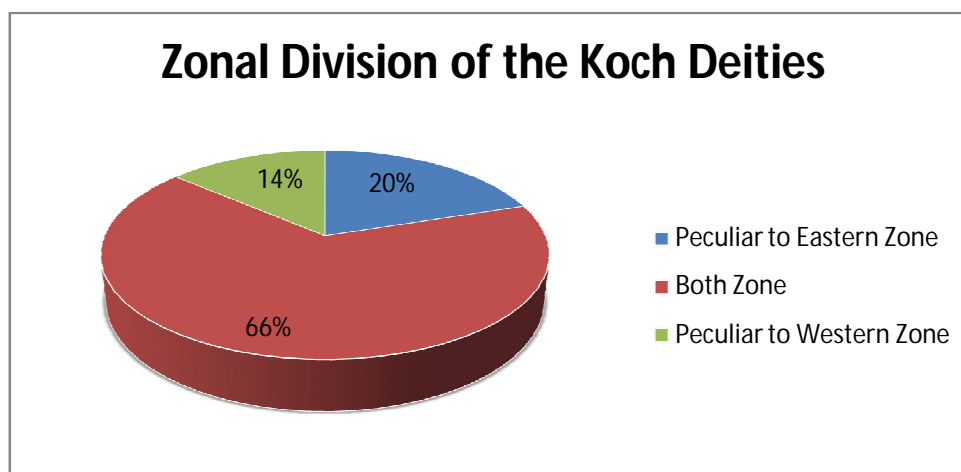
As we have seen that small hilly ranges form the geographical position of the eastern part as a hilly region than the western part, the differences in the existence of various deities and spirits are also noticed. In the table also the deities that are marked as peculiar to the eastern parts are the spirits associated with either a hill, or a stream, or a cave, or a pond, or a lake. The spirits of *Rajachareng, Eklapukhri, Solsoli, Doluwa deo-*

Dholuwani deo, Gangarani, Badiyarani, Dewari mao, etc. are basically associated with the natural objects of the surrounding environment. On the other hand, the deities mentioned as peculiar to the western zone are also spirits, but not related to the natural objects.

On the other hand, despite the zonal differences, the number of common deities and spirits are huge (Approx. 66%). All these deities and spirits are worshipped by the Koches in both region. This similarity can also be seen at the uses of materials to symbolize the deities or that are used at the ritual. As B. C. Allen has noted, "Near the Brahmaputra, much of the country is exposed to flood and is covered by a dense growth of grass and reeds. Further back, the level rises and rice fields take the place of swamps. The houses of the cultivators are buried in dense groves of areca palms, plantains, and bamboos, and at all seasons of the year the country looks fresh and green."[17] Moreover, despite the zonal difference, flora and fauna are also similar to both regions. Therefore, we can see the association of the deities with the trees and jungles and the uses of various plants like bamboo, plantain, areca nut, etc. are similar in both regions. But, the uses of pith images are seen popular in the western part than eastern. In the eastern part, uses of pith image are confined only to the *Bishohori puja*. Although, the availability of pith is found in both region, but the influence of North Bengal which is very much near to the western Goalpara region mark the popularity of the pith images in the west than in the east.

Thus, the regional variation of Koch folk deities can be noticed in the two zonal division of the region. But, the existences of these folk deities that are considered peculiarly to the Koches remain same except some. Moreover, the beliefs and concepts related to the supernatural being remain the same. These are the deities and spirits that purely carries the essence of Koch identity. This is because the community shares a common cultural thread of origin that carries their Koch identity. As French scholar, Emile Durkheim with his book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* constructed the idea of religion or religious behavior as a fact of the collective or social phenomenon by

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[17] B. C. Allen, *The Gazetteer of Goalpara*, Calcutta: The City Press, 1905, p. 1

saying, "….the collective consciousness is the highest form of psychic life, since it is the consciousness of the consciousnesses."[18]; it is the collective psychic construction that evolved and establishes Koches' sacred realm of religious life. The representation of these deities is their collective experiences from the environment that articulate their collective reality. The commonality of their understanding and beliefs in the deities acts as the foundation of their social solidarity. The belief, worship patterns, rituals, etc. constructed these traditions for the Koches. Therefore, they are popular in both zones with huge in number with the existence of few variations and these variations are because of their surrounding environment and the influences from other superior cultures. So, the geographical condition has formed their religious worldview and that is reflected through the uses of materials and practices of belief system.

5.3.3: Native and Hindu Deities

Various Koch folk deities operate and govern the mundane life of the Koches at the point of familial, lineage, village and regional. Most of these forms got assistance with various beliefs, rituals, and rites that are practiced by the member of the community. The number of these folk deities is huge, and most of them have a connection with their surrounding environmental life and experiences. These deities not only offer a solution to the immediate needs of the people but also carry and maintain their social unity and solidarity. In terms of religious beliefs, it is true that the practice of Hinduism does exist among the Koches but in different forms and variations.

As it has been already mentioned in the second chapter that Koch population formed a major Hindu population in the undivided Goalpara district of West Assam, they have heavily contributed in the creation of uniformity in the socio-cultural life of the region. The Koch belongs to the non-Aryan origin and is believed to declare their Koch rank from Bodo or Rabha through the process of conversion.[19] Hinduism that is practiced

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[18] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. J. W. Swain, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982, p. 445.

[19] The process of conversation generally performed by the *Gosains* who are the Vaisnava preachers and the tribal family recognised as pure Hindu after going through a series of purification. In the process, the first stage is known as *Modashi* or *Modahi* and at this stage; the converts are allowed to take pork and liquor. In the second stage, which is known as *Garami* or *Xoronia*, the consumption of these things is forbidden. The

by the Koches is very much free from the rigidity of orthodox Hinduism and generally characterized by the beliefs and practices of the past. The worshiping of the Hindu cults such as *Kali, Chandi, Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Vishnu*, *Ganesha*, etc. are seem not that much old. But the worship of *Kamakhya* is one of the oldest one. The Koches offer their worship towards *Siva, Parvati, Chandi, Kali*, snake goddess *Manasa* in their *Puranic* forms. Most of the times, these Sakta and Puranic forms are then assimilated and adopted into various native Koch forms. Such forms include *Bishohori, Kani Bishohori*, *Marai, Bormani, Dhumsiya, Dhang-Dhing,Gomaria,* etc. With the worship of Sakti cults, they worship Siva or Mahadeva too. Like the Bodo and the Rabha community, the worship of Siva with his various names exists among the Koch people. Almost all villages and areas of Goalpara region that have Koch inhabitants, Siva is considered as a dignified and central male deity. Not only among the Koches, but the popularity of Siva exists throughout the region across the racial and other sectarian divisions too. Regarding the popularity of Siva, Birinchi Kumar Barua has commented that "Saivism, or at least the worship of Siva, prevailed in Assam from a remote period and it was the popular form of religion both amongst the aboriginal and the Aryanized people."[20] Among the Koches, Siva is worshipped by different names and in different forms. He is said and worshipped under the name of *Sanyasi Thakur, Mahadev, Dhumsia, Gomira, Dhang-dhing, Deonia,* etc. He is also associated with a number of other folk forms. He is believed as the consort of *Kali* or *Parvati. Parvati* is believed and worshipped by the Koches as *Mahamai, Mecheni, Dhouli Mai, Tistaburi, Dangdhari, etc. Manasa*, another most popular deity among the Koches is also related to Siva.[21] She is believed as the

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last stage towards the pure Hindu comes after a year and sometimes it takes the generation. Regarding the conversion, William Crooke mentioned that "the process is often gradual. When the *Kachari* first puts himself under the guidance of a *gosain*, or a teacher of the Vaisnava sect, he is a Hindu in little more than a name, eating pigs and fowls, and continuing to drink strong liquor. After a time, he somewhat modifies these abominable practices, and then, after several generations, when the family has given up or concealed its taste for forbidden food and drink and has become in appearance at least, ceremonially pure, its members are finally promoted to the ranks of orthodox Hindus." – See: W. Crooke, *Hinduism*, Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, Vol. VI, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908, pp. 699-701.

[20] Birinchi Kumar Barua, A Cultural History of Assam, Vol. I, Guwahati: K. K. Barooah, 2001, p. 143.

[21] A table depicting various forms of Siva-Parvati and the connected deities of Koches has been prepared and included in the appendix.

daughter of *Siva* who was born from his seed. There is a myth exist among the Koches that tells how Goddess *Manasa* was from *Siva*. According to the myth:[22]

Narrative 5.1: Birth of Goddess Manasa.

> **"Once, Lord Siva was roaming in the *Paddubon*, a forest. There he saw *Prakriti* and ejaculated his semen. Lord Siva kept his semen over a lotus leaf (*poddo pat*) under a *Bilva* tree. On that tree there was a pair of bird who was living on the forest for thousand years. The name of the male bird was Khema and the female bird was Khemi. When Khemi saw the semen over that lotus leaf, she thought that as a food and swallowed that. But unable to digest, she became restless. Then Khema and Khemi started to meditate Siva. Siva told them that, the thing she had eaten was not food but his semen and told them to vomit that over the leaf. Following the advice of Siva, Khema and Khemi went to the *Bilva* tree and then Khemi vomited that. But when she vomited, the semen made a hole on the leaf and through the pipe of the leaf it went under the *Patal* (underworld). At that time Basuki nag and his wife was doing intercourse. The semen fell down on that and from there the deity Manasa was born."**

Historically, worshipping Siva appears as one of the earliest and popular forms of religion amongst the local indigenous people as well as the Aryanised population. The level of the popularity of this sect can be judged from the number of the shrines and temples that are dedicated to Siva.[23] In ancient time, Siva can be said as the prime deity of the Assamese Hindu population. The historical accounts and legends related to the different royal dynasties tell that almost all royal dynasties of ancient Assam were related to the Siva worship. The legend of *Ban Roja* also gives a fair idea of his devotion towards the god Siva. The different names of sacred places that were mentioned by *Kalika Purana* in its description, it clearly shows that many of the names of these sacred places are related to Siva worship. The *Kalika Purana* in recounting the sacred places of ancient *Kamrupa* mentions fifteen places sacred to Siva against five sacred to the Devi and five sacred to Visnu (Chapters 81, 82).[24] But the popularity of worshiping Siva did not decline that much and Siva is considered as the central deity and worshiped in different names

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[22]Informant: Biren Chandra Barman, Male, Age: 83, Pareyapara. Interview date: 27/05/2016.

[23] Maheswar Neog (ed.), *Pavitra Asam*, Dhemaji: Kiran Prakashan, 2008, pp. 302-320.

[24] Bani Kanta Kakati, *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya*, Gauhati: Lawyer's Book Stall, 1961, p. 10.

and different forms. But the nature and characteristics of those Sivas are very much different from the original idea of the Vedic Siva. The Siva that exists in the region has not only "assimilated much of the demonolatry and Animism of the non-Aryan races"[25], but also "has been largely modified by the fertility cults of the region."[26] Although Siva is known as a tribal deity, he has a connection with Hindu myths, Puranas and epics. But the myths related to Siva among the Koches do not have any connection with Puranas or epical myths. So naturally, this makes Siva as an independent deity for the community. Moreover, the celebration of other Puranic deities like *Durga Puja, Kali Puja*, differs region wise among the Koch society. The celebration of *Durga Puja* was much less in the eastern part of undivided Goalpara district than the western part. Like that the adaptation of the Puranic Tantric deities into more a localized version by the Koches has also been seen. The festival of *Ambubachi* which is related to goddess Kamakhya is celebrated by all Assamese communities. But among the Koches this is known as *Amoti or Amati Suwa*. According to the belief, the *Amati* or *Amoti* comes from the Koch word *Amai* means mother and *Ti* which is used for blood, ultimately means the blood of the mother. According to the Koch belief, this is the time when mother earth known as *Ai Bosumoti* gets her menstruation and considered the whole world as impure. At that period, Koch people do not engage with any cultivation work as they believed that mother earth is on her menstruation period during that time. Therefore, the assimilation and adaptation of the Puranic deities related rituals and beliefs into the native culture is an important fact of the Koch religious life.

The assimilation process with Hinduism has an impact on the construction of the various forms of the deities. As Saktism and Saivism are the two major sects worshipped by the Koches, the adaptation of various pantheon of these sects get infused with the folk deities. Therefore, it has been seen that most of the Koch folk deities are either considered as a form of Siva or Parvati and also sometimes a connection is established with both of them. Other than that the existence of Saktism and Saivism, the practices of

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[25] W. Crooke, "Hinduism", *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, *Vol. VI*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908, p. 700.

[26] Birendranath Datta, *A Study of the Folk Culture of the Goalpara Region of Assam*, Guwahati: University Publication Department, Gauhati University, 1995, p 53.

Neo-Vaisnavism culture have their influence among the Koch people, though not that much widespread. History says that when Chilarai accepted the neo-Vaisnavism under Sankardev, many of the Koch people became followers of Neo-Vaisnavism. Many of the followers of neo- Vaisnavism still exist, but at present, the number is very less. Among the Koches, *Hari Thakur* who is considered as the form of Lord Vishnu is the only deity that gets a place at the household shrine. Moreover, not all folk forms are counted as a form of either Siva or Parvati or Kali or Vishnu. Spirits, ghosts, nature and natural phenomenon, ancestors are manifested and worshipped through numerous folk forms. Birendranath Datta has rightly quoted Grunning's report that says: "From the nature of the races who call themselves Hindus it is not surprising that the Hinduism profess in the district is not of a very rigid character. The Rajbansis……retain much of their ancient beliefs and superstitions. The popular religion is expressed in the worship of a number of spirits and deities whose chief attribute is their power to cause evil if they are not appeased by offerings and sacrifices."[27]

Further, one of the most interesting facts that can be seen and observed in most of the Koch rituals is the existence of non-Aryan beliefs and practices. The main belief systems of the Koches are related to spirit worship and this is quite similar to the other tribal religion of the region. In terms of the names and mode of worship varies from others. Most of the rituals are accompanied by dances and songs and most of their belief system is related to various natural objects. These natural objects are then personified or having controlled by some supernatural power. As one of the most important facts of early religious beliefs is that almost all of the early people were worshipping the nature, the personification of nature into certain supernatural being led the understanding of human psycho-physical relation of human beings to its surrounding nature. All the physical things of nature that are beyond the control of human understanding and human culture often appear to the religious consciousness as a manifestation of sacred[28]. This leads to the veneration of various natural phenomena, including both celestial objects as

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[27] Birendranath Datta, *A Study of the Folk Culture of the Goalpara Region*, Guwahati: University Publication Department, Gauhati University, 1995, p. 47. Also see J. F. Grunning, Jalpaiguri District Gazetter, 1911, p. 42.

[28] Lawrence Sullivan, Nature: Worship of Nature in Encyclopedia of Religion, Second Edition, p.6438.

well as terrestrial objects. In the Gifford Lecture series delivered on the topic 'Worship of Nature' by James Goerge Frazer, argued that most of the major religious traditions both the primitive one and the present century venerate the similar gods because of their perception of the similarities on the same natural phenomena.[29] As per his understanding of the ubiquitous nature of worship in the human society, he identifies two types of worship; the nature worship and the ancestor worship which is the worship of the dead. In the nature worship human being basically personifies and anthropomorphizes the nature into various figures because of their uncontrollable and superiority of power to human that is experienced through their consciousness. The experiences that are perceived through the relationship of the human being with nature reflected in the form of respect, fear, veneration where the sacredness manifests through materials.

Among the Koch community, the understanding of nature as a whole is not known very well; rather the understanding of natural phenomena exists in its individual form. The idea of rain, thunder, earthquake, drought, disease, storm, etc. all understood as an individual natural force is controlled by a separate entity that influences their lives. Thus, they try to satisfy them by worshipping for a peaceful life. The understanding of every natural phenomenon because of a supernatural being is very much noticeable in their ritual practices also. In every year, typically Goalpara region receives the rain from the monsoon and the wild wind locally called *Bordoisila* marks the beginning of the monsoon rains not only to this region but also all over in Assam. The name *Bordoisila* may be an offspring of the Bodo term *Bardwisikhla* where *Bar* means wind, *Dwi* means water and *Sikhla* mean girl. According to the Bodo and Koch belief system, this *Bordoisila* or *Bardwisikhla* is a mythical goddess of nature who controls these natural phenomena like wind and rain. The narrative goes like this.[30]

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[29] James George Frazer, Worship on Nature, https://www.giffordlectures.org/lectures/worship-nature

[30] Informant: Satish Das, Male, Age: 63, Bakharapara. Interview date: 21/05/2016.

Narrative 5.2: *Bordoisila / Bardwisikhla* – **The girl who carries wind and rain.**

> **Once, a girl was married far from her paternal house and she was allowed to visit her paternal house only after a year. After one year the girl was allowed to visit her paternal house and it was the time of New Year. She was so happy that while coming to her mother's home she even forgets to comb her hair and started to run. While running to her mother's house strong Wind *(Bar)* and Water *(Dwi)* started to come with her and because of this whatever comes in front of her she started to destroy everything. The trees started to fall down and housed are torn apart. From than she was known as *Bardwisikhla* or *Bordoisila* who brings heavy shower and storm and damage everything whichever comes in front of her. From then, whenever *Bardwisikhla/Bordoisila* comes people from each family offer a *phoni* (comb), a *asi* (mirror) and a *pira* (small stool) and requested her to sit in the *pira* to comb her hair and to go slowly. Today also this practiced in each and every household.**

But although she is not worshipped as a separate deity and her identity is also not clear, she is considered as a supernatural being that controls wind and rain. But the most prominent and popular deity that is associated with rain and thunder, among the Koches, is *Hudum Deo*. *Hudum Deo* is one of the most important folk deity who is identified as the Koch counterpart for the Hindu God *Indra*; the god of rain and thunder. Although many people try to identify *Hudum* with *Indra*, the resemblance in terms of worshipping method discarded that argument. Further, the earlier worshipping method by catching a pair of *Hudu pokhi* (one-eared owl) and using them as a representation of the deity tells the importance of the animal worship in the society. The Koch people believe that the conversations of those birds bring rain and hence the name of the deity comes from the name of the bird.[31]

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[31] The name of the *Hudum deo* is connected with the *Hudu pokhi* also called as *Hudum pokhi* in the Rajbanshi language which is the eared owl bird and this bird is believed as having the power to call for the rain. According to the folk belief of the Koch people, when the *Hudu* bird cries or calls (*Rao kara*), the *Madda Hudu* (male *Hudu*) and *Maddi Hudu* (female *Hudu*) actually doing a conversation sitting in a branch of a tree facing each other. The conversation goes like this:

Madda: Sundari sundari bujlu ?
Maddi: Ki ?
Madda: Deowa megh korse, jhori asibe.
Maddi: Bujilung, bujilung.
(Male: My love my love did you understand?
Female: What?
Male: Cloud has come, it will rain.

As the community lives in such a geographical region where ponds, streams, small hills are numerous, the members of community attributed certain beliefs that each natural object has a spirit and in order to live in harmony with them, they worship them. Mountain and hills are always considered as abode of the spirits. A very interesting tradition of worshipping *Bhumeswar Pahar* (*Bhumeswar* hill) in the Bongaigaon district by the Koch population of that area reflects a very systematic relationship between the people and the image of not only the hills but also the surrounding eco-systems. *Raja Thakur* who is worshipped everywhere in the eastern part is actually the *Bhumeswar* hill. He with his family members who are identified with either a stone or hill or a pond is worshipped every year and connects them through the mythical stories. Further, when the cliff of a mountain is covered with clouds they belief that the spirits that live on that mountain are cooking food or lit the fire; when rains on the cliff of the hills and sound come they say that the *Dholuwa deo* and *Dholuwani deo* are beating a drum.[32] Again spirits like *Ali Bura deo*[33], *Masoti deo*[34], *Haluwa deo*[35], *Rajachareng*[36], *Solsoli*[37], etc. each carries the name of the spirits inhabiting the special eco-zone. Additionally, *Dewari Mao* is another female spirit who uses to live near the roads of the hills. She causes problems like stomach ache or vomiting if someone crosses the roads without paying

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Female: Understand, understand.)

Because of the belief that this kind of conversation of the *Hudu* bird brings rain in the earth, the people of the Koch community observed *Hudum puja* installing the wild *Hudu* bird as the main deity. The folk belief also says that in early days for the *puja*, at the *Khorobar* or *Sokhabar* (Saturday or Tuesday) of the *Amavasya* (new moon) night this bird is brought and tied with a *khuta* (stick) on a lonely field. The stick where the bird is tied of is known as *Hudum khuta*. After that women go to the field where the *Hudum khuta* is installed and then striping their cloths and untie their hair they started to dance and sing in a circle. In middle of the dance and song they tease the bird touching their genitals and tried to get their cry. Although, now a days the use of *Hudu* bird of the jungle as the *Hudum deo* is replaced by the banana tree, the importance of *Hudum khuti* remain same.

[32] Informant: Pahuram Ray, Male, Age: 73, Pareyapara. Interview date: 28/05/2016.

[33] *Ali Bura deo* is a male spirit who is believed to live at the *Ali* or the embankments of the paddy field.

[34] *Masoti deo* is believed to stay at the streams. She is a female spirits and always imagined with the *Jakhe-Khale* (traditional fishing tools).

[35] *Haluwa deo* is a male spirit. He is imagined in the form of a farmer who use to live at the paddy field.

[36] *Rajachareng* is also a spirit who lives at the lake. He is a male spirit.

[37] *Solsoli* is the female spirit lives at the water, basically at the stream.

respect to her. So, whenever people go to another place by crossing the road they throw a bunch of grass to her and request her to allow them to go safely by kneeling down. Communally once in a year, the above said deities are worshipped.

Another element of nature which is always manifested with supernatural power is water. Streams, rivers, ponds or lakes are always the center of the Koch religious belief and rituals and they have worshipped not only the agricultural cycle of the community but also at the moment of any life cycle rituals. Water bodies become an important part of the various communal rituals. Starting from the purification to the last rites of a communal ritual, water sources are considered as the most important. But most of the Koch people see the water sources as the abode of evil spirits who can contaminate the life of people. Water spirits like *Masan, Mogor, Jol Kuber, Bak*, etc has an important part in the Koch life. But these deities are mostly considered as spirits and ghosts and the belief of harming people led them to worship these spirits.

Among the Koch people, the list of the spirits and ghosts are quite huge and there is a very thin line that differentiates the gods from the spirits. The worshipping process of those spirits also constitutes a significant place as equal to the gods and goddesses. As it is already discussed earlier that the term *deo* is used to designate to any supernatural being whether they are benevolent or malevolent without any discrimination. Among the spirits and ghosts that exist in the belief system of Koch people, the numbers of the malevolent spirits are big and they have the capacity to harm the people. Therefore, to restrict those spirits from doing harm and taking offenses, they are offered puja and sacrifices. Sometimes a *deo* is believed to be a deity or a spirit of a dead man who generally uses to live in a bamboo grove or a *sheora* tree or a *ximolu* tree, especially in a lonely place. Generally, the male *deos* are called as *bhoot* and the female are known as *pettani*. Among the Koch belief system, some of the most important *deos* such as *Jokha, Dhumsiya, Mashan* or *Mashang, Abola, Soshan, Achin, Gogona*, etc. are the male and *Koltani, Kal-Matri, Sundarmala* etc. are female *deo*. Region wise the name and propitiation of the spirits are different.

In the belief system of Koch people, *Jokha* is the most important spirit who enjoys the status of the godlings. He is so important that he is often given a major place in the shrines and even many families worship him as their family god. There are three kinds of *Jokha* exists and they are *Kal Jokha, Boisnab Jokha*, and *Dakini Jokha*. Among these three kinds the *Kal Jokha* is considered as the most powerful and he is offered sacrifices especially of pigeons. The *Jokha* is also believed in Assamese society in the name of *Jokh*[38] and he is believed to be a terrible spirit who "kills his victim by gnawing his vital parts. He assumes the form of a large buffalo and splashes the water with his horns."[39]

Among the Koch people, *Mashan* or in some places called *Mashang* is also regarded as the most powerful evil spirit.[40] He is conceived as a male spirit, normally riding the horse and is attributed with greatest of the malignancy.[41] He is believed to live everywhere, but out of human inhabitants. There are different types of *Mashan* found in the whole region.[42] The attack of *Mashan* can cause various kinds of diseases and abnormalities depending upon which kind of *Mashan* has attacked that person. There is a place to say that the spirit *Kubir* in the Koch beliefs may have its origin from Kuber, the

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[38] In the eastern part of undivided Goalpara district, especially in Bongaigaon, Abhayapuri, Bijni areas *Jokha* is known as *Jokh*, but his status is not as high as the *Jokha*. He is generally associated with the water and fishing.

[39] Benudhar Rajkhowa, *Assamese Popular Superstitions and Assamese Demonology*, Gauhati: Dept of Folklore Research, Gauhati University, 1973, p. 04.

[40] *Masan* or *Masang* is considered as one of the most outrageous and most maleficent water spirit among the Koch people of the western part of the Goalpara region. It is a male spirit who is worshipped not only in West Assam, but also among the Rajbansis of the North Bengal.

[41] Birendranath Datta, *A Study of the Folk Culture of the Goalpara Region*, Guwahati: University Publication Department, Gauhati University, 1995, p. 57.

[42] Although *Masan* is considered as a male water spirit who particularly resides in water, yet he can be inhabited at any place of this earth. It can live in water, in the tree, at the cremation ground, as well as at the courtyard too. It is believed that Masan has various species, out of which Charu Chandra Sanyal has identified sixteen types of *Masan* and Girija Sankar Ray has described eighteen types of *Masan*. But in the Kokrajhar area, it is believed that there are one hundred and twenty six (*soy kuri*) types of Masan exist. Amongst them some of the types of *Masan* are: 1. *Barika Masan, 2. Chandiya Masan, 3. Bhula Masan, 4. Solona Masan, 5. Rongiya Masan, 6. Sutka Masan, 7. Obuya Masan, 8. Susiya Masan, 9. Kuhulia Masan, 10. Lengta Masan, 11. Bisuwa Masan, 12. Ghatiya Masan, 13. Bohota Masan, 14. Kal Masan, 15. Tisila Masan, 15. Solona Masan, 16. Kali Masan, 17. Demsa Masan, 18. Muriya Masan, 19. Nabang Masan, 20. Ghora Masan, 21. Bhera Masan, 22. Kataru Masan, 23. Pitsla Masan, 24. Khaimurti Masan, 25. Pora Masan, 26. Dakini Masan, 27. Jolo Masan, 28. Adakatli Masan, 29. Radhakatli Masan*, etc.

god of wealth and treasure. But among the Koch people, this *Kubir* is considered as the evil one. There are various kinds of *Kubir* can be found. Some of them are *Jol-Kubir, Thol-Kubir, Ish Kubir, Bish Kubir, Patal Kubir, etc.* are considered as the malevolent spirit. *Dhon-Kubir*, another form of Kubir hides treasure and the only one which does not have the malignant nature. Among the other spirits, there is *Bira* or *Biradeo* who has mischievous nature and have a special interest in harassing people. *Bira* is attributed with the throwing stones on houses, stealing and misplacing things from the household and generally makes annoyance in other obnoxious ways. It is believed that this *Bira* can be tamed and there are persons who tamed them and are used to harm people.

Another spirit *Ghorabak* is regarded as one of the scariest spirits who use to live in water. It is believed that at night when people go for fishing; this spirit targets them. Further he eats the head of the victim and digs his body in the mud from head side down. There are various kinds of beliefs exist related to *Ghorabak*. It is said that he has the ability of shapeshifting. With his ability to mimic the appearance and voice of any person; at midnight he used to call people by their name and request to go for fishing with him. Once the person goes out with him, he kills the victim. It is believed that he calls the name only for one or two times and therefore at midnight no one comes out from their house until and unless they call him three times.

Other spirits such as *Bhoirob deo* who generally use to live in the bamboo grove are also believed by many. *Paura* is another spirit who is believed to take place when a man loses his way and because of this spirit, the man arrives again and again at the same spot from where he had started his journey. It is believed that *Paura* "is a sprightly female spirit. She amuses herself at the meeting of three roads leads way-fairer astray."[43] Thus, the association of the Koch folk deities is as much diverse as their conception of the presence of supernatural being. Therefore, the connection of Koch folk deities with various religious tradition and supernatural forces is shown through the table and the percentage from that table is represented through the pie chart.

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[43] Rajkhowa, Benudhar, *Assamese Popular Superstitions and Assamese Demonology*, Gauhati: Dept of Folklore Research, Gauhati University, 1973, p. 09.

Table No. 5.2: Koch Deities and their association

Sl. No.	Related to Hindu Pantheon	Native Gods and Goddesses	Deities Related to Nature	Deities Related to Spirits and Ghosts	Ancestral Deities
1	Sib	Aideu	Hudum	Othoro Garja Deo	Bura-Buri
2	Parbati	Bastu Thakur	Nala-Nali	Tong Bura-Tong Buri	Kuch-Kuchuni
3	Hari Thakur	Ai Thansri	Jhora-Jhari	Dangdhora-Dangdhari	Mech-Mecheni
4	Lokkhi Thakur	Subasini	Hawaimari	Gabu thakur-Gabu Thakuraniani	Pedi Kumar
5	Manasa	Raja Thakur	Eklapukhri	Bura Soddar-Buri Soddarini	Sikna Raja
6	Madan Kam	Kora-Kori	Solsoli	Bhangua-Banguani	Dangdhora
7	Kali	Corok	Rajacharang	Jokha- Jokhini	Khuksiya
8	Chandi	Ai Bosumoti	Ultakhunda	Pagili	Khudibura-Khudiburi
9	Mahamaya	Dharma Thakur	Bouna Gohai	Abala Thakur	Sanyasi Thakur
10	Kati / Katika	Sonarai	Saleswari	Doodh Nakhawa	
11	Kamakhya	Ruparai	Radhika Thakur	Dholua Deo-Dholuwani Deo	
12	Ai Bhogowoti	Kasaikhai	Bordoisila	Luka Thakur	
13	Lakhol Thakur	Ai/Shitli	Tistaburi	Masan	
14	Pagla Thakur	Ajangar		Kubir	
15		Gornath		Pettani/Petni	
16		Bidyagaya		Khetor	
17		Bageswari		Bak	
18		Sanyasi Thakur		Nengta deo	
19		Dhel Khawa Thakur		Poiri	
20		Ma Thakurani		Bira	
21				Joka	
22				Nirkali Thakur	
23				Gogona Thakur	
24				Dokhina deo/Gohili	
25				Mogor	
26				Uka Bhoot	
27				Ukni Buri	
28				Dimamala	
29				Akash Daini-Patal Daini	
30				Dhumsia	
31				Paura	

32				*Bhoirob deo*	
33				*Achin*	
34				*Masoti Deo*	
35				*Ali Bura Deo*	
36				*Dewari Mao*	
37				*Dakait Thakur*	

In the table, the number of the deities related to the spirits and ghosts are seen more. These spirits and ghosts are basically worshipped communally. Following them, the native gods and goddesses also holds a good number in their folk religious life. On the other hand, if we see the Hindu pantheons list, we can notice that the majority of them are the local forms of Hindu cults. *Siva* and *Parvati* hold a good place in their life. The following pie chart represents the percentage of the above table.

Pie Chart No. 5.2: Association of Koch Deities
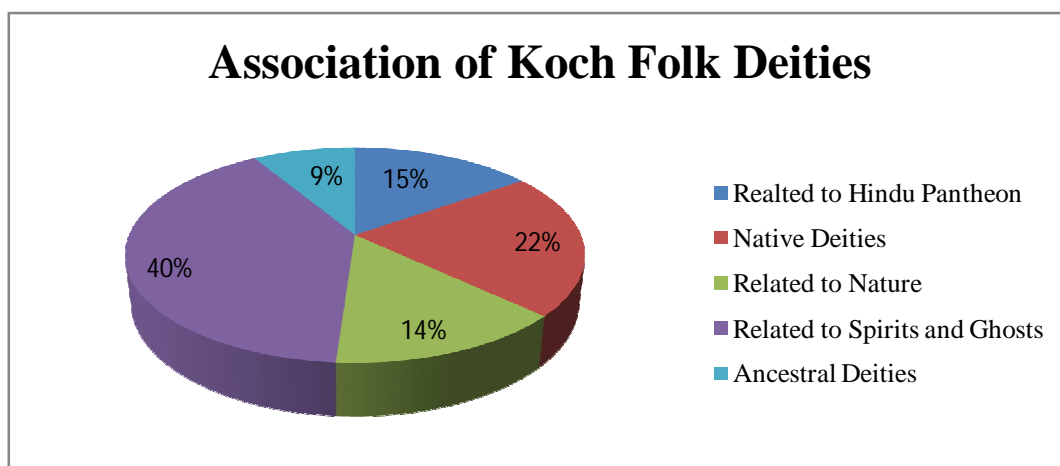
Although once Hinduised Koch community do venerate various Puranic and Vedic cults (15%), the percentage of the folk deities (other 85%) reveal the beliefs and dominance of the folk deities in their socio-religious sphere. They belief in spirits of the surrounding environments that controls their life and therefore a tree, a junction, a stone, an altar, etc. can also become a representation of that supernatural entity. Their belief in supernatural power keeps the Koches to venerate them in order to satisfy and keep away from any calamities. They are the supernatural beings that hold the power to protect them from various natural threats which could be seen on their beliefs. They belief their life is always controlled by the super natural beings. Fear makes them conscious to be moral

that brings sacrality to their life. This sacredness can be seen in their mundane life also that constitutes their domestic as well as public realm.

5.3.4: Sacred Space: Domestic and Public Realm

The symbolic classification of a particular space into sacred and profane is one of the fundamental aspects of any religious belief system. The sacred character that produced the attribution of sacred objects on that specific geographic location demarcates the sacred place from a profane space. This appears to be a very important matter into the life of the peoples as they are considered as the place that holds the power and that consecrates the relationship between the living world and the supernatural being. The dichotomy of sacred and profane, as discussed by Emile Durkheim, is considered as the most important character of religion. As he said "religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden"[44], where scared stands for the social unity of the group is reflected through their sacred symbols, or totems. For the believers, sacred carries the meaning of dedication or set apart for the service or worship towards a deity.[45] In other sense, there is always an attribution of sacredness towards a space or an object that are connected with supernatural beings. Moreover, a specific geographical area does not always attribute sacredness on it; rather the defining factor of sacredness to a place depends upon the value and belief system of the individual as well as communal and how the community members perceive the place. The concept of sacred implies to the restrictions and prohibitions on human behavior that set apart a site from everyday places and that has a significant role in their religious life. "To say that a place is a sacred place is not simply to describe a piece of land, or just locate it in a certain position in the landscape. What is known as a sacred site carries with it a whole range of rules and regulations regarding people's behavior in relation to it, and implies a set of belief to do with the non-empirical

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[44] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, New York: The Free Press, 1995, p. 35.

[45] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sacred, accessed on 05/06/2017.

world, often in relation to the spirits of ancestors, as well as more remote or powerful gods and spirits."[46]

Considering to the sacred sites associated with deities and spirits, every Koch family has certain places that are purely dedicated to those deities and spirits. An individual household as well as village area have their different sacred spaces called as *thanshali*[47] that are dedicated for the deities and for their manifestations. In a Koch socio-cultural life of the Goalpara region of Assam, this *pat* or *than* is considered as a very important religious matter. This *pats* or *thanshali* is the sacred space that exists inside, at the border and some time at the outside of the household and the village. Each sacred place is considered as the abode of the deities and spirits and therefore is considered as the sacred place which is positioned at certain special areas depending upon the nature and function of the deities and spirits. Therefore, depending upon the location of these sacred spaces these family and village Koch deities, can be divided into two broad groups, i.e. the sacred space for familial or household deities and the sacred space for village or communal deities. In the vernacular uses this can termed as *Mareyar Deor Pat* and *Rajohuwa Deor Pat* respectively. It has been shown and discussion will follow after the diagram.

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[46] David L. Carmichael, Jane Hubert and Brian Reeves, *Introduction* in Sacred Sites, Sacred Places, London and New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 3.

[47] A *Thansali* is the sacred space dedicated for the deities. *Thansali* is the combination of two words i.e. *Than*, means shrine and *Sali* means the place or area. *Thansali* carries not simply means the shrine, but the whole area that consists of those shrines. The whole area is considered as sacred. The word *thansali* is used also used as suffix after the ritual name. For example: *Garjashali*.

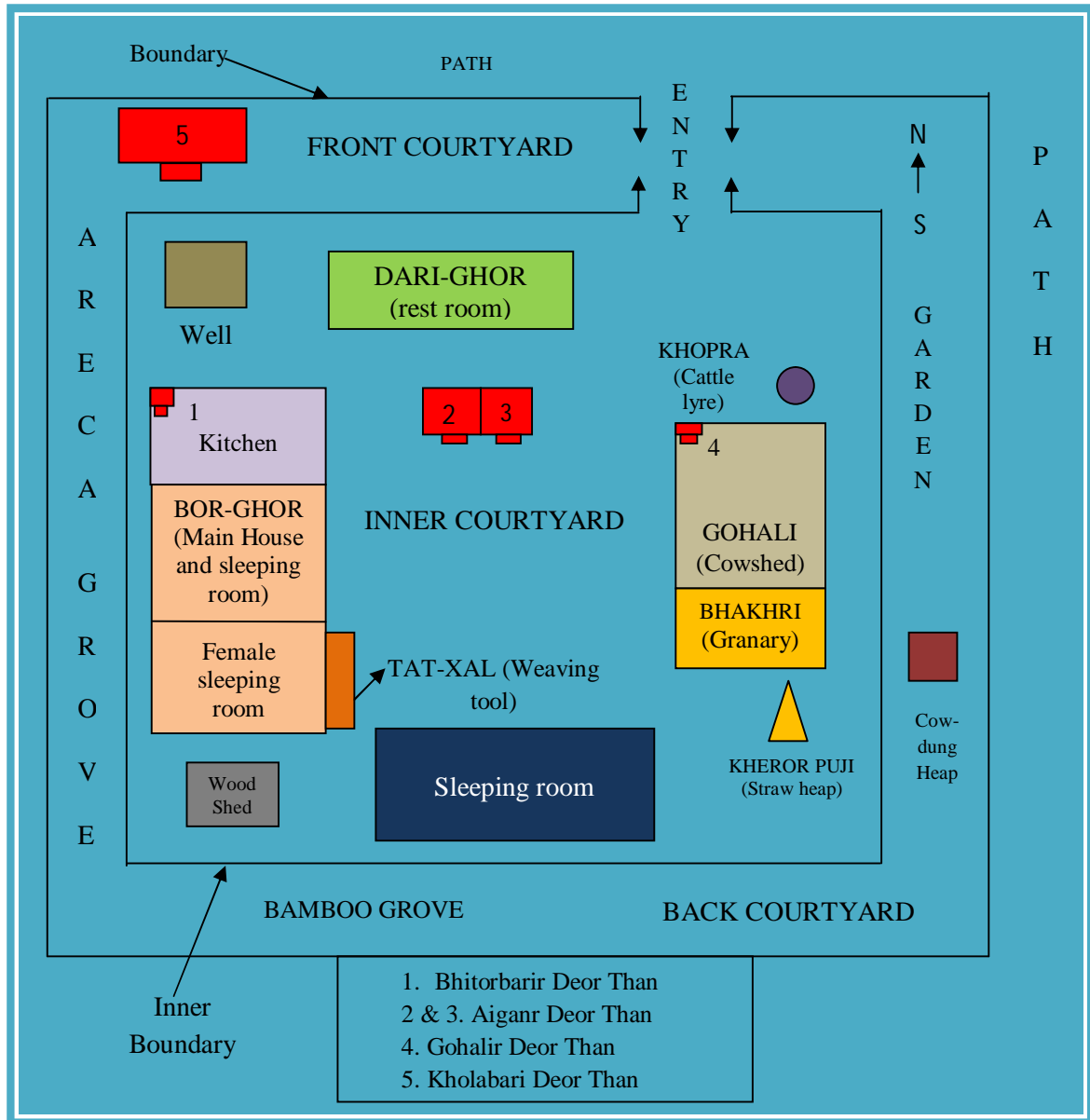**Diagram No. 5. 1: Sacred Space and Associated Deities.**
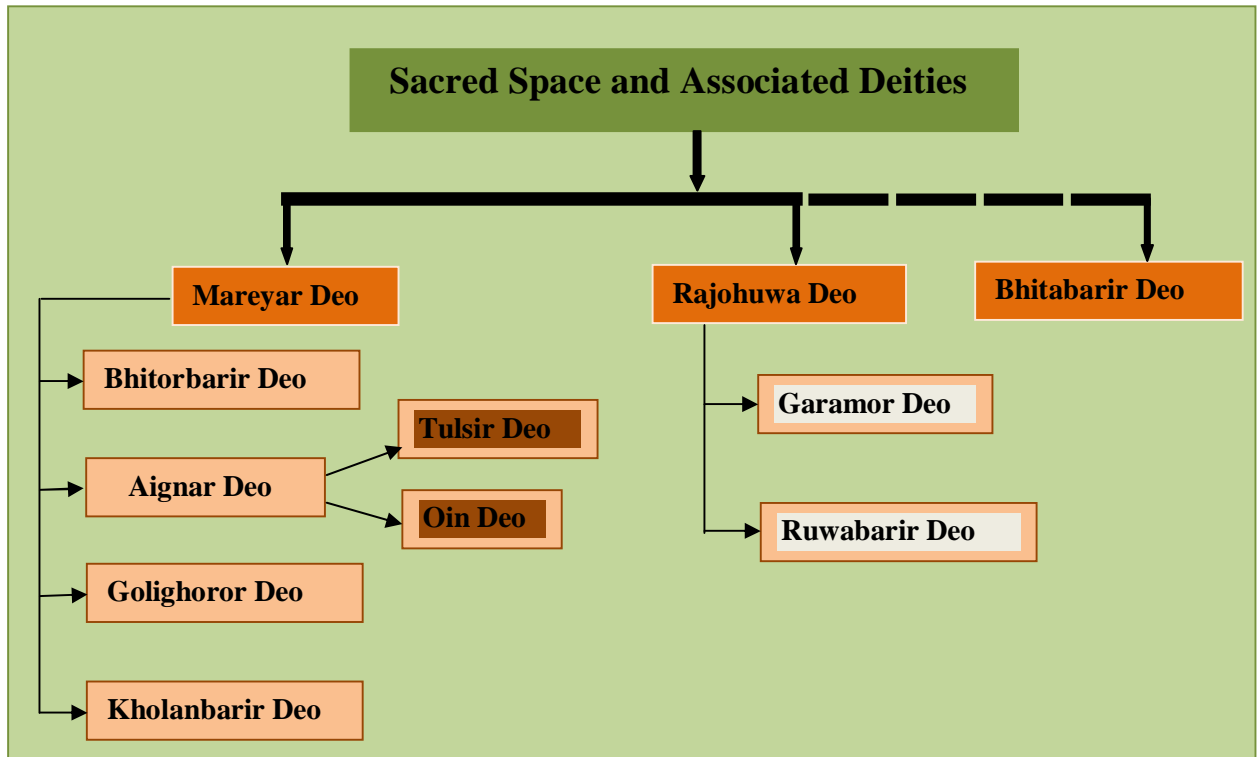
The above diagram has been discussed and analysed below:

5.3.4.1: *Mareyar Deor Pat* **(Sacred Space for Familial or Household Deities)**

Mareyar Deo is the Koch counterpart of the Hindu concept of Grihadevta, but among the Koch people this not only includes the household deities, but also the ancestor deities of the family and the evil spirits that can cause harm to the members of the family. These deities are considered to have a close affinity to the family members who worship those deities generation wise. These are the deities who are basically venerated at the familial level and closely related to the various affairs related to the family. On the other hand when we talk about the *Mareyar deor pat or than* that carries the meaning of the sacred spaces where deities are worshipped inside or around the house by the family members individually. A *mareyar deor pat* or *than* is divided into various sub-sections on the basis of the worshipping places of the deities and which are *Bhitorbarir Deor Than*, *Aignar Deor Than, Gohalir Deor Than* and *Kholanbarir Deor Than*. The placement of these sacred spaces in the homestead has been shown in the diagram below.

Diagram No. 5.2: Household Shrine

Diagram showing the layout of a Koch household shrine. Labels include: Boundary, PATH, ENTRY, N S (with compass), GARDEN, FRONT COURTYARD, 5, ARECA GROVE, Well, DARI-GHOR (rest room), KHOPRA (Cattle lyre), 1 Kitchen, 2, 3, 4, GOHALI (Cowshed), BOR-GHOR (Main House and sleeping room), INNER COURTYARD, BHAKHRI (Granary), Female sleeping room, TAT-XAL (Weaving tool), KHEROR PUJI (Straw heap), Cow-dung Heap, Wood Shed, Sleeping room, BAMBOO GROVE, BACK COURTYARD, Inner Boundary.

1. Bhitorbarir Deor Than
2 & 3. Aiganr Deor Than
4. Gohalir Deor Than
5. Kholabari Deor Than

From the above diagram it has been noticed that every Koch household contains two distinct types of sacred spaces for the household deities. Among the four sacred shrines for the Koch household deities that have been shown in the two diagrams, one is situated at the interior part of the house which is known as *bhitorbarir deor than*. On the other hand, the second type of shrine is situated at the exterior part of the house but inside of the boundary of a homestead and includes other three sacred places of the house. They are *aignar deor than, gohalir deor than* and *kholanbarir deor than*. The number and

selection of deities for the exterior household deities whom they will worship and whom not are completely depend upon the family members. But *bhitorbarir deos* are the common deities among all the members of the community that are worshipped compulsorily inside the homestead.

Bhitorbarir Than (No. 1 in the diagram) is a worshipping place that is situated inside of a household. The term *bhitorbari* means inside of the house. Every Koch household is a combination of several individual houses. The *borghor* or the central house which is constructed on the northern side is further divided into three rooms. The eastern room of the *borghor* is the *pakghor* or kitchen. But many people construct the kitchen separately along with the *borghor* at the northern side of the homestead or some time at the eastern side. At the south-eastern or north-eastern corner of the kitchen and nearby the *Akha* (hearth), a *Dhip* (alter) is dedicated to *Ai Thansri*. At the *dhip*, around five *takor* (approximately 45 inches) long and approximately 10 inches round bamboo pole is established. Then the bamboo pole is plant in front of the *dhip* in a way that only two inch of the pole will come up from the soil. The *dhip* along with the bamboo pole is considered as deity and every day morning she is worshipped with a *Saki* (earthen lamp), *dhup* (incense sticks) and with some flowers.

Akha is also considered as sacred because it is believed that the fire deity or in native language called as *Agni deo* inhabited there and at the time of cooking, the first spoon of each cooked food is offered to the *Deo*. Because of the existence of the *Akha* and the *dhip*, the kitchen is considered very much pure and sacred. Hence, the women who are in their menstrual periods are not allowed to enter in the kitchen. Further, entering into kitchen without taking bath and with sleepers is also considered impure. The housewife, therefore, every day use to clean the place after cooking and failure to this and uses of broom at the *dhip* at the cleaning process is believed to show disrespect to the deity. Phunul Barman who is a housewife has informed that while cleaning the *akha* and *dhip* sometime unknowingly they touch the hearth either with their legs or by broom which makes the deity unhappy. So if someone touches the hearth either by broom or leg, she will get a black mark on any part of her body, basically on the legs or hand or face. She further said that that mark is not a disease and it does not pain at all, on the contrary

it is the sign of unhappiness of the deity. This is known as *Thansriye guta* which can be translated as the kick of *Ai Thansri*. Once they have noticed the mark, on the very next morning after taking bath they have to pray her for forgiveness by saying that they have done that mistake unknowingly. She said that after the prayer for her forgiveness the mark will automatically go.[48] Hence, *Ai Thansri* is considered as a very important *Mareyar Deo* (household female deity) who is worshipped for prosperity of the family and therefore maintaining the purity and sacredness of the deity and space is considered very much important part of their daily routine work. In Most of the house along with *Ai Thansri* and *Akha Deo (Agni Deo), Baus Thakur* is also worshipped side by side. Otherwise, in some family, *Lokkhi Thakur* and *Baus Thakur* are worshipped at the main room of the *Borghor*. Then this *thansali* will call as *Baus Bhitha* and the deities are represented with the *matir dhip* (alter made by soil) and a bamboo pole. Thus, *Ai Thansri, Akha Deo (*or *Agni Deo), Baus Thakur* are the three major interior household deities that are worshipped by the Koch people.

On the other hand, in the exterior part of the house and at the inner courtyard another *thansali* is prepared for the other deities who are also considered as household deities. They are called as *agnar deo* as they have their own *thansali* situated at the center or eastern side and at the northern side of the *agna* which is the inner courtyard of a house. The *agnar than* (No. 2 and 3 in the diagram) is again divided into two different *thans* dedicated to various deities. One than is dedicated to *Tulsi thakuror than* (No.2 at the diagram) where a *tulsi* plant is worshipped considering as the deity *Aideu*. While another than is dedicated for other deities like *Madan Kam, Sib Thakur, Hari Thakur, Subasini* and *Bongshor Thakur* (Ancestor deities). This *than/pat* is called as *oin deor than*. Although both of these two *thans* (No 2 and 3 at the diagram) are two separate *aignar than*, but many time it is seen that some families place the both *thans* together either unknowingly or due to inconvenience of the family.[49] The third type of deity is the *gohalir deo* where a permanent place is dedicated to the deity at the cowshed and this is known as *gohalir deor than* (No. 4 at the diagram). In a Koch house, the *gohali* or the

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[48] Informant: Phunul Barman, Female, Age: 45, Dimalgaon. Interview date: 03/02/2016.

[49] Informant: Raghunath Choudhury, Male, Age: 54, Futkibari. Interview date: 21/04/2018.

cowshed is always build at the southern part of the homestead. The construction of a *gohali* is not similar with the other houses. This is like an open shed where long bamboos are used to keep the boundary of the house. At the south-east corner of that *gohali* a special place is dedicated towards *Lakhol deo* who is considered as the deity of the cattle.

The fourth group of deities inside the household category is the *kholanbarir deo*. *Kholanbari* is the front courtyard that is located at the front side of the house after the entrance gate and a *than*/*pat* is dedicated to these deities. This *than* or *pat* is called as *kholanbarir deor than* (No. 5 at the diagram). This is basically situated near the main entrance gate. So this is basically represents to the entrance to the family or house i.e. towards inside and going to the community i.e. towards outside. In each Koch household, there are some gods who has a place in the communal ritual also and they act as both household and communal deities. Every *kholanbarir deor Than* is a dedicated place to the deities of *Bura-Buri*, *Bishohori*, *Bormani*, *Sitola*, *Ai*, *Abala*, *Chandi*, *Kali* etc. depending upon family to family and village to village. Thus, a list of the household deities has been prepared and shown through the pie chart.

Table No. 5.3: *Mareyar Deo* (Household Deities) According to their Sacred Space.

	Inner Courtyard				Front Courtyard
Sl. No.	Bhitorbarir Deo	Aignar Deo		Goli-ghoror Deo	Kholanbarir Deo
		Tulsir Than	Oin Deor Than		
1	Ai Thansri	Aideu	Sib Thakur	Lakhol Deo	Bura-Buri
2	Akha Deo/Agni Deo		Hari Thakur		Bishohori
3	Baus Thakur		Subasini		Bormani
4			Bongshor Thakur		Podda
5			Madan Kam		Ai/Sitola
6					Chandi
7					Kali
8					Mahamaya
9					Abala
10					Sanyasi Thakur

In the tabular form the household deities are listed base on their sacred spaces in a homestead. In a traditional Koch homestead, three courtyards exist where only in the front and in the inner courtyard household deities are given a space. Therefore, the table of the deities is prepared based upon the inner and front courtyard. The percentage of the following table is represented through the pie chart below.

Pie Chart No. 5.3: Household Deities

Mareyar Deo (Household Deities)

- Bhitorbarir Deo
- Aignar Deo
- Golli-ghoror Deo
- Kholanbarir Deo
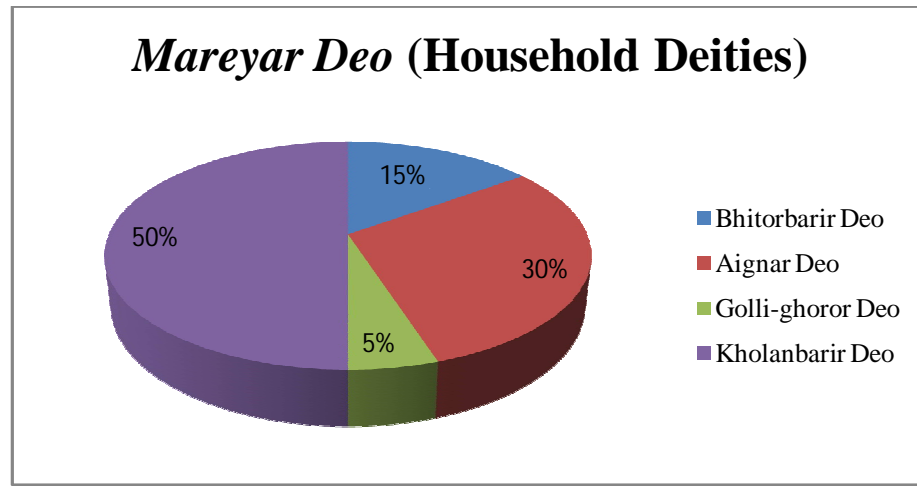
From the above pie chart, it has been seen that the percentage of the both inner and front courtyards are equal. Both sacred spaces shares 50% of their household deities. Interestingly, the deities of inner courtyard are worshipped by the family members and in familial rituals. They are mostly the benevolent deities worshipped for productivity and prosperity for the family members. But the *kholanbarir deo* (deities of front courtyard) are worshipped not only at the familial level, but at the time of communal rituals also. They are can be termed as the mediator of the public to private religious realm and vice versa. These deities, therefore, shares an ambiguous characters also and are worshipped for the protection of the family members from evil spirits, diseases and natural calamities. So, in order connect the religiosity of a family to the community, the Koches required a kind junction that mediate two separate realm.

5.3.4.2: *Rajohuwa Deor Pat/Than* **(Sacred Space for Communal Deities)**

On the other hand, when we talk about a *rajohuwa deo* (Communal Deities), each and every village has their own number and name of the deities depending upon their

territory and the spirits that are inhabited inside the village area. There are territorial deities who protect the village from outside evil powers and of course there are village deities who stay at the center of the village. But most of the deities are common to the community except certain minor gods and godlings that are believed to be inhabited at the stream, hill, lake, etc. and these deities have a significant impact on the life and activities of the village life. As Gait has mentioned, "almost every village has its special tutelary deities (one or more), which preside over the welfare of the community"[50], that shows the character of the village life and help the people to regulate and to maintain the balance between the human and spiritual environment. Hence, a systematic investigation of the position of sacred place inside a *garam* or village is considerably important to open up their socio-cultural and religious understanding. The religious ideology of the community is reflected in a better way through the structure of the village which is considered as "a concept, a way of life".[51]

Although there is no strict traditional pattern followed for a Koch village, but being an agricultural community most of these villages are situated in an open space rather than inside the forest. They basically inhabit near their paddy field. It has been noticed that most of the Koch families have their agricultural fields inside of that village boundaries where water sources are easily available. Moreover, in order to mark the boundary there is no strict boundaries or land marks exist. Instead, an imaginary boundary is marked to separate each from other village boundary with the help of trees, streams, roads or embankments called as *Ali*. According to the Koch belief system, spirits inhabits on the each marker of the boundaries who protects the village territory. Moreover, the cultivation land, hills, streams are considered to have spirits who are very much responsible for the communal prosperity and health. So the appearance of certain supernatural power are associated and manifested through objects like tree, stone, road, hill, stream etc. and the establishment of those beliefs continued through various narratives. Those are considered as sacred and the existences of those sacred objects

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[50] E. A. Gait, "The Gramya Devata", *Census of India, Vol. 6*, Calcutta, 1901, p. 215.

[51] D. N. Majumdar, *Caste and Communication in an Indian Village*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1958, p. 324.

transform the space into sacred space and separate them from profane. As Mircea Eliade says, "The sacred always manifested itself as a reality of a wholly different order from "natural" realities"[52], these sacred manifestations can echo in the form of either in hierophany[53] or in theophany[54]. According to him, "when the sacred manifests itself in any hierophany, there is not only a break of homogeneity of space; there is also revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the normality of the vast surrounding expanse."[55] Therefore, a sketch of the typical Koch village has been drawn and the position the sacred spaces is depicted below which will help us to explain and understand the Koch rural life settings and their religious ideology.

Diagram No. 5.2: Map of a Koch village and the Position of Sacred Spaces.
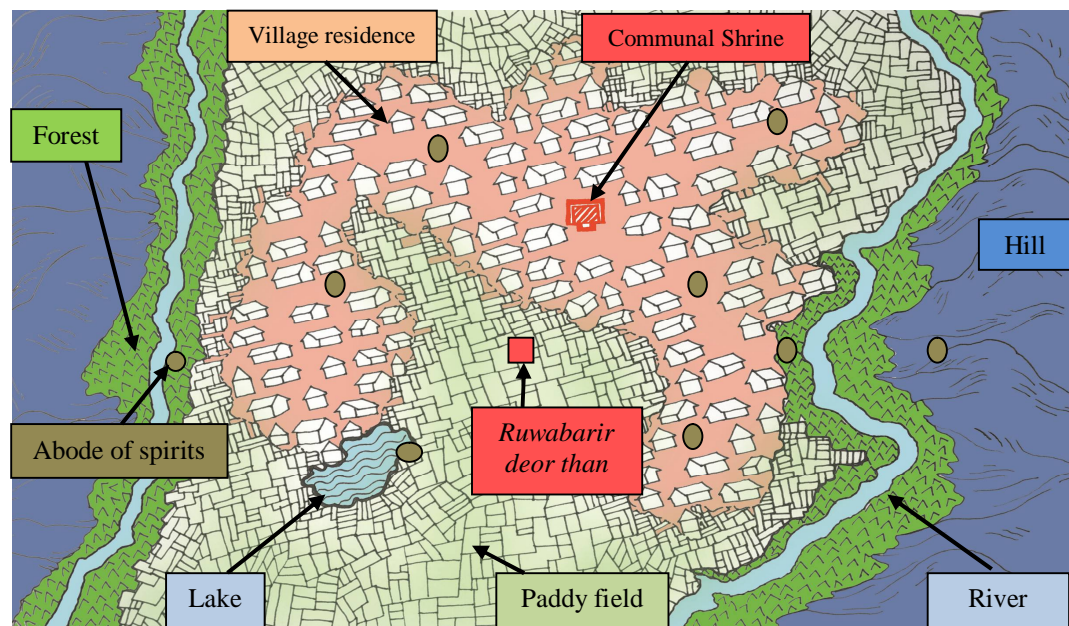
[52] Mircea Eliade, Sacred and Profane, New York: Houghton Miffin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1987, p. 10.

[53] *Hierophany* is the act to manifestation of sacred. For Mircea Eliade *hierophany* is "any manifestation of the sacred in whatever object throughout history. Whether the sacred appear in a stone, a tree, or an incarnate human being, a hierophany denotes the same acts: a reality of an entirely different order than those of this world becomes manifest in an object that is part of the natural or profane sphere." – See: Mircea Eliade (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion, Vol. 6*, New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987, pp. 313-317.

[54] *Theophany* is the manifestation of a god or goddess into any human form. In Hinduism, the *Avatara* of Vishnu can be said as the *theophany*.

[55] Mircea Eliade, Sacred and Profane, New York: Houghton Miffin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1987, p. 21.

From the above diagram, it has been seen that a normal Koch village dedicated several sacred spaces towards the deities and spirits inhabited inside the village boundary. The numbers of these sacred spaces depends upon the territory of the village. Every spirit and deity gets their own sacred space inside and some time at the boundary of the village. Sometimes these spaces are made visible by constructing shrines or huts or tying up red clothes, but most of the time these remains imaginary into the mind of the people. These deities are not worshipped regularly and at the time of the veneration only these spaces are made clear and conduct the ritual. But among all the territorial spaces of the deities and spirits, the communal shrine is the most common phenomenon in all Koch villages. This is situated at the center of the village and all the spirits and deities of the village get their space at the communal shrine. At the centre of the village territory there are various sacred shrines and spaces that are dedicated for various village deities. This is the place where whole community worships together the *garamor deo* (territorial or village deities) and this sacred space is known as *garjashali* (sacred space for village deities; No. 1 at the above diagram) where deities are worshipped collectively by the whole village people. In some areas this is also known as *dasjanya dham*. In some places, especially in eastern part this *dham* is called as *than* or *thansali*.

Communal rituals and festivals are an integral part of any community. The Koches have also observed certain festivals where every families of the village take part in the festival and worship the deities of the village. A typical Koch village consists of at least one community shrine or a dedicated public place to worship the deities where most of the popular deities are worshiped. It is situated at outside the home and generally nearby the sacred grove of trees or bamboos. The shrines generally do not have any idol of gods and godlings that are worshipped in that shrine. This *thansali* is usually remained open and is surrounded on all sides by a jungle of trees and bamboo clumps, the road towards the *than* remains open. In that *than*, there is an open space which is known as *chotal*. At the time of the ritual day only, they built small temporary huts for worship and these huts are supposed as the abode of the deities. In that huts the image of deities are not kept, but those huts are built for each deity according to their position from North to south. Moreover, to keep the *thansali* clean and tidy some people are charged and it is their duty to maintain the purity of the *thansali*. At the time of the ceremonial worship,

the whole place is given a thorough cleaning. Ceremonial worship of all the gods and godlings are held twice in a year – once after the *sali/xali* harvest and the other after the *ashu/ahu* harvest before the *Noya khawa* festival has taken place.[56] At that time each and every deities and spirits inside the territory of the village are installed on that *thansali* (shrine) and worshipped. These ceremonies are known as the *Garja Puja* and sometimes as *Deo Puja* which are conducted by the *deodha* and *deosi*. The exact number of the gods and godlings that are worshipped at the *thansali* are not fixed. Although the principal deities remain invariably, only in the case of the minor deities the number varies. According to the aptitude and belief of the community, village to village the number of the deities changes that depend upon the size and boundary of the *thansali*.[57]

Other than the *garjashali* or *dasjaniya dham*, the paddy field is also considered as the sacred space for venerating the deities. This space is known as the *ruwa-barir than* which is the designated sacred place at paddy field. There are certain deities among the Koch who are not worshipped communally; instead these deities are worshipped by limited participants like the individual family or group on their own cultivation land. *Ai Bosumoti* is considered as the mother earth who is worshipped at the *Hal Jatra* ritual[58] and after that ritual only the farmers start to plough at the paddy field. In addition, it is believed that there are spirits and ghosts also exist at the paddy field and they also have to worship for a good crop. These are known as *Bhuita deo*.[59] These are the family level rituals which are done at the paddy field. Sometimes these deities are worshipped by a particular section of the society also based on age, gender etc. *Hudum, Kati Thakur, Sonarai* etc. are such deities which is limited to a section of the society. The worship towards the deity *Hudum* and *Kati* is strictly restricted to the adult female members of the society. These rituals are conducted without any male participants and kept faraway their

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[56] Birendranath Datta *A Study of the Folk Culture of the Goalpara Region*, Guwahati: University Publication Department, Gauhati University, 1995, p. 54.

[57] Except *Soshan Kali*, each and every deity and spirits of the village get a space at the shrine. *Soshan Kali* is worshipped only at the cremation ground near the village.

[58] For more detail see the agricultural festivals described at the chapter 4.

[59] For more detail see chapter 4, pp. 216-217

eyesight. So, the paddy fields are selected as the sacred space for the veneration of these deities. But with regards to the *Kati thakur*, the position of space changed depending upon the context. According to Dhiren Das, "the worship of *Katipuja* can be conduct at *aigna* (inner courtyard), *kholanbari* (front courtyard) or at the *bhuibari* (paddy field) depending upon the context and situation."[60] On the other hand, *Sonaray puja* is observed by the young male members of the society. These deities are basically related to the fertility, productivity and other agricultural issues and the number of these types of deities is very less. These types do not have any permanent shrine or place for worship. Instead at the time of worship, a temporary space is prepared and dedicated towards the deity.

The last sub-group of this classification is dedicated to the deities who are inhabited inside or nearby the jungle and they are known as *bonor Deo* or *bondeo*. They are believed as the protector of the jungle and no one can enter into the jungle and pluck anything from the jungle without their permission. Although they are not worshipped regularly, but in order to collect wood or food from the jungle, people should have take their permission by offering a puja towards these deities. Further, sometime in order to regain of the lost cattle or to protect the cattle from the wild animals these deities is worshipped. Such deities include the name of *Radhika Thakur, Saleswari, Bouna Deo* etc.

Apparently, despite the fact of these two major groups (familial and communal) of Koch folk deities there are certain groups of *deos* that do exist among the Koch society that does not fall under the rubric forms of these spatial classification. Such one group is the *bhitabarir Deor* which is actually the space where various harmful spirits, ghosts and deities are venerated. The term *bhitabari deo* can be translated as the deities worshipped at the nearest jungles or groves outside of the boundary of the house. For the *bhitabarir deo* there is no permanent shrines are constructed. Daily basis worship is also not conducted. As per the belief, the place is considered as the abode of the deities and spirits who are believed as very much malicious in nature and who have the capacity to harm

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[60] Dhiren Das, *Goalpariya Lok Sanskriti Aru Lok Geet*, Guwahati: Chandra Prakash, 1994, p. xv.

people. People do not into those places normally as they belief that going those places may contaminate the human being by those evil spirits. Mostly the bamboo grooves, under the certain trees like *sheora, pakhri, bel* etc., river, or pond banks, stream, road junction, hill etc. Moreover, the existence of this *deos* is not clear. Koch people believe that these harmful spirits can live anywhere in the village including the interior and exterior part of the house. Therefore, people worshipped these deities by cleaning the place where they are believed to live whenever they are affected or possessed by these *deos*.[61] Thus, a proper list of all *rajohuwa deos*, according to their space is given below in a tabular form.

Table No. 5. 4: *Rajohuwa Deo* (Communal Deities) according to their Sacred Space.

	Rajohuwa Deo (Communal Deities)			
	Center of the village	**Inside or Bordering Area of the village**		**Anywhere in the village**
Sl. No.	*Garamor Deo*	*Ruwa-barir Deo*	*Bon Deo*	*Bhitabarir Deo*
1	Othoro Garja Deo	Ai Basumoti	Radhika Thakur	Soy Kuri Mashan
2	Bura-Buri	Bhuita deo	Saleswari	Joka
3	Lokkhi Thakur	Hudum deo	Bouna deo	Pettani
4	Manasa	Sonarai Thakur		Sanyasi Thakur
5	Madan Kam	Ruparai Thakur		Kani Bishohori
6	Kali			Saitol
7	Chandi			Brohmodotyo
8	Mahamaya			Daini
9	Bageswari			Moila Deo
10	Raja Thakur			Khetor deo
11	Kamakhya			Dokhina deo
12	Kasaikhai			Mogor
13	Ai Bhogowoti			Nala-Nali
14	Ai/Shitli			Jhora-Jhari
15	Ma Thakurani			Akash Daini-Patal Daini
16	Tong Bura-Tong Buri			Dimamala
17	Kuch-Kuchuni			Uka-bhoot
18	Mech-Mecheni			Nengta deo
19	Dangdhora-			Phuldeo

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[61] For example: worshipping of various spirits like *Moila deo, Daini, Pettani, Khetor* etc. For more detail see the birth ritual at the chapter 3.

	Dangdhari			
20	Gabu thakur-Gabu Thakuraniani			Kalpisas
21	Bura Soddar-Buri Soddarini			Dewari mao
22	Bhangua-Banguani			Ukni Buri
23	Bidyagaya			Uka bhoot
24	Jokha- Jokhini			Bira
25	Pagili			Poiri
26	Abala Thakur			Dimamala
27	Doodh Nakhawa			Hawaimari
28	Gornath			
29	Dakait Thakur			
30	Kubir			

So, from the above table it has been noticed that the deities that are worshipped as a communally includes the Hindu deities, where the absence of Hindu deities can be seen in terms of *ruwa-barir deo* and *bon deo*. On the other hand, the supernatural beings that are worshipped who do not have any permanent shrines are the spirits and ghosts (*bhitabarir deo*). The percentage of this list is shown below through the pie chart.

Pie Chart No. 5.4: Communal Deities.
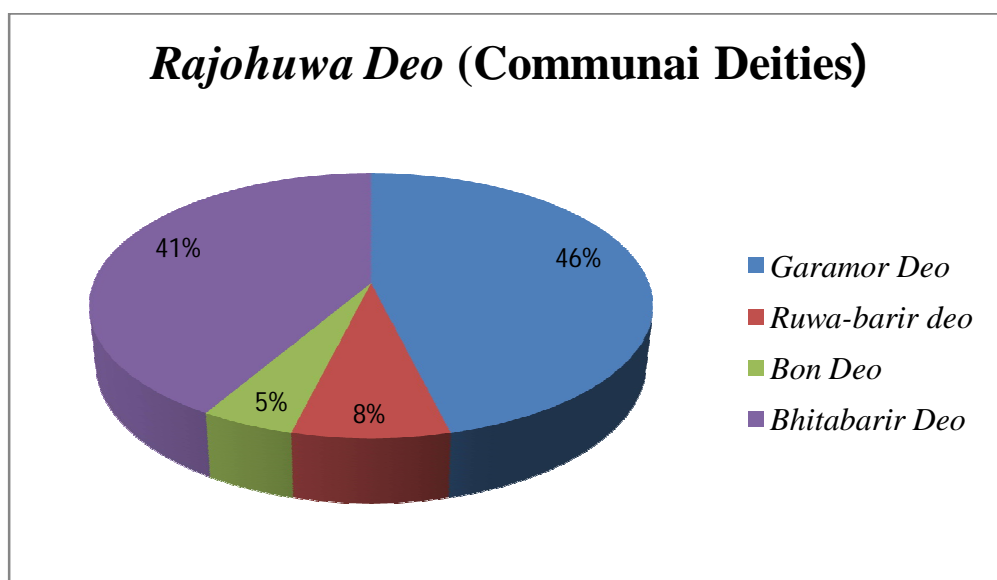
Thus, from the above discussion and tables of household and communal Koch deities, it has been seen that all of the deities and spirits of the village are worship

together and get a place at the annual communal worship at the *garjashali*. Moreover, we have seen that the number of *bhitabarir deo* is also huge (approx. 41%) who do not get their place at the communal shrine. As these deities are considered as the most malicious and harmful one, a fear rather than their sacredness is always associated with them. People always want to stay away from their contact. The community member worship or try to appease them only if any member is attacked or victimised by these spirits.

Thus, from the above discussion of household and communal spaces, we have seen that the *kholanbarir* deities play a major role in the socio-religious life of the Koches as these deities connects the both public and private realms. As we have already said these deities play the role of a mediator to connect these two realms. They connect the society with the family. In the social level, the numbers of the deities are also big (approx. 46%). In the communal ritual various Hindu deities like *Jagannath, Ganesha, Kali* etc. are also worshipped along with various Muslim deities like *Pir sahib, Madar* etc. As village is the place where people from different social status, groups, or religious background mingles and live together, the associations and assimilation of these different deities can be noticed clearly. Further, the existence of various spirits and ghosts who are worshipped but do not get any permanent sacred space is also a noticeable factor of the Koch religiosity. They are believed to live everywhere who attack and harassed people whenever they get a chance. Therefore, people worship them whenever they are attacked and in order to appease them. The furious nature makes the people to worship them. Thus, with the sacred space, belief, fears related to the deities constructs the life of the Koches. This leads to build the nature and functions of the deities.

5.3.5: Nature and Function of Koch Deities

It has already been discussed that Koch people use the term *deo* to designate the deities despite of their gender, nature, and character differences. A *deo* can be a malevolent, a benevolent or a harmful spirit and as for the characters of the deities are considered; the conception of Koch people is blurred and region wise it varies significantly. The idea of the Koch deities includes a beneficiary character as well as the evil one. But most of the deities are believed to have both characters and that characters are mostly reciprocal. As per the belief system goes the deities should demands offering

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of *pujas* and sacrifices in certain time and season, otherwise, there are possibilities that they will take offenses. There are deities simultaneously who has a transparent nature and character to shift from a benevolent to a fierce one. Kripa Ray, a Koch farmer from Chirang district of the eastern part of the region has informed that they have regularly performed sacrificial offerings towards the goddess *Bormani* in every rainy season in order to make her satisfied. According to him, goddess *Bormani* takes care of him and his family and therefore they have to offer something towards her. Further, if they don't perform that ritual she will get angry because this shows as a symbol of disrespect to her which will bring misfortune to the prosperity and life to the family. He further mentioned that if they forget to perform the sacrificial ritual to her, any family member will see a snake in their dream or snake will enter in the house or even snake may bite to any member of the family which can cause a loss of life.[62]

Sometimes, a deity carries different character depending upon in what forms they are represented. For example, goddess *Kali* alone carries both i.e. from benevolent to malevolent. While forms like *Raksha Kali* and *Dakshina Kali* are considered as the benevolent one that nourishes and protects the devotees from any misfortune, epidemics, and diseases; *Rudra Kali* and *Bhadra Kali* are considered as of fierce character. But *Soshan Kali* and *Bama Kali* are the most dreaded, powerful and dangerous forms among all forms of *Kali*. *Soshan Kali* who lives and worshipped in the cremation ground and identified as dark black in colour holds the personification that carries the power of destruction. The same goes with the case of *Kubir* also. *Kubir* who is considered as a spirit and worshipped yearly in the communal ritual, his various forms reflects various characters. Although when people talk about *Kubir*, their idea placed him as a malevolent one but one of his form *Dhan Kuber* is considered as the deity who has a benevolent character. But basically, the deities who carry malevolent and evil characters are the spirits who live in the mortal world. These evil characters live either in the trees, water, cremation ground, junctions, etc. and anyone can be attacked by them if they come to contact with them. These are basically the spirits who are considered as minor godlings such as *Mashan, Jokha* etc. also get a place in the communal rituals. Although *Masan* is

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[62] Informant: Kripadhar Ray, Male, Age: 54, Patiladaha. Interview date: 20/06/2016.

considered as a male water spirit who particularly resides in water, yet he can be inhabited at any place of this earth. It can live in water, in the tree, at the cremation ground, as well as at the courtyard of a house too. It is believed that Masan has various types, out of which Charu Chandra Sanyal has identified sixteen types of Masan[63] and Girija Sankar Ray has described eighteen types of Masan[64]. But according to the folk belief, *Soy-kuri Masan* (one hundred and twenty types) is believed to exist.[65]

On the other hand, the benevolent deities are mostly considered as the protector of the family and village. They are believed who have the most generous and helpful nature. Among the benevolent deity, *Raja Thakur* can be considered as one of the most popular, especially in the eastern part of the region. He is believed as a human being who turns into a deity. Another benevolent deity who is worshipped most commonly in the western part is *Sonaray*. *Sonaray Thakur* is another popular and interesting deity that is very much admired by the Koch people of the western part of Goalpara region. He is actually considered as a tiger deity mostly worshipped and celebrated by the cowherd boys and young men. According to Birendranath Datta, "*Sonaray* 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."[66] As an independent deity, it is very much hard a find a shrine dedicated to this deity, but he has given a seat at the time of *Garja puja* and a place has been assigned to him in some of the *dasjaniya dham* (community shrines). *Sonaray Thakur* is mainly related to the *Sonaray puja* which is basically an additive to *Pushna* or *Domashi* festival[67]. As the protector of the domestic animals from diseases, *Sonaray Thakur* does not appear in a dreadful nature and in the present time, the *puja* for the deity is celebrated in a very much joyful way rather than a ritualistic way. But despite the

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[63] Sanyal, Charu Chandra, *The Rajbanshis of North Bengal*, Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1965, p. 162.

[64] Girija Sankar Ray, "Mashan", *Rajbongshi Loka Dewata-Masan*, Golakganj: CESR, 2007, p. 80.

[65] Sushil Kumar Ray, "Masan Pujar Parampara: Eti Xonkhipto Alosona", *Rajbongshi Loka Dewata-Masan*, Golakganj: CESR, 2007, p. 11.

[66] Birendranath Datta, *A Study of the Folk Culture of the Goalpara Region*, Guwahati: University Publication Department, Gauhati University, 1995, p. 88.

[67] For more detail see the agricultural ritual at the chapter 3.

regional zones; *Garja Deo, Sib (Siva) Thakur, Subacini, Bura-Buri, Ai Thansri, Lokkhi (Lakshmi), Hari Thakur, Kati Thakur, Aideo* etc. are considered as the most benevolent deities. As seen above, the basic nature of the Koch deities can be divided into three broad categories. They are: Benevolent, Malevolent and Ambivalent. In order to reveal the nature of the Koch deities a table has been prepared which will be followed by a pie chart. This will lead to the functions of the Koch folk deities.
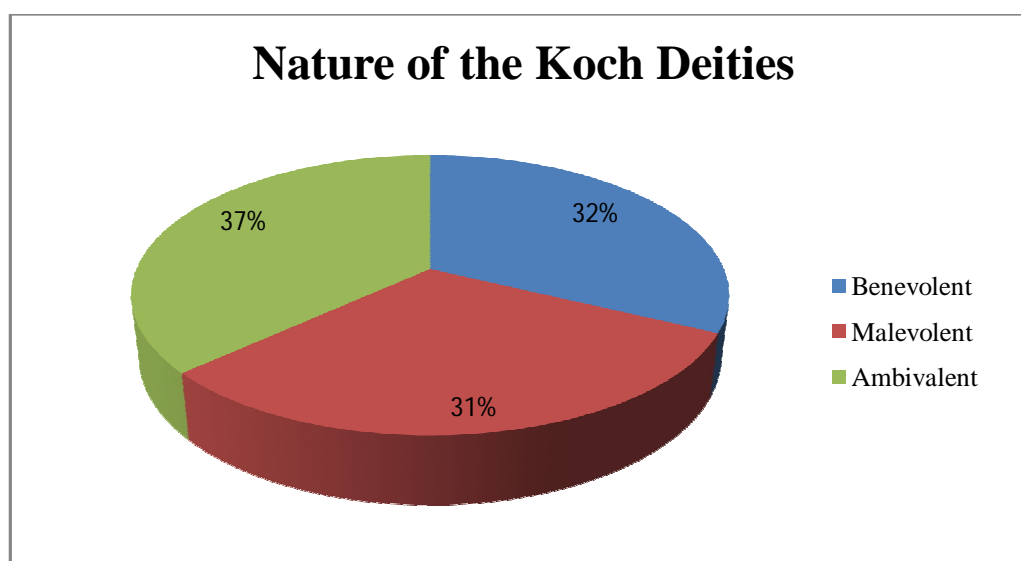
Table No. 5.5: Nature of Koch Deities

Sl. No.	Benevolent	Ambivalent	Malevolent
1	*Sib-Parbati*	*Pagla Thakur*	*Dokhina deo/Gohili*
2	*Bura-Buri*	*Manasa*	*Mogor*
3	*Tulsi Thakur*	*Kali*	*Eklapukhri*
4	*Hari Thakur*	*Chandi*	*Solsoli*
5	*Lokkhi Thakur*	*Mahamaya*	*Rajacharang*
6	*Bastu Thakur*	*Bageswari*	*Ultakhunda*
7	*Ai Thansri*	*Sanyasi Thakur*	*Dholua Deo-Dholuwani Deo*
8	*Aideu*	*Nirkali Thakur*	*Uka Bhoot*
9	*Subasini*	*Gogona Thakur*	*Ukni Buri*
10	*Madan Kam*	*Bouna Gohai*	*Dimamala*
11	*Raja Thakur*	*Dhel Khawa Thakur*	*Masoti Deo*
12	*Bhandarni*	*Dhumsia*	*Ali Bura Deo*
13	*Dhouli Mai*	*Kamakhya*	*Dewari Mao*
14	*Ajangar*	*Kasaikhai*	*Luka Thakur*
15	*Pedi Kumar*	*Ai Bhogowoti*	*Masan*
16	*Sikna Raja*	*Ai/Shitli*	*Kubir*
17	*Kora-Kori*	*Jokha- Jokhini*	*Nala-Nali*
18	*Corok*	*Pagili*	*Jhora-Jhari*
19	*Ai Bosumoti*	*Abala Thakur*	*Akash Daini-Patal Daini*
20	*Dharma Thakur*	*Doodh Nakhawa*	*Pettani/Petni*
21	*Othoro Garja Deo*	*Gornath*	*Khetor*
22	*Kati / Katika*	*Saleswari*	*Bak*
23	*Hudum*	*Radhika Thakur*	*Nengta deo*
24	*Ma Thakurani*	*Dakait Thakur*	*Poiri*
25	*Sonarai*	*Tong Bura-Tong Buri*	*Bira*
26	*Ruparai*	*Kuch-Kuchuni*	*Hawaimari*
27	*Lakhol Thakur*	*Mech-Mecheni*	*Joka*
28	*Bidyagaya*	*Dangdhora-Dangdhari*	
29		*Gabu thakur-Gabu*	

		Thakuraniani	
30		*Bura Soddar-Buri Soddarini*	
31		*Bhangua-Banguani*	
32		*Saitol*	

In the idea of the Koch people, deities carry both natures i.e. benevolent and malevolent. Among these deities, the people have clearly identified their nature and character. Most of the benevolent are from the household deities, where the malevolent deities are either spirits or the ghosts. But, as it is seen in the table the ambivalent deities exists more. They are both the spirits as well as deities. As we have already talked earlier that the common idea about the deities are that they need to be worshipped. It is the blur idea about the deities where fear dominates makes the deities ambivalent.

Pie Chart No. 5.5: Nature of Koch Deities.

The benevolent deities are mostly the household deities who are worshipped for the prosperity, fertility, wealth and protection of the family from various kinds of calamities. While talking about the worshipping of the communal deities the function expand from an individual perspective to a communal level perspective. Thus, with regards to the most fundamental function of the deities is concerned it is seen that most of the deities are attributed a function to the removal of diseases and calamities and

protection from the evil spirits. Like their character, the function of the Koch deities is also varied in contexts. The function of an individual deity is not clearly demarcated in the belief systems of the Koches. A single deity can be simultaneously worshipped for the protection of the family as well as for the removal of the diseases. Mostly the function depends upon in which form and when the *Deo* is worshipped. For example: in *Garja puja* which is organized twice in a year in every village, along with the *Garja deo* which again has eighteen different forms and names other major and minor deities and spirits are also worshipped. While each *Garja deo* is believed as the benevolent one and having control different aspects that have an effect on overall agricultural life, but various spirits who have a very much malicious and harmful nature also get a place in the ritual. Along with the deities their attendants are also worshipped who are believed to have a furious and malevolent nature. All of them are worshipped for the protection and welfare of the lives of the community members from the evil that are expected to affect the villagers. So, through the rituals and propitiations even the malevolent spirit gets diminished with their evil powers and the benevolent one helps the community to appease the evil ones and tame them in this *puja*.

On the other hand, *Subacini* who is also worshipped at the *Garja Puja* for the protection and welfare of the village; she is also worshipped to find a good husband or in order to conduct the marriage ritual without any problem in the family level. Another most powerful deity *Kali* is worshipped not only for the removal of evil spirits from the village but also to protect the village people from epidemic like cholera. But in the whole region, *Ai* is worshipped as the most common deity for various diseases. In many areas, she is also called as *Sitli* and the most common function of her is to protect people from chicken pox and the evil spirits that can cause various diseases like hysteria, stomach ache, dysentery, etc.

Consequently, on the basis of the above discussion the Koch folk deities has been classified into deities related to fertility and productivity, deities related to diseases, deities related to health, wealth and prosperity, deities related to general welfare, deities related to agriculture, and deities related to animal welfare and in order to understand the character and function of the Koch deities a tabular form is prepared and listed below:

Table No. 5.6: Function of Koch Deities

Sl. No.	Fertility and Productivity	Diseases	Wealth and Prosperity	General Welfare	Agriculture	Animal Welfare	Protection	Not Cleared
*Mareyar Deo* (Household Deities)							
1			*Ai Thansri*		*Ai Thansri*			
2				*Bastu Thakur*			*Bastu Thakur*	
3								*Akha/Agni Deo*
4	*Aideu*			*Aideu*			*Aideu*	
5	*Sib Thakur*			*Sib Thakur*			*Sib Thakur*	
6				*Hari Thakur*				
7	*Subasini*		*Subasini*	*Subasini*				
8				*Bongshor Thakur*				
9						*Lakhol Thakur*		
10				*Bura-Buri*	*Bura-Buri*		*Bura-Buri*	
11				*Bishohori*			*Bishohori*	
12				*Podda*				
13		*Ai/Sitola*						
14		*Kali*		*Kali*			*Kali*	
15				*Chandi*			*Chandi*	
16				*Sanyasi*			*Sanyasi*	
17				*Abala*			*Abala*	
18				*Bormani*			*Bormani*	
19	*Madan Kam*			*Madan Kam*				
*Rajohuwa Deo* (Communal Deities)							
20	*Kati Thakur*							
21				*Othoro Garja Deo*	*Othoro Garja Deo*			
22					*Hudum deo*			
23					*Sonaray Thakur*	*Sonaray Thakur*		
24	*Ai Basumoti*				*Ai Basumoti*			
25			*Lokkhi Thakur*					

26		*Ma Thakurani*					
27		*Ai Bhogowoti*					
28		*Kasaikhai*					
29			*Raja Thakur*	*Raja Thakur*	*Raja Thakur*		
30			*Tong Bura-Tong Buri*				
31			*Kuch-Kuchuni*				
32			*Mech-Mecheni*				
33			*Dangdhora-Dangdhari*				
34			*Gabu thakur-Gabu Thakuraniani*				
35			*Bura Soddar-Buri Soddarini*				
36			*Bhangua-Banguani*				
37			*Bageswari*				
38			*Dhumsia*				
39			*Dharma Thakur*				
40			*Dhel Khawa Thakur*				
41			*Pagla Thakur*				
42			*Kora-Kori*				
43			*Corok*				
44					*Gornath*		
45					*Saleswari*		
46					*Radhika Thakur*		
47					*Dakait Thakur*		
48							*Soy Kuri Mashan*
49							*Joka*
50							*Pettani*

51							*Saitol*
52							*Brohmodotyo*
53							*Daini*
54							*Moila Deo*
55							*Khetor*
56							*Dokhina deo*
57							*Mogor*
58							*Bidyagaya*
59							*Jokha-Jokhini*
60							*Pagili*
61							*Doodh Nakhawa*
62							*Akash Daini-Patal Daini*
63							*Pettani/Petni*
64							*Khetor*
65							*Bak*
66							*Nengta deo*
67							*Poiri*
68							*Bira*
69							*Hawaimari*
70							*Joka*

In the above table, the Koch deities has been categorised into eight types depending upon their functions. From the table it has been noticed that many deities do not fit into only one category. They are included into different types based upon the function attributed by the community. Further, there are certain deities and spirits whose function is not at all clear or they are not fall under the other categories that are made. Therefore, they are kept in the 'not clear' category. Except the *Akha/Agni deo*, all of the supernatural beings that are kept in this category are either malevolent spirits or ghosts. One of the reason for this is that these deities are worshipped communally or whenever necessary because of the fear of harming them. In other word, people are venerating them to appease them to not to harm.

The table is again represented in pie chart in order to look at the percentage of each category.

Pie Chart No. 5.6: Function of Koch Deities
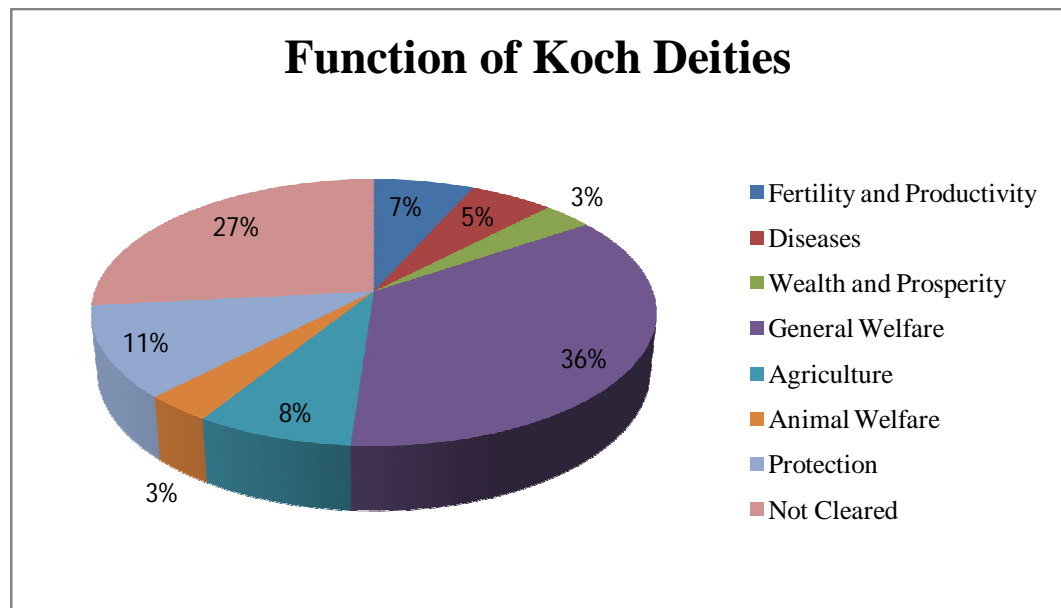
So, from the above two diagrams it has been noticed that the maximum number of deities fall under the category of general welfare (approx. 36%) which is a broad category. Further as early said one deity fulfills different functions. This means that among the Koches there are many deities exists whose exact functions are not yet clear. People or family members are worshipping them without knowing their actual functional

attribution. Their function depends upon the context, time, region and family. Further, one important fact of this list is that the 'not cleared' type of supernatural deities. They are the only supernatural beings that do not have any function. But still they are a part of their religious life. The existence of spirits and ghosts weave their daily life so intricately that one cannot think Koch society without mentioning those deities.

On the other hand, the worshipping of the deities for the agriculture, and animal welfare directly links the community to their economic dependency upon deities. But functions like productivity, fertility and protection carry the same ideology of an agricultural community indirectly if not directly. These deities are an integral part of their religiosity. Therefore, they are venerated, offer, and sacrificed in order to appease them. For that reason, they construct the visual image of the deities.

5.3.6: Visual Representation of Deities

Images and symbols that are used to represent the supernatural being often represent the basic religiosity of the folk art forms of the human being. Sometimes this visual and pictorial representation offers the simple as well as complex religious ideas and beliefs. Symbols and images that comprise in certain forms, shapes, and materials are the basic elements to represent the intentions of one's religious faith and knowledge. This images and symbols help to establish and continue the relationship between the sacred realms of supernatural and the world of a human being. So the symbols manifested as the mediator of religious consciousness and form as the idea of sacred through worship. Through the system of worship, the symbols are then materialized into various forms which give the physical existence of supernatural power with that material. This images and symbols are accepted as sacred or holy that gives the idea of spiritual reality which can be found in every religious belief systems. It is also the same in the case of the Koches too. So, typological study leads us to consider this.

For the representation of each deity, the Koch uses of materials and symbols are as diverse as their characters and functions. Even though, most of the Koch folk deities do not have a particular idol or image dedicated to a particular deity, many times the materials and symbols are also differ depending upon the types of the ritual and the

economic condition of the family. For example: while in the *Bash puja*, the deities are represented by bamboos, but in the *Garja puja* most of the times temporary huts are built. On the other hand, in the familial level most of the time the altar represent the deity. But interestingly, in the course of time visual representations through idols and images came in to the Koch belief systems too. Among the Koches, the worship of a clay idol is done mostly in the case for the Puranic or Vedic deities and the temples or shrines of those deities are also situated in the town areas only where mixed populations inhabited. But in most of the village areas except for the mainland Indian Gods and Goddesses the permanent image for the folk deities can be seen in a less manner. In some villages, mostly in the western part, a few clay idols for folk deities are also created depending upon the creator's folk imagination. The most prominent mainstream Indian deities that enter into the village religious life are Siva, Durga, and Kali. From the field data, it has been noticed that the popularity of clay image for the folk deities is very much limited to the Koch people and Koch people also does not engage with the making of the clay images. On the contrary, a different class called Mali is engaged with the preparation of clay images of deities and the Koch community turns here as just as consumers. Moreover, the clay idols are constructed the same as it is depicted in the Puranas which is influenced by a superior culture. As C. C. Sanyal has commented, "….the Malis (image maker) were taught to make the images like those found in other parts of Bengal, that is, in which Kali stood on the prostrate body of Mahadev with her tongue protruded. Probably due to the influences of Bengalis from south, at present many of the clay images have the conventional feature of the images as in other parts of Bengal."[68] Except for *Siva, Durga* and *Kali* the lesser known folk deities that are popular in the western part of the region like *Sanyasi Thakur, Pagla Thakur*, and *Dhumsia* has also depicted sometimes by a clay image or idol. Further, these deities are also believed as another form of *Siva*. So naturally, these deities also share a similar physical appearance as *Siva*.

But rather than a clay image, perhaps the most popular image in the western part of the region is depicted through the pith work which can also be considered as a peculiar form of folk art of the region. A pith or cork known as *Sola* in the western part and *Botla*

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[68] Sanyal, Charu Chandra, *The Rajbanshis of North Bengal*, Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1965, p. 135.

in the eastern part is a kind of fibrous reed that grows in the wet lend or swampy areas. Regarding the tradition and popularity of pith work in the region, Birendranth Datta has quoted, "it is true that the tradition of working on pith is not confined to the Goalpara only. In North Bengal to the west of the region and Kamrup and Mangaldai to the east of it, a similar tradition is known to have existed. Some work on pith is also done in East and West Bengal. But according to some experts the art developed in lower Assam and North Bengal where the natural abundance of the material and the local artistic genius combined together to the greatest advantage, particularly in the districts of Kamrup and Goalpara in Assam, and Jalpaiguri in North Bengal where rainfall is copious and natural drainage defective. Reed grows in abundance in the many swamps and it is left to the native genius of the 'Malakars' and 'Solakars' to put it to good use."[69]

At the *dasjaniya dham* (in the western part) which is basically an open permanent place for communal or public worship, most of the deities have their own space inside of that shrine. Each deity has its own allotted space where no images are installed to represent the deity. Only at the time of a ceremonial puja, freshly built pith images are installed to represent the deity. Usually, not all deities are represented by the pith images. But in the eastern part where a communal shrine is known as *thansali* the popularity of *sola* or *botola* image to represent a deity is very much negligible. Contrary, in the eastern part the folk art of pith is normally confined to *Manasa* cult. Further, the mask made of *sola* or *botola* (pith) in order to symbolise deity *Kali* and *Chandi* at the time of *Bash Puja* is well famous in the whole region.

Other than the clay idol and pith images, the Koches use stones to visualize and worship a deity. But the stone as a conception and symbol of a god or goddess is not confined to a particular deity only. Stones are used to symbolise a deity despite of their nature, function, gender or position. Although the most popular form of Siva which is worshipped in the form of a *linga,* in Sanskrit which means symbol, where a vertical pillar of stone is established and symbolized as Siva, at some of the *Dasjaniya dham* or *Thansali* (communal shrine) stones are established to symbolize other deities also. In

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[69] Birendranath Datta, *A Study of the Folk Culture of the Goalpara Region*, Guwahati: University Publication Department, Gauhati University, 1995, pp. 270-271.

some of the villages *Ai Bhogoboti* (at Xaonagaon), *Mao Thakurani* (at Mamugaon, Xaonagao, Bhatipara), *Raja Thakur* and his family members (at Atugao) are worshipped in the form of a stone.

But in order to symbolize the stone as a deity, as the Koches believe, the stone should have a spirit in it. Only then it can be established as a deity.[70] It is called as *jiya xil* and is believed that the stone that has a soul inside it increased every year and as time passed it grows bigger. The spirit of that stone is considered as deity's spirit which is later considered as the sacred object. But in order to maintain the sacrality of the stone, a *dhip* (altar) is prepared. Sometimes, the altar also symbolise the sacred space as well as the deity. The most common material to represent this is the soil. In most of the shrines, a *dhip* made with loose soil is enough to represent the existence of the deity. There is no fix size and structure in order to make this *dhip*. But generally, it is made two to three inch higher than normal soil level and in a square size. Normally the top is kept flat but sometimes the tomb type shape can also be seen in many villages. The *dhip* always stands facing the eastern side of the *pat* or *than* which is a religious space.

Once the *dhip* is prepared by pressing down the soil with a heavy object, a bamboo pole is installed in the middle part of the top side of that *dhip*. The *dhip* is then mopped with either water or cow-dung mixed water to make the surface sacred and clean. In the case of the *mareyar than* (household shrine), this *dhip* is actually a permanent altar which use to demarcate the sacred world from the profane where the bamboo pole is installed to represent the deity. According to Raghunath Choudhary, believe the *dhip* as the symbol of deity and the bamboo as his/her *bahon* (vehicle).[71] But many people do not have a clear demarcation about this and consider the altar and the bamboo altogether as the deity or the abode of the deity. Therefore, the family members always keep an eye to maintain the purity and sacredness of the space and the *dhip* by cleaning the place and

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[70] Informant: Sadananda Singha, Male, Age: 60, Xaonagaon. Interview date: 03/06/2016.

[71] Informant: Raghunath Choudhary, Male, Age: 54, Futkibari. Interview date: 21/04/2018.

lightening a *saki/gasa* (earthen lamp), incense sticks and *dhuna* (smoke) every day.[72] For that, the woman who is going through the menstrual period is not allowed to go nearby the *dhip* and the usual worship is conducted by some other members of the family. Moreover, in order to protect the sanctity of the deity, the worshipper has to make himself/herself clean and pray only after taking a bath.

Along with the bamboo pole, a *Jekni bari* (long bamboo stick) is installed where a triangle shape cloth in either white or red color is tied on the top of the pole. The color of the cloth signifies the gender of the deities as the white color is used to signify a male deity and the red color to female deity. So the attribution of red and white color to the deities reveals the dyadic relationship of their social understanding. In the Koch society, whiteness is always associated with the life, purity, clean and benevolent nature, while the red signifies the blood that reveals the life, danger and its ambivalent nature of flowing blood from body signifies the transformation from purity to impurity. Regarding the color symbolism of red and white Victor Turner commented in his book *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* that "white and red, on the contrary, are associated with activity. Both are considered "to have power." Blood, the main denotation of "redness," is even identified with "power". White, too, stands for life fluids; it represents milk and semen."[73] Sometimes in order to represent the Koch female deity, instead of a bamboo pole or stick a *ghot* (earthen pot) which is prepared by using red soil or clay is placed or some grass and shrubs are installed depending upon the ritual of the deity. While in terms of the red clay pot, not only the color of the pot symbolizes the gender of the deity but also the shape of the pot symbolizes as the womb of the mother where the creation of life happens.[74]

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[72] In the native language, there is no perfect word to describe these types of daily rituals. But Koch people normally use the word *dhup-dhuna diya* or *gosa bareya* in order to mean the ritual of daily worshipping of the household deities by lighting the earthen lamp.

[73] Victor Turner, The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989, p.80

[74] Informant: Golapi Rajbongshi, Female, Age: 76, Patiladaha. Interview date: 20/06/2016.

These enhance the fertility and productivity as in *Kora-Kori puja* three *ghots* are placed, where the bigger pot symbolises the deity. This is completely women centered ritual where a female priest is used to conduct the ritual. On that day after cleaning the *dhip*, a handful amount of paddy is kept over a *kula* (winnowing fan) and over that paddy one big *ghot* is established. Inside that *ghot*, seven-piece of raw turmeric, seven *atop saul* (uncooked rice), seven-piece of *gwi* (betel nut) and *khili pan* (betel leaf), seven pair of *gwi-pan*, and milk and curd is kept. At the top one mango twig with possibly seven leaves on it and *sendoor phwta* (vermillion mark) is given on the body of that *ghot* in seven in number. On the little front of both side of the *dangar ghot* (big pot), two small pots are kept. One piece of *gwi-pan*, milk, and curd is kept inside the pots and each pot is then covered with a lighted earthen lamp at the top. Here also seven vermillion marks are given.

All the pots are then decorated with a garland made with radish, dub grass and flowers of the mustard plant. In front of the winnowing fan, two *khutas* (poles made either with bamboo or wood branch) are installed on the two sides of the fan and each pole is tied down with the two edges of the fan with another garland made with mustard flower, dub grass, and other flowers. In front of that one small pond is dig up with seven *ghats* (shore) and on each *ghat* seven pieces of raw turmeric and vermillion mark are given. Then raw milk is poured on that pond and seven drops of mustard oil are given. One piece of *dheika* (fern), *kolmou* (water spinach), dub grass and mustard seed are given and two duck eggs after giving a vermillion mark on it are then left on that pond.

On the other hand instead of using earthen pot as a symbol for deities, uses of grass, shrubs or trees as the sacred symbol is very much popular. In order to conduct the ritual for *Bura-Buri* two bunch of *Birina* which is a wild shrub is collected and installed at the ritual place closely by making two different *dhip*. One *dhip* with *birina* is considered as *Bura* and another is as *Buri*. As we have already seen the popularity of bamboo as the symbol of various folk deities is very much prominent, trees and grasses are also used to symbolise or conduct the worship. Big trees like *sheora* (Streblus asper)*, pakhri (*Sacred fig*), bot* (Banyan tree), *simla* (Bombax ceiba) are generally considered as the abode of spirits and deities. Bamboo groves are always considered as the home of

various spirits and many time bamboo sticks are used to symbolise various spirits. Additionally, use of banana tree as a deity can be seen in the most popular *Hudum puja*. Although it is said that the worship of birds as *Hudum deo* is later replaced with the banana tree, till now it is believed that the calls of *hudu bird* will bring water to the earth. But due to the inaccessibility of *hudu bird* at present-day replaced the bird with a banana tree.

Another important material that is used to symbolise the deity is the sword and other metal equipment. *Bageswari* is one such deity who is represented by the sword and every year at the time of *Durga Puja*, she is worshipped in the form of a sword. There is story also exists regarding the association of a sword with the deity *Bageswari*. According to the story,

Narrative 5.3: Origin Myth of Goddess *Bageswari*.

> **"Once upon a time, there was a poor man named Bhuta used to live in the Borpara village of present day Bongaigaon district. He used to sell wood for food. One day, as usual he was going to sell his wood to a village named Sitkagao which is in the eastern side of his village. While returning, he saw a beautiful stone in the Kujiya river. So, he brought that stone. At night he saw a dream where a lady wearing Patani told him to immerse the stone at the Kujiya river. She further gave him instruction to bring whatever he will get in return and to perform a puja once in a week. Next day, Bhuta did the same. Miraculously, the stone floats at the river and disappears. After some time, about two feet long sword came by floating and stopped near him. He brought that sword and starts to worship the sword constructing a small hut. Many days passed like this. But one day, Bhuta awakes suddenly at night. There he saw a tiger was taking rest near the sword. he was so afraid, but did not shout out of fear. Like this, Bhuta noticed that every night the tiger comes and leaves the place at dawn. So, he informs this to local landlord and explains the entire story. On the other hand, that night the landlord also saw the same dream. So, they have decided that this is not a normal sword and the landlord constructed a permanent shrine for the deity. Slowly, the entire story spread in the area and people starts to call the deity Bageswri; the queen of the tiger. From the shrine the hill also gets its name and now it is known as Bageswari hill." [75]**

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[75] Informants: Bhubaneswari Choudhuri, Female, Age: 79 and Jayanti Choudhuri, Female, Age: 54, Borpara. Interview date: 22/06/2016.

There are different versions and variations are also prevalent among the people.[76] The name *Bageswari* means the queen who rides a tiger. She is also connected to a legendary Koch lady who fought for the community against the Bhutan kingdom and martyred at that battle. According to the legend,[77]

Narrative No. 5.4: Legend of Bageswari.

> **"The western side of the Manas river of Bijni kingdom (under Koch rule) was known as Bagduwar. In this Bagduwar region, there was a Koch girl named Bagheswari. She was also called as Bage. She was a great warrior. Once, when the Bhutan King or Bhutia King attacked the Koch kingdom of Bijni region, she fought very bravely against the Bhutia army. She died in the battlefield trying to protect her kingdom from the Bhutia army. After her brave death, her dead body was cremated in the south – west corner of the present Bagheswari hill. There the Koch army build a small temple and installed the sword of Bage/Bageswari as the symbol of Shakti and start to worship her."**

She is considered as the incarnation of *Ranwchandi* who is the war goddess of the Koch and even *Ranwchandi* was patronized by the Koch royal dynasty. She is also considered as a form of *Durga* and worshipped as *Dor Puja* by the Koch people at the time of *Dashami tithi* of the *Durga Puja*.

Although the *Dor Puja* is a part of the Sakti worship that is patronized even by the Koch kings, in the folk level of Koch socio-religious life the worship of trees, plants, grass, shrubs, etc. to symbolise the deity is the most popular. Attribution of trees like *sheora* (Streblus asper), *pakhri* (Sacred fig), *bot* (Banyan tree), *shimla* (Bombax ceiba), bamboo grooves, etc. with the evil spirits and deities is seen everywhere. Therefore, it is considered as the taboo to touch by the feet or urinate nearby that tree or the shore of any water body as it is believed that this may offend the spirit which can cause harm to the human.[78] Apart from the trees grasses or shrubs are also used to represent the deity. As in

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[76] The versions and variation of the *Bageswari* myth is therefore included in the appendix.

[77] Informants: Bhubaneswari Choudhuri, Female, Age: 79 and Jayanti Choudhuri, Female, Age: 54, Borpara. Interview date: 22/06/2016.

[78] Koch people belief certain trees or groves as the abode of various evil spirits. Urinating near those trees will bring misfortune to the person. The evil spirit will attack the person and can kill the person. So, as per

communal ritual, the uses of small temporary huts which are constructed with the bamboo and *eluwa* grass (wild grass) to represent the deity as well as their abode is the most common factor among the Koch in the whole region, the bouquet of *birina* grass also represents the deity. At the time of *Bura-Buri* puja, the bunch of this grass represents the deity when it is installed in a *tukli/tukri* (round bamboo basket) filled with soil.

Apart from this, many time the representation of deities and spirits incorporate the idea of the existence of their abode. For example: in order to represent the spirits and deities that inhabit in the water, Koch people made a replica by digging either a small pond or a small stream or river. This represents all the deities and spirits related to the pond, stream, river, etc. Likewise, a replica of a hill is prepared with the loose soil that represents the spirits and ghosts of the hill or who lives at the hill.

Hence it is seen that the Koch people used various material that is available in the environment they inhabit to represent the deity. Like the deities, their representation and visualisation also varies depending upon the context, ritual, region, association and the availability of the materials. The visualisation of the Koch deities is as diverse as their characters and functions. Most of the Koch folk deities do not have a particular idol or image. Many times the images and symbols to represent the deity are also differ depending upon the types of the ritual. But in the progress of time, the influences and assimilation from other cultures slowly boost the idol worship into their religious spheres. So, the idol worship has existed, but the worship of a clay idol is noticed only in the case for Puranic or Vedic deities. Further, the temples or shrines of those deities are also situated in the town areas only where a mixed population inhabited. But in most of the village areas except for the mainland Indian Gods and Goddesses the permanent image of the folk deities can be seen in a less manner where worships are done in various manners. As of now, one can see the importance of the visualisation of the deities as it enhances

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the belief system it is considered as taboo to urinate near those places, especially in evening as well as at night. Therefore, at evening or night, before urinating in an unknown place or outside, the Koch people spit three times and use to say like "please forgive me, I am not urinating in your place. I am urinating here thinking it is my mother's lap".

the feeling of the presence of the deities among the community. This gives the members to venerate the deities through various worship patterns.

5.3.7: Worship patterns of Deities

In general, the religious act of devotion towards the supreme or supernatural beings; i.e. the deity can be understood as worship. It is the inseparable and fundamental unit of religion. While worship includes cult, taboo, rite, devotion, and feast; as nature it incorporates the awe, dread, respect, and adoration. Beliefs establish by the experience stories, dreams, myths, imaginations constructed the wide ranges of worship method into various forms of worship. In one sense, worship included our psychological, social, religious and cultural behavior. The Rajbongshi equal term for the word worship can be said as *baray* or *baraowa* which means 'to offer or to give someone respectfully' as William K. Kay and Leslie J. Francis quoted Hardy's understanding of worship as the "worth-ship" – that is who is worthy and who has a dignity[79], but in general Sanskrit word *Puja* is used. As regarding the Koch deities, they are allocated with some special power and function. Some of them are ascribed the power to control the natural phenomena, others are attributed to the creation of the world. But generally, the deities are meant for the general welfare of the individual life, family and village life of the community. They are believed as the guardians who can protect and save them from various diseases, other various kinds of problematic situations and if sometimes this situation arises the people immediately approaches the deities directly for the solution. Koches believed that the deities have the power to control everything including the life of the human, animals- both wild and domestic, weather, environment and their wealth, health and good and bad consequences completely depends upon their mode of contentment. If the people worship them, please them and make them persuade with the offerings, they will protect them with health and wealth and if someone is unable to do so they are going to lead a tough life. Therefore the consequences to depend upon the deities lead them to the apprehension belief of the power of the deities inspired the masses to create some modes or customs to satisfy them. In that process to satisfy them, the masses

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[79] William K. Kay, Leslie J. Francis (edited), Religion in Education, Volume 1, Leominster: Gracewing, 1997, p.77.

generate ideas of giving offerings by sacrificing and celebrated that day as a festival. As Durkheim says " to conciliate their favour or appease them when they are irritated; hence come the offerings, prayers, sacrifices, in a world, all the apparatus of religious observances".[80] The saying *"baro mahot tero puja"* literary means thirteen festivals in twelve months indicates the festive nature of the community and their attempt to satisfy their gods for a smooth life.

There is no doubt about the varieties of worshipping methods among the Koches depending upon the deity to deity and area to area. Among the Koches of the whole region, sacrifice reflects the most common act of worship and sacrificing something is a part of a ritual which will believe please the deities and in return, deities will protect them from various calamities. So in order to satisfy the supernatural beings, regular worship is done. Among the Koches the pattern of worship can be categorized into three main ways and they are the prayer, the offering, and the sacrifice. While generally, sacrifice means the ritual gift of blood or life, offering implies to the bloodless sacrifice of food or objects. These types of worship are not done on a regular basis. On the other hand, prayer is done on a regular basis which is an act of remembering the deity.

5.3.7.1: Prayer

For Koches, prayer is the most common act of veneration towards the deity and is the fundamental event in their religious belief system. It is mode worship that reveals the faith, the religious life of the people towards the supernatural being. Prayer can also express the living unity between God and the devotee and explains the socio-religious bonding of humanity. As Heiler observes prayer as neither a simple oral feature of worship nor merely an oral rite; rather it is an indispensable act of every religious human being. He further confirms the prayer as the fundamental underpinning of worship that goes further than the vocal, material or physical expression of prayer in order to comprise sacramental or institutional rituals as well as expressive components.[81] This could be seen

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[80] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary forms of Religious Beliefs* (tr. J. W. Swain), New York: The Free Press, 1965, pp. 68-69.

[81] John S Mbiti, Introduction to African Religion, London: Heinemann, 1975, p.66

among the prayer done by the Koch people also. Among the Koch people, it has been noticed that prayer becomes the commonest manner to approach a deity which is done on a regular basis. In the familial level, prayer towards the deities could be observed individually, privately or by the female or male head of the family. But in the communal level ritual, the prayer is done communally asking for the community needs.

Prayer towards the household deities is done every morning and in the evening. Most of the time prayer is done without uttering a single word where devotion is reflected through the expressive behaviors and gestures. The bowing down in front of the deities after lighting up of earthen lamps, incense sticks and offering of flowers are the mode of everyday prayers towards the deities. At the household level, the way of prayer is generally short in length and conducted by the female head of the family. Mostly, the prayer is also done by the female head of the family by uttering certain dialogue in order to praise, seeking protection and thanksgiving the deity. But sometimes at the point of a certain occasion, praising form of prayer is also done by singing devotional songs with music or reciting hymns. This type of prayer is a kind of extended version of invocation that narrates a set of circumstances in detail. This prayer stays for longer and the process of prayer is lengthy. These prayers reflect the Koches' religious affinity and strong belief towards the deities.

Further, in order to conduct this type of prayer a leader, a group or experienced person is hired for the prayer. Such people include the *oja/ojani* (experienced man/woman), priests, *deori*, etc. and they act as the mediator between the devotees and the deities. In addition to this, among the Koch people blessings are common and also done in the form of prayer. The elders or the mediator man sprinkled the holy water to the devotees when they bow down in front of the deities. The sprinkling water carries the belief that the deity has heard their prayer and blessed them. Although, in the surface level it seems like prayer is the simplistic mode of worship that exists in the society, in reality, it also has a deep intention to keep alive the good connection and relation of human to the deities. Most of the time prayers reveal the expression of thanking the deities for what they offer to them or what the deity has done to them; on the other hand, some of the prayers demand the concrete needs. This concrete human need asks for

protection from various danger, good health, good agriculture, wealth and prosperity, safety and security, etc. and these needs differ from family to family.

Thus, prayer is an important phenomenon in Koch religious life as they offer the people a sense of connection with the supreme beings and strengthens the bond between them as they can speak to them directly or through the mediators. While it helps to remove the individual as well as communal fears, threatening, anxieties; it also helps the members of the community to connect and bind together and strengthen the unity. Finally, for the Koches, it can be said that "prayer becomes a dimension of life that transcends and reinterprets every social relationship and social experience. Ultimately, prayer is a continuous mode of living, a living communion, by no means limited to occasions of formal utterance or formal communication. Obviously, prayer, like religious faith has different degrees of intensity. It is also true that it operates within social structures, serving a number of social purposes unrelated or incidental to its own."[82]

5.3.7.2: Offering

An offering is another important sacred act that is considered among the Koches as the most important and essential part than sacrifice. Although, most of the time offering is used as a synonym for sacrifice, in order to differentiate it from sacrifice, offering does not include any ritual killing. So, basically, an offering includes presenting mainly the foodstuffs and inanimate materials to the deity. Among the Koches this is called as *thogi diya*. But among the Koches, another important thing is that they offer the life of an animal that too without killing that animal. Most of the time, along with the other materials, the animal or bird is set free in the name of the deity and that animal is considered as the sacred thing in the society. The transformation of a sacred being from the profane world is done by tying up a red cloth on the neck of the animal after the sacred ritual and purification process. That animal is considered so sacred that no one will do any harm or kill that animal and it is considered as a blessing by the deity if that animal comes or takes shelter to the house of a family.

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[82] John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, London: Heinemann, 1975, p.57

As like sacrifice, offering also needs a mediator to communicate between worshippers and the supernatural and that role is played by the community priest which also carries the same intentions like sacrifice. Offerings allow the worshipper to communicate with the deities and therefore, offering sanctions to the worshipers to participate and to be a part of that sacred ritual. The offering confirms the security of the devotees. As it is believed that people should not go and approach to the deity with an empty hand, for Koches offerings of foodstuffs are the most common. Like sacrifice, the offerings are done communally as well as individually at the family level. At the offering where various fruits, flowers are offered as *Prasad*, the offerings, as well as sacrifice, are also distributed to the devotees after they are offered to the deity. They take that offering believing as the blessing of the deity. As Allan Menzies has said, "offering is presented to the god whole, but the worshippers help to eat it. The god helps the savour of it, which rises into the air towards him, while the more material part is devoured below……all the incidents of offerings and sacrifices suggest that it is not merely a thing offered to deity, but a thing in which man takes part; if it is a meal, it is one of which the god and the worshippers partake in common."[83, 84]

Thus, offering constitutes an important act of worshipping the supernatural that holds the belief of protection, prosperity and a relationship with the deities. Therefore, sacrificing and offering of an object is not only an act of giving a gift to the deities internally but externally it also includes as the manner and expression of offering things. Sacrificing animal to the deities carries the belief of protection from diseases, evil attacks, and misfortunes while restoring the prosperity, wealth and good health.

5.3.7.3: Sacrifice

As a ceremonial act, sacrifice restores a special place among any religious community. It is an act that establishes the relationship between the devotee and the sacred supernatural object. Sacrifice as worship consists of the materials which are

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[83] John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, London: Heinemann, 1975, p.54.

[84] Allan Menzies, *History of Religion: A Sketch of Primitive Religious Beliefs and Practices, and of the Origin and Character of the Great Systems*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917, p. 64.

sacrificed, the method uses when making the sacrifice, the place and occasion of sacrifice, the recipient of the sacrifice, and the purpose or intentions of the sacrifice.[85] So, sacrifice as worship needs the materials that can be offered. Generally, among the Koches, the materials that are sacrificed to the deities are objects or a life which can be said as a blood sacrifice and bloodless sacrifice. Therefore, domesticated animals, inanimate things, food stuff, and plants are the basic category of sacrificial materials.

For the blood sacrifice, basically domesticated animals like goat, pig, duck, and pigeon are used. But sometimes wild animals are also used as a sacrificial animal. For example: at *Garja Puja* and *Deo puja*, a *dura kasu* (tortoise) is offered to various deities like *Garja deo, Tong Bura-Tong Buri* etc. and in *Lakhol Marai* which is one of the type of *Marai Puja*, a pair of *phoring* (cricket) is sacrificed to deity *Manasa*. On the other hand, bloodless sacrifice includes the offering of agricultural crops, plants, and inanimate things. The agricultural things include plant, flower, foods, fruits, banana, betel leaf-areca nut, tobacco, etc., while inanimate things include money, clothes, water, milk, etc. are also part of this category.

Moreover, before sacrificing any object the maintenance of its sanctity and purity is always kept by giving a sacred bath to the sacrificial materials. Water which is already offered to god is used to purify the object. After the bath, each object is given a vermillion mark on it. Further, it is also seen that before sacrificing an animal or bird to the deity, the people who are engaged with the sacrificial ritual try to look at the physical condition of the object as it is believed that sacrificing of any defecting object may insult the deity. So they try to avoid sacrificing any animal that is sick or who has any wound on the body and this is not only among the Koches but for most of the community who offers sacrifice. As Leonard has also mentioned that before sacrificing an animal, the animal is "first of all carefully examined and if a scratch or incision is found on any part of its body, or limb is seen to be bruised or broken, it is instantly classed as unclean and unfit. In addition to that, its color also matters. White is the most favored in some societies, while other societies prefer a black. White color indeed seems to have an

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[85] Mircea Eliade (ed.), Encyclopeadea of Religion, volume 12, New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987, p.545.

otherworldliness, a spirituality, a purity about it."[86] This seems also true with the Koch society and in terms of color, Koch society prefers basically black color rather than white to sacrifice. This type of believes are legitimised through various experience narratives. As Bale Ray has informed that they have experienced such incident once. According to him,

Narrative No. 5.5: Experience story.

> **"Once there was an old lady who came to the puja with a cock to sacrifice in that puja. When she entered at the main place she suddenly loose her consciousness and fell down on the ground. She then started mumbling *'kala patha; kala patha'* that means black goat, black goat. One of her relative then came forward and prayed the deity for the old lady and prepared one black goat to sacrifice. After that only the lady regains her consciousness."[87]**

On the other hand, when we think about sacrifice as a form of worship, it also includes the manner of the worship and the intentions that are attached to it. Most commonly, among the Koches the *deodha* or *deosi* used to sacrifice the animals to the deity in a communal ritual. The types of sacrifice also differ depending upon the ritual. Mostly the blood and head of the animals are offered to the deity after slaughtering the animal. In the individual ritual like *Bormani puja* done by the family every year, this sacrificial ritual is done by the *Oja* or *Ojani* where a pair of black pigeons are sacrificed, every time they are not slaughtered. On the contrary, it is seen that the *Ojani/Oja* twisted the head and tear apart the head from the body and pours the blood on the bamboo pole of the *dhip* (mounded soil) which is considered as the deity and offers the blood along with the head. On the other hand in the communal ritual like *Mao Thakurani Puja*, the sacrificial ritual is done outside of the main shrine, where there is space built for the sacrifice. On that place, every animal are slaughters and the blood and head are then kept on a *Dona* (plate made with banana trunk) and then one *Deosi* will go and offer that plate to the deity. So there is a permanent space for the deities who have a permanent shrine.

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[86] Mircea Eliade (ed.), Encyclopedia of Religion, Vol. 12, New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987 p. 549

[87] Informant: Balen Ray, Male, Age: 44, Patiladaha. Interview date: 25/06/2016.

But the spirits or deities who don't have any permanent shrine also doesn't have any permanent space for sacrifice. For the spirits, sacrifice is done under the tree, on the spring or stream, on the hill, at the cave, etc.

Another important fact of sacrifice is the intentions attached to it. A sacrifice may have several intentions to offer and among them, some of the intentions are the propitiation, fertility, supplication, and thanksgiving. Human being always tries to maintain their relationship with the supernatural beings, spirits and to the departed souls. According to the beliefs, the inability to maintain that relationship will bring misfortune and suffering to the life of the individual as well as to the community. So the fear of suffering led the people to maintain the ontological relationship between the living being and the supernatural beings. "The making of sacrifice, therefore, is to restore this ontological balance. Sacrifice also is an act and occasion of making and renewing contact between God and the human being, and also between spirits and human beings in the spiritual and physical worlds. When the sacrifices are directed towards the departed, they are the symbol of fellowship, a recognition that the departed are still members of their human families, and tokens of respect and remembrance for the departed."[88] Often it is believed that knowingly or unknowingly done offenses will bring drought, flood, epidemic and other natural calamities which are controlled by the supernatural forces. So the sacrifice of a sacred thing or a life will help the individual or community to wipe out the sins or mistakes they have done, which will again restore the relationship between them.

Thus, prayer, offering, and sacrifice are the three basic modes and method of worship that are seen in all Koch venerations. While most of the time, these three modes go side by side in the ritual especially in the case of a communal ritual. But for everyday worship instead of sacrifice; offering and prayer can be seen mostly. Further, while prayer and offers on a daily basis is seen for the household deities, for the communal level this is not seen on a daily basis. On the other hand, sacrifice is mostly done for communal deities. Moreover, the mode of worship also differs in terms of ritual, deity,

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[88] David Chidester, *Shots in the Streets: Violence and Religion in South Africa*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1991, p. 58.

and context. For example, the household deity *Aideu* is worshiped by prayer every day for prosperity, protection and good health of the family. But at the time marriage ritual she is venerated by offering sacrifices and at the time of *Garja puja* (at the communal shrine) she is worshipped by other offerings. So, the context and purpose of the ritual are very much essential to understand the Koch mode of worship.

5.3: Conclusion

To surmise, folk deities are an integral part of any religious society in which the member of the community lives. Through the understanding of these folk deities, one can easily mark the essence of their religious beliefs and practices that carries their identity. One can understood the structure of socio-religious values and ideology through the typological study of those folk deities. The classification of the Koch deity is not tend to be accurate as the deities carries a flexible character and functions. Most of them have multiple character, function, space, images and worshipping method and are not confined to one single category and most of them depend upon the context. From the discussion it has also been seen that Koch folk deities are represented as formless and shapeless who is omnipresent. In other word, Koch deities are represented in an abstract form. It is the supreme power superior to human being that gives their ability to control various natural phenomenon as well as human affairs. As Tylor proposed his minimal definition of religion by saying "a belief in supernatural agencies", the belief and practices of the supernatural beings forms the base of Koch religion. Therefore, being converted into Hinduism once, the Koches preserve their old religious heritage that is still echoed through their understanding of supernatural beings. We can see numerous deities that are worshiped by the Koches are spirits. These spirits are also manifested by either a natural object or ancestors. For a religious community like the Koches, these spirits and their manifestations form the sacred reality that is different from the profane world. Moreover, there is always a mediator that connects the relationship between the spiritual world and the human world. The role of the mediator is played by a *Deosi* or *Oja* (Shaman), who "typically enter a trance state during a ritual, and practice divination and healing."[89]

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[89] https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/shaman

The realm of supernatural and natural world as sacred and profane forms the religious belief system that carries their values and emotions. Durkheim understands this dichotomy of sacred and profane as the two basic realms to form the structure of religion. But various scholars have raised questions on the universality of the sacred-profane dichotomy. Rejecting Durkheim's dualism of sacred and profane, Evans-Pritchard[90], in his study of Azande argued that the concept of sacred and profane is intermingled together that cannot be separable and negotiate with each other. As Evans-Pritchard has mentioned in the case of Azande, for the Koches also it is seen that many time the emergence of sacredness is situational, at least for the case of the spirits. For the Koches also, the binary of sacred and profane forms the basic structure of their religious belief system. But in addition to that, for the Koches, there is an existence of an intermediary phase can also be noticed. As we have seen in the above discussion that most of the Koch deities whether communal, ancestral or familial, the sacrality is always maintain through *hierophany* that establishes their sacred realm. Most of these deities are worshipped on a regular basis seeking for protection and prosperity. But there are certain spirits and ghost who are also worshipped by the Koches that do not fall under this rubric dichotomy. It has been seen that various spirits, ghosts, and witches that are worshipped not because they are sacred but because they are too much malicious and can harm human being anytime who come in contact with them. Furthermore, the worship is done only when a person is contaminate and possessed by these spirits. Additionally, sometime at the time of veneration magic is also used as a tool in order to ward of these evil spirits. So, there is a fear that makes the Koches to venerate those deities for not to harm their life. Further, the veneration and offerings are also done out of the house compound where normally people goes less so that they will not attack others. Therefore, a temporary space is created for the veneration whenever it is necessary. This is not the sacred space but rather the feasibility for the people. The associated trees, ponds, lakes, junctions, etc. are not considered as sacred, rather people do not want to engage or go to that place because of the fear; the fear of being victim by those spirits. So there is the difficulty to distinguish

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[90] E. E. Evans Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976.

"supernatural to natural" and "spiritual to non-spiritual agencies". As Jack Goody[91] has argued, "neither do the LoDagaa appear to have any concepts at all equivalent to the vaguer and not unrelated dichotomy between the sacred and the profane which Durkheim regarded as universal."[92] Therefore, in the Koch folk religion the dualism of sacred and profane is also connected with another intermediary phase which is not clear.

Thus, it can be said that the dualism among the Koches is not clearly marked. Rather the idea of sacred for the Koches is situational where the sacrality is depend upon what types of supernatural being is associated with it. The understanding of supernatural beings and their connection and impact on the socio-religious life also helps to give shape their religious worldview that is transferred orally from generation to generation. The Koch religious worldview throws light on their ideologies and understanding of the cosmos. Therefore, in order to understand the core ideology of the Koch folk religious life, next chapter will elaborately discus about the Koch worldview.

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[91] The article "Religion and Ritual: The Definition Problem" is Jack Goody's empirical study concerning the LoDagaa of Northern Ghana. In this article he explores the problem of what is involved in categorizing acts and beliefs as religious, or ritual, or magico-religious. He also tries to clarifying certain aspects of the analysis of social systems in general.

[92] Jack Goody, *Religion and Ritual: The Definitional Problem*, The British Journal of Sociology, Vol. 12, No. 2, June 1961, p. 151.

Chapter: 6

KOCH WORLDVIEW IN KOCH RELIGIOUS LIFE AND MYTHOLOGY

6.1: Introduction:

Human beings are social animal lives in various geographical regions. They built or choose a suitable environment according to their convenience for a permanent settlement. Such an expedition brings them to connect with the surrounding environments through their interactions within it. The interaction and experiences got from their environment helped in cultivating their idea of fear, faith and belief systems which led them to practice various activities. Such practices and belief systems with the environment creates a world which is different from the physical world that binds a group of people into one. They have generated narratives corresponding to the beliefs and through the retellings that are handed over through generations. So, the concept of religion itself originated from the group of people inhabited in the environment. On the other hand, most of the communities of the world have their own religious understanding that flourished their religious values both in the form of spiritual as well as physical. For them, that is their 'world' and it is the vastest environmental scenario that they had experienced which is the ultimate reality. All these experiences get shaped in the form of worldview. So, in a way or other human being or the group tries to interact with the surroundings that have been shaped as their worldview and mirrored in various forms of culture like religion, art, architecture, social structure, folklore etc. It is their collective "inner experiences" and "practical dealings" that express their worldview. These experiences and practices may differ and depend upon ones or the groups' interactions and perspectives that establish the criteria for their understanding of the world. Therefore, worldviews are not "fixed copies or images of the world, but will somehow try to capture, as much as is possible all the aspects of this world."[1]

As an individual human being, man could have constructed his/her own perspective and opinion regarding his/her experiences and understanding of the world.

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[1] Diederik Aerts, and Jan Van der Veken (eds.), World Views, Brussels: Vubpress, 1994, p. 18.

There is a possibility that this understanding may have differences from the social understanding of the world also. But as a part of the social group or society, one's individual perspective and understanding is very much influenced by the attributions that have set by society. Societal understanding of the world has always influenced the understanding of an individual through various social medium like family, school, church, communal gatherings etc. Therefore, worldview is something that can be understood as the interpretations of the collective belief system about the universe and the life that has been experienced by the group and how they have interpreted those collective experiences. This is very much associated with the understanding of the religious beliefs of a group. As Durkheim believes that religion is something which is not inspired and established through supernaturally but rather understands it as a product of social collectiveness. He has argued that this collective experiences and understanding is the main force to form the religious belief of a group. For him, religion is something which is very much social and it operates as a source for group solidarity. Therefore, in order to understand the religious worldview of a particular community, one has to collect and study all the scattered elements and aspects that formed their worldview.

But before directly jumping into the structure of the Koch worldview, it is very much necessary to understand what actually the meaning of worldview is. That's why, the present chapter is divided into two sections wherein the first section meaning, history and theoretical background of "worldview" will be discussed and in the second part the structure of Koch worldview will be discussed in order understands their religious life.

Section I: Worldview: An Overview

According to Oxford Dictionary, a worldview is a "particular philosophy of life or conception of the world."[2] The *International Encyclopedia of the Social Science* has defined worldview as "one of a number of concepts in cultural anthropology used in the holistic characterization and comparison of cultures. It deals with the sum of ideas which an individual within a group and or that group have of the universe in and around them. It attempts to define those ideas from the individualistic point of view holding them from

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[2] https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/worldview.

inside the culture rather than outside."[3] While discussing the concept of worldview at the beginning of the article, Redfield identifies worldview as the "outlook upon the universe that is characteristic of a people."[4] He further said that "the phrase names one of the groups of concepts which allow us to describe a way of life and to compare ways of life with one another."[5] Most of the time cultural anthropologists used the word worldview as a synonym for the concept of cosmology. Although, the concepts of worldview and cosmology are related to each other, every time both concepts cannot be fit in one single box. For example: in a religious tradition or culture, a hierophany which is the manifestation of sacred can guide to an image of the cosmos, but images of the cosmos do not essentially acquire on a sacred significance.[6] Therefore, Encyclopedia of Religion defines worldview as a "more general, less precisely delineated but commonly accepted set of ideas (i.e., an ideology) concerning life and world"[7], whereas cosmology refers to "more consciously entertained images, doctrines, and scientific views concerning the universe. In religious traditions, the natural place to look for cosmology is the myths of creation or birth of the world (cosmogony), whereas questioners might be the best means to arrive at a dominant worldview."[8] According to Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology, "the concept of worldview is similar to that of cosmology. A people's cosmology is their understanding of such things like the shape of the earth, its origin and place in the universe, and the origin of human beings and their fate after death. A worldview encompasses cosmology as well as more general ideas that underlie it."[9]

[3] David L. Sills (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of Social Science, Vol. 16*, The McMillan Company & Free Press: the U.S.A., 1968, p. 576.

[4] Robert Redfield, "The Primitive World View", *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 96, No. 1, 1952, p. 30.

[5] Ibid, p. 30.

[6] Kees W. Bolle, *Cosmology: An Overview,* in Encyclopedia of Religion, Lindsay Jones (ed.), Second Edition, Vol. 2, The Thompson Corporation: U.S.A., 2005, p. 1992.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] David Levinson & Melvin Ember (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 4, Henry Holt and Company: New York, 1996, p. 1380.

Originally, the general concept of the term "worldview" or many times written as "world-view" is derived from the German word *Weltanschauung,* where *Welt* means "world" and *Anschuung* means "perception" or "view". So, naturally, the direct translation of the German word into English is "Worldview" or "World-view" and both English and German terms are equally used in scholarly works. The concept of *Weltanschauung* is very much original to the works of German epistemology and philosophy and refers to an all-inclusive perception or individual viewpoint of human life and the universe.[10] In terms of the popularity of this German term, Immanuel Kant is always counted as the pioneering figure as he first used the term *weltanschauung* in his work "Critique of Judgment" in the year of 1790. But as David K. Naugle has mentioned Kant used the term to simply mean "the sense perception of the world."[11] While saying that there is nothing remarkable about the first use, Naugle quoted Wolter's (*Weltanschauung* written by Wolter) opinion where he argued that other German term *Weltansicht* also means 'worldview' or 'opinion' and further quote Martin Heidegger's[12] argument to support his view.[13]

From the early beginning of the nineteenth century, the concept has started to face the growth and expanded into other disciplines also. Pioneering intellectuals like Hegel, Schlegel, Jean Paul, Friedrich Schleiermacher etc. has also used the term. "Though German theologians, poets and philosophers primarily made use of the term during the first two decades of the nineteenth century, by the century's midpoint it had infiltrated a number of other disciplines."[14]

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[10] https://www.dictionary.com/browse/weltanschauung

[11] For details see: David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Cambridge, 2002, p. 59.

[12] Martin Heidegger, The Basic Problems of Phenomena, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.

[13] David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Cambridge, 2002, p. 59.

[14] David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Cambridge, 2002, p. 61.

As we have already discussed the definition of worldview forwarded by Redfield, where he defines worldview as the perception of the group and their vision to see the way of life compared with others, for him it is the general understanding of the cosmos by the group. In his article, Redfield tried his best to analyze and explain the very term in the context of ethos, mode of thought, culture and national character. For him, the aspect of comparison is not mean to reveal the contradiction but to see "in relation to all else". It is the "self" that forms the idea the universality that carries the basis for society or group's idea of the world. According to him, "every world view distinguishes not only the self from not-self, but distinguishes parts of the self from each other."[15] So, while an individual or a society tries to put forward its worldview, it actually tries to establish its difference from the other group or other individuals. Although, Redfield accepts the difference from self to others, in one point he also accepts the universality of the ideas regarding the worldview. For him, these are the Man, Nature and God where the universality of worldviews from different culture reflects. Accepting to Redfield's idea, Michael Kearney said that, "using this major tripartite division in world view – Human, Nature and God, Redfield wished to know in what characteristic way different peoples "confronted" the nonhuman (Nature and God). He noted that there is much variation in the central concerns of peoples, with some attending more to the human, some more to nature, and some more to God, while others more evenly divide their concerns."[16]

However, other than Robert Redfield's contribution in terms of a theoretical understanding of the worldview, Alan Dundes' concept is also worth mentioning. Although the concept of worldview has already been studied by various scholars and intellectuals, it was in the late twentieth century that marks a path-breaking step towards folkloric studies. Alan Dundes with his folkloric interpretation of worldview has proposed to study the fundamental units of worldview to clarify all the vagueness and diffuseness that has been always attributed with the concept.[17] He called these

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[15] Robert Redfield, *The Primitive World View*, Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, Vol. 96, No. 1, 1952, p. 30

[16] Michael Kearney, *World View*, Chandler & Sharp Publishers: California, 1984, p. 39.

[17] Alan Dundes, "Folk Ideas as Units of Worldview", *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 84, No. 331, Toward New Perspective in Folklore, 1971.

fundamental units as "folk ideas". He also mentioned terms like "basic premises", "notions", "cultural axioms" and "existential postulates" to refer to folk ideas. But for him, more than the term, it is the "underlying assumptions" that affected the ideology of a culture. As he believed these folk ideas "are not likely to appear consistently in any fixed form" and should not be identified as a separate genre, rather these are the assumptions that may appear in any genre. Dundes considered worldview as "the way people perceive the world and its place in it"[18] and said that "all cultures have underlying assumptions and it is these assumptions or folk ideas which are the building blocks of worldview......if one is seriously interested in studying worldview, one will need first to describe some of the folk ideas which contribute to the formation of that worldview."[19]

However, the concept of folk ideas in worldview forwarded by Alan Dundes is also not free from criticism. Stephen Stern and Simon J. Bronner disapproved Dundes' analysis of worldview by saying it as ahistorical tendencies which may lead to the reader in a false conclusion. According to them, the methodological drawback of Dundes' may "either give the appearance of an unequivocal pattern or too begin with one's conclusion and find data to fit the theme."[20] On the other hand, folklorist Linda Degh also argued and criticized Dundes' idea and said, "Folklorists weary of critically re-reading the body of scholarship accumulated shop around for new ideas, for a new beginning, by borrowing from other disciplines while ignoring those ideas developed within folkloristics by previous generations of scholars.......old classifications are useless and so are the archives storing improperly collected texts, fossils of no use."[21] While talking about worldview she says that worldview is a kind of perception that motivates human action and defines worldview as the "sum total of subjective interpretations of perceived

[18] Alan Dundes, "Folk Ideas as Units of Worldview", *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 84, No. 331, Toward New Perspective in Folklore, 1971, p. 96.

[19] Alan Dundes, "Folk Ideas as Units of Worldview", *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 84, No. 331, Toward New Perspective in Folklore, 1971, p. 96.

[20] Simon J. Bronner (ed.), *The Meaning of Folklore: The Analytical Essays of Alan Dundes*, Utah State University Press: Logan, Utah, 2007, p. 181.

[21] Linda Degh, "The Approach to Worldview in Folk Narrative Study", *Western Folklore*, Vol. 53, No. 3, 1994, p. 243.

and experienced reality of individuals."[22] She further mentioned that worldview "permeates all cultural performances, including folklore".[23]

After a year Degh's article was published in Western Folklore criticizing Dundes, Alan Dundes again published another article where "echo and amplify Degh's plea for more attention to the worldview in folk narrative studies."[24] In this article, Dundes introduced two different notions of the worldview that are binaries between old and modern. According to him, the 'old notion' of worldview represents the synonymous of cosmology; where one view one's place in the world or in the cosmos. On the other hand, a contrast to the older notion the 'modern notion' of worldview is something which is more cognitive and structural which according to him refers "to the way in which people perceive the world through native categories and unstated premises and axioms."[25] He further writes, "Thus the cosmology itself (the older sort of worldview) could provide data from which one could extrapolate principles of the newer kind of worldview."[26] But the central difference between the two notions, as stated by Dundes is the engagement of conscious awareness. While the worldview as cosmology is peculiarly conscious, the other notion is not and this conscious or unconscious is not the way the psychoanalytic theorists have to understand, but rather it is the linguistic unconscious that the "speakers of a language are not 'conscious' of the grammatical laws governing their speech."[27]

So, in order to study the worldview of any culture or group, Robert Redfield's idea and the concept is important as his study reveals the integration of the primitive

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[22] Linda Degh, "The Approach to Worldview in Folk Narrative Study, *Western Folklore*, Vol. 53, No. 3, 1994, p. 247.

[23] Linda Degh, The Approach to Worldview in Folk Narrative Study, *Western Folklore*, Vol. 53, No. 3, 1994, p. 247.

[24] Alan Dundes, Worldview in Folk Narrative: An Addendum, Western Folklore, Vol. 54, No. 3, 1995, p. 229.

[25] Alan Dundes, Worldview in Folk Narrative: An Addendum, Western Folklore, Vol. 54, No. 3, 1995, p. 230.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Alan Dundes, Worldview in Folk Narrative: An Addendum, Western Folklore, Vol. 54, No. 3, 1995, p. 231.

worldview through the universal tripartite division. This tripartite division of man, nature and God can also be connected with the Koch spirituality which is also closely related to nature spiritualism. As Redfield has also tried to explore these three facets in order to understand the primitive worldview, the Koch worldview also carries various rituals and rites in order to maintain the harmony between man, nature and the God. This gets reflected in their various mythic narratives about creation of the earth, sky, human beings and so on. As Redfield claims that primitive or primary worldview is marked on three assertions; the first one being the unitary fact of man, nature and God, the second one is to have common characteristics between man and not-man i.e. the nature and God and finally, the third one is some commonality between man, nature and God; in the next section, we will try to understand the Koch worldview and Koch spirituality through these triangle assertions of Redfield. This part will also look from Dundes' folkloric understanding of worldview through folk ideas.

Section II: Koch Worldview

Every religious tradition follows certain spiritual and philosophical beliefs and knowledge that carry the understanding of the world or metaphysics either by orally (for the followers of a folk religion) or by written scriptures (for a mainstream religion). Like other communities, Koch community has certain religious understanding and ideologies that bring their perception about the cosmos and the world which is conceived by them. In their local language, there is no vernacular term to explain the concept of Koch's worldview or the way they perceive the world. However, it can be understood from their mythologies, religious practices and cultural products which are associated in their socio-economic life. As we have already seen in the previous chapters, the religious life of Koch community is very much influential with the aspects of nature and its relationship with the sacred-profane concept. Moreover, not only the belief towards the folk deities and social practices associated with the life and worship of deities, but also the Hindu Vedic influence significantly shapes their worldview. The existence of multiple deities and supernatural figures registered their religious beliefs as polytheism. Koch community believes that their polytheistic gods are responsible for various natural phenomena either by destruction or by restoration that has an impact on human life. Every natural

phenomenon then creates a wonder in their mind is seen with fantasy and romance. For a better understanding of the worldview of Koch community, let's have a look at these mythic narratives, beliefs and practices that forms, gives shape and reflects their religious worldview.

6.2: Supernatural Beings and the Cosmos

From the above definition of worldview, it is known that understanding of cosmology gives the idea of the creation of the world and life which is perceived and conceived by the community. Most of the scholars and encyclopedias define cosmology as a part to understand the idea of life and the universe. In most of the religious cultures, the primary metaphysical understanding of the creation and elements of the world and the universe opens the forwarding page to see the relationship between the world, the universe and the living creatures inside that world. Cosmology is the study of the cosmos or the universe. It is "a theory of the world or the world order. The term 'cosmos' is mostly used in the sense of an orderly world, or a world-order in contrast with chaos or disorder."[28] According to Koch belief system, it is the supreme beings or the gods that control every aspect of the universe to maintain the peace. Gods are the sole reason for the existence of this universe and they are the creator of this world. As the Koch creation myth says, there are only waters at the beginning of this universe and it was the supreme deity that created this world for their settlement. The creation myth is given below:

Narrative 6.1: Creation of the Earth[29]

> **At the beginning of the creation of the earth, because of the good intention of *Issor Gohai/Gosai* or the Supreme Being, a pair of birds was born and they laid three eggs one by one. They started to incubate those eggs. But many days after, the birds could not notice any sign to hatch the eggs and then the female bird break one egg to confirm if inside there is life or not. But there was no sign of life coming out from the broken egg. So the pair of birds went to *Issor* and asked about the issue. Then *Issor* suggests and warns the female bird not to break other eggs or else the universe will**

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[28] The Encyclopaedia Britannica, vol. 6, Cambridge: The University Press, 1910, p. 493.

[29] Informants: Uttam Rajbongshi, Male, Age: 81, Panbari. Interview date: 12/03/2018. Sarbeswar Koch, Age: 61, Dotma. Interview date: 28/06/2017.

be in big trouble. *Issor* suggests the female bird to spread the egg everywhere. As per the suggestion, the female bird spread the egg with her beak everywhere and she again started to incubate the eggs as per the suggestion of *Issor*. From the broken egg *Jokh-Jokhini* (evil spirits), *Pet-Pettani* (ghost), *Daina-Daini* (witches), animals, birds, insects etc. were born.

At that time *Issor* looked down from the sky, he saw that the world is covered with only water. As there was no soil and the whole world is completely covered with water, the newly born lives start to starve for food. So in order to produce food he planned to bring soil on the world which is safely guarded by the King of *Patal*.

Therefore, *Issor* ordered every animal and bird to bring soil from the *Patal*. The animals, birds, insects; all tried their best to collect the soil from *Patal* but no one was able to bring it from *Patal*. Finally, *Issor* handed over the responsibility to bring the soil from *Patal* (underworld) to a pair of *Kakra* (crab). The *Kakra* went to the *Patal* and collected the soil to make the earth. Unfortunately, while returning back with the soil they are caught by the guards of *Patal* and they snatched the soil and gave them severe punishments. After coming back, on the way the pair of crabs died.

After many days while the crabs did not return back, *Issor* was in a big tension and send everyone to bring some news about the crabs. Finally, a crow finds them floating in the water and after that, the crow informed the news to *Issor*. Then he ordered them to bring the crab and *Issor* then again gave life to the crabs. Then the crabs narrate the whole story to *Issor* and said that there is some soil remains inside of their claws. Then *Issor* spread the soil all over with the help of a *Kesu* (earthworm) and let the soil to dry. In order to make the soil smooth, *Issor* then again ploughed and harrowed. In doing so, the crab and the earthworm also help *Issor*. But, while doing so, the footsteps of the crab remains in the soil and when it dries up it turns into the lakes and ponds and the path of the earthworm turns into a river.

After the creation of the world, *Issor* was in big tension thinking about where to keep the world because already there is water everywhere and soils just dry up. So, they kept the whole newly create earth over a huge *Dura Kasu* (tortoise) in the water. But the earth was so heavy that sometimes the back of the tortoise started to ache and then he shakes his back. Then, the earthquake occurs. Further, while the tortoise moves his body from east to west the day and the night happen.

After the creation of the world, many years after the egg that was incubated by the female bird is hatched. And from one egg *Bura-Buri* and from the other one, sun, moon and other deities were born. But after the birth, all of them want to leave the world and go to heaven as heaven is more prosperous and peaceful than the world. So they informed to *Issor* about

their wish. Then *Issor* said that they can come but in one condition and that is while coming to heaven no one can look back to the world. They agreed and started their journey towards heaven. But at the middle of their journey, they heard crying and disturbances from the earth searching for food and protection from the other creatures. At that time *Bura-Buri* couldn't ignore their crying and look back at the earth. The moment *Bura-Buri* looked back to the earth they fall down from sky to the earth. Then *Issor* ordered *Bura-Buri* to stay in the earth and to take care of the life of the earth and told them not to worry about food in the earth as their future generations will offer food to them in each and every ritual. Therefore, in the present day also *Bura-Buri* is called as the originator of the Koch people and gets a share of offerings in each and every ritual whether it is familial or communal.

The creation of the earth reveals the creation of various entities that has been transferred orally throughout the generations. It gives an explanation the creation of how supernatural beings like gods, spirits, ghosts, witches, sun, moon etc., various lives, nature, natural occurrences like day, night, earthquake etc. are created or come to existence. Further, from the narrative it is understood that the clear idea about the shape of the world is absent. However, it is notable that there is a space which is not suitable for the lives. As at the beginning of the creation of the earth, space was covered by water. The idea of cosmology is originated from the *Issor* (the Supreme Being) who create living beings and provide a suitable space for sustaining life. The concept of three worlds or the existence of three cultural elements is found in this narrative. In this narrative, there are three types of spaces that are occupied by the evil spirits, the deities and the human beings separately. Such creation of spaces and their existence of evil spirits, deities and human beings are because of their supreme god.

Further, it is also revealed that the existence of the evil spirit is because of the unwanted deed of somebody against the law of nature. The existence of human being is because of *Bura* and *Buri* who are considered as ancestors of Koch community and mediator of the two worlds-living and metaphysical. It is also known that Koch people inhibited in such an environment that includes features like lakes, hills, rivers, etc. and are connected to the shape of living creatures. From this myth, it is known that human beings are created only after the existence of various creatures like crabs, earthworms, tortoise etc. Further, the narrative brings the idea of three worlds- underworld, the living

world and the supernatural world. Moreover, the creation of various lives from an egg is the symbolic representation of fertility that is the originator of all lives- evil spirits, human beings, and god and goddess. In these three worlds, there is a hierarchical space of the cosmos that lies in the Koch worldview. The Sky who is the father figure that is in the above where the supreme deities live, the mother earth lies in the middle where the ancestor of the Koch community *Bura-Buri* stays and protects their and finally lies the underworld. The influences of the patriarchal structure in the social life of the community can be seen through this kind of hierarchical position of the cosmos. Further, the same cosmogony can also be reflected in their day to day social and individual structure. The imaginary demarcation is an interesting fact of their social structure. There is an imaginary boundary that lies between these three different worlds which are connected through the sacred and profane activities. The understanding of this tripartite division of world and living beings has been shown in a diagram below:

Diagram 6.1: Tripartite Division of Spaces and Living Entities.
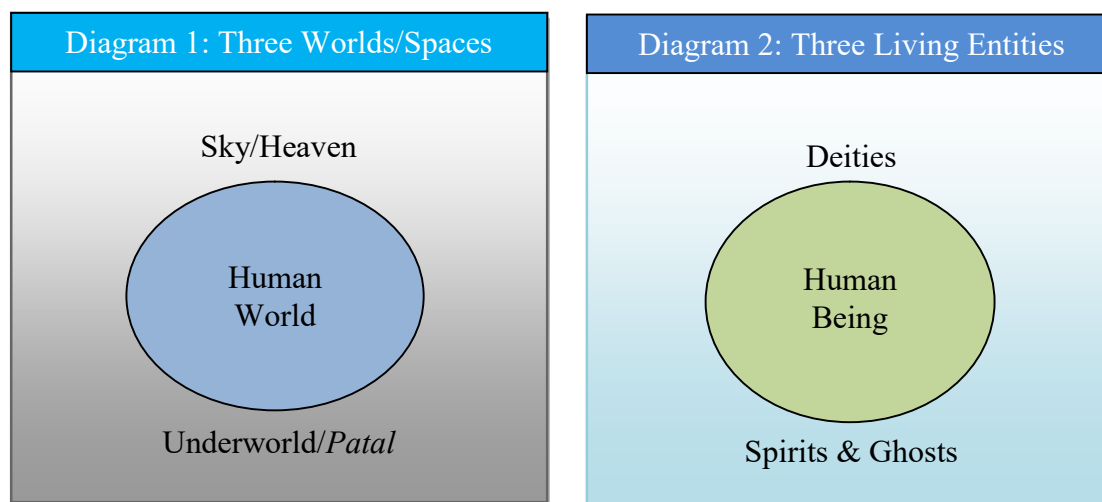
So, in the creation myth, it has been seen that number three plays a prominent role which has been reflected in their various aspects of life.[30] Therefore, the above diagrams are included. The existence of these number three that constructs their religious worldview can also be noticed in their various life cycle ritual as well as communal.[31]

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[30] This has been discussed in the later part of the present chapter.

[31] For more details see the life cycle rituals in Chapter 3 and for communal rituals in Chapter 4.

Moreover, the origin of the cosmos and various cosmic occurrences reveal the geo-environmental phenomena and their cultural explanations. From this narrative, it is also known that earthquake is one of the natural causes that disturb the living world. However, such disturbance can be controlled by the god. For Koches, each and every natural phenomenon is controlled by certain supernatural entities. It is up to their wish whether they destroy the beings and environment or they flourish it with prosperity. The control over rain and wind by a supreme being is one of the most common understandings of the cosmic phenomenon. There is another narrative that explains why various natural phenomena like day-night, earthquake etc. happens and these are the folk ideas of the community members that got carried out through various myths and rituals. For example: the practice of the ritual is to calm down *Bordoisila/Bardwisikhla*[32] so that no harm of the family, the village or the community occurs. According to the belief, the character of the narrative is a spirit of nature that carries the wind and rain with her. This is a natural phenomenon where believes and ritual of calming down the *Bordoishila* gets establish through the narratives. Overall, the Koches have followed ritual to calm down or satisfy her as a supernatural being, but the feelings that were carried and manifested through her makes the character as more humanely. The happiness to meet her maternal family again, the sadness to being separated for a long time from her own family makes her restless and this is the feeling that a normal married woman carries with herself.

Another interesting fact is that, as per the Koch belief, the sky is considered as the father who is the creator and the earth is considered as the mother who nurtures all the living creatures of the world. In their belief systems, the sky was believed to be very near with the earth and the following myth will give a picture of the reason why the sky goes up.

Narrative 6.2: Creation of the Sky[33]

> **Long back ago, the sky was not so far from the human world. It was so near that they actually can touch the sky with their bare hands. Once, an**

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[32] The narrative has been discussed in the Chapter 5, p. 244.

[33] Informant: Satish Das, Male, Age: 54, Bakhrapara. Interview date: 25/03/2018

old lady was preparing to husk the paddy with her *Ural/Sam* and *Gahin* (traditional wooden mortal and pastel). But the lady was suffering from back pain and while she started husking the paddy because of the sky she has to bend more her back than regular and it was creating more pain to her back. So out of anger, she hit the sky with her *Gahin* (pastel) with such a force that the sky went in so much up to that no one can touch it. From then onwards the sky was placed in so high.

From the above narrative, it is known that the living world and the sky world was very near in distance as anyone can touch it easily. This story gives a sense of the relation between the living world and the sky world that reflects the belief system of Koch people. This may bring a sense of understanding how the human being and Supreme Being once lived together in harmony as the Koches believe that their ancestors/gods were once lived together with them. That's why in the ritual context even though the deities are not present as an object; they are strongly believed to live among devotees. There are various narratives that deals with the personal experiences exist among the Koch people till today. One of them is the experienced story that people have faced with the deity *Raja Thakur*. He is believed to be the benevolent deity who lives among the people of *Bhumeswar* hill harmoniously. According to one of the stories that go like:

Narrative 6.3: Story of Raja Thakur[34]

> **Legends about Raja Thakur says that he used to live along with the villagers be a part of them in harmony and peace. He used to live like a normal person and always used to wear white *Kurta* and white *Angsa* and on his neck he used to take a yellow *Gamsa* (these are the traditional dresses that a Koch old man used to wear). People say that he used to help people who actually need help with money in order to conduct marriage and some rituals. He used to provide ornaments and dresses of the bride and to the family each and every type of material such as baskets, cooking equipment, etc. But the family has to return all the materials once the ceremony is over. If someone needs help, he/she have to go to the Bhumiswar Hill and have to ask him for his graces by bowing down to him.**

> **But once a family went to the Bhumiswar hill and asked his help for a marriage ceremony. Unwillingly, the family did not remember to return the hired materials given by Raja Thakur. From that day, Raja Thakur stopped to help people because of the human's irresponsibility towards the helper. However, Koch people still believe that Raja Thakur still comes to**

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[34] Informant: Hiren Choudhury, Male, Age: 52, Atugaon. Interview date: 15/06/2016.

the ceremony disguising himself as an old man for blessing the bride/groom and after blessing the bride/groom he returns to nowhere.

Thus, this story also reflects the same understanding of the human relationship with the deities, but the deeds and misdeeds create problem in the life of the human being. It is believed that if they offer food or worship to the ancestors/god with a good intention then they will get prosperous life. Such ritual of appeasing supernatural being is still practiced to protect from any disturbances. But the misdeeds toward the supernatural being bring misfortunes to the Koch life or causes natural calamities or unpredictable accidents. This popular belief that reflects in the narrative reminds Koches set the divinity with the deities that lives among them and ask them to respect and stick to their own words to gain the blessings from the deity. The living presence of the God amidst them made Koches to be faithful in their actions and fearful towards the misdeeds. This made Koch community more ethical and moralistic in nature.

6.2.1: Village Structure in Cosmic Context

Every Koch village is demarcated imaginarily by the villager. Even if there is no physical demarcation, there is a distinct demarcation between the village territories as understood by the Koches. The settlement and arrangement of Koch community in a village is based on the systematic organization of their social structure which is also found in every Koch family. Moreover, the perception and belief systems associated in the selection of land occupied by the family reveals their worldview. They construct village territory from their own perspective and opinion regarding the experiences got during the process of settlement in a particular geographical region. However, it is not an individual perspective and opinion, but a part of the social group or society. So, their environmental experiences develop their religion, belief systems, values and norms that define their existence which is the ultimate reality.

In Koch community, a village is considered as a universe created by the god and goddess where they live under the protection of god and goddess. The Koch village has a certain unique feature from another village inhabited by other ethnic groups. All the family of Koch community living in a village is lived together under a social structure, practising various verbal and non-verbal expressive behaviours handed down from one to

another generation as a tradition. Every Koch family of a village is bound by their common ideology, belief system and perceptions. They do not have a system for occupying a land area through their lineage system. They have a loose lineage system within a family which can be found in the marriage practice where a Koch family may make the marriage relationship to the same lineage of the family when the family has completed seven generations. So, after seven generations a family is separated into two different families. Since the Koch community is a patrilineal and patriarchal society in which man took the decision of a family and community. All the family members reside in their respective houses are gathered under a village head and each person acts according to their customary laws and social norms and values. Not even in the family structure, a village is also under the authority of village headman which has a noticeable power. Politically, the traditional administration of the village is done by the village headman recruited from a particular lineage which is not hereditary. [35] The village headman has not only the power of judicial and policy-making but also ritual practices.

In a Koch village, there are spaces for communal gathering and sacred in which various religious practices are performed to express their unity and identity. The protection of village boundary, as well as each family, is an important responsibility which has to be taken by the individual, family and villagers. As we have discussed in the previous chapters that the religious life of Koch community is influenced by the aspects of nature and its relationship with sacred nature that bind each family into one. They believe in the existence of multiple deities and supernatural figures which controls the natural phenomena that have an impact on their life. The faith and belief of supernatural phenomenon create complex social behaviour in their everyday life. Such complex behaviour and their veneration towards the multiple deities and supernatural figures rollicked in and around the village is the main reason for the existence of their life.

According to the village structure, most of the village deities stay in the middle of the village area which is considered as a sacred place where all the religious practices are performed by the community.[36] In some Koch village, such a sacred place is defined by

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[35] For more details about village structure of the Koches, see the second chapter.

[36] See the diagram of the sacred spaces for the communal deities in the fifth chapter, p. 260.

constructing a temple or making a mound from the ground. Construction of the temple in Koch community depends on the village and there is no tradition in the construction of the temple. It is said that the construction of the temple is not an indigenous culture and the culture of temple construction is started from the influences of others. However, they used to build a temporary small hut which is considered as a house of the god and goddess according to the circumstances and ritual purposes. Koch community believes that supreme beings are in the abstract which has no shape and figure and cannot be seen by the naked eye. However, their faith, belief systems associated with their deities are shown in different spaces through various human behavioural practices done by the villagers. In a village, the village deity is considered as the main deity for their welfare and protection of the community and the performance which is done during the communal ritual deal all the deities including malevolent and benevolent. Not only the village deity, but there are also several deities that act as the protector of the inside and outside the boundary of the village. Each and every Koch family of the village is connected to the main sacred place through the various path in which various deities (malevolent and benevolent) have existed. Mostly, the junction or the meeting of two or three paths, tree or bamboo groves are considered as the place where evil spirits are lived but in active. The existence and associated beliefs of these spirits in their everyday life activities through various acts is one of the inherited behaviours of Koches.

Koch people- man and woman including children engage in all manner of social and sociable interaction. The relationship and interaction between man and supernatural being are shown during the agricultural work and public realm of life through rituals. Various rituals are performed regularly in order to keep the world in balance and restore the relationship between the god and the living world.[37] Philosophically, there are three worlds- under-world, living-world and higher or supreme-world.[38] The living world includes all visible and tangible objects, whether human, animal, vegetable, etc. Another two worlds are the greater part of the living world where men perform several ritual practices to reach both the worlds. Their living world has various malevolent and

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[37] See various life cycle ceremonies, communal and agricultural rituals in the chapter 3 and 4.

[38] See the above diagram.

benevolent spirits in which a man may get to suffer from either entering the two greater worlds (under and the higher world). Spirits are normally invisible and intangible, which is in abstract form. The diviner can go through several rituals in which he/she can see spirits and mediated the living world and the greater world. Ideas and conception of Koch people's to their living world are shown in through religious practices and belief systems. Priest and priestess play tremendous roles in various religious practices to connect or to mediate the spiritual world through performing rituals. *Deodha* and *Deodhai* (shaman) are considered to possess the power to perform specific actions to heal, to win at gambling, and to hunt some other being. From their recipe and view, the Koch world is shown magically.

In Koch community, the ancestral deities either heavenly or earthly are considered as the primordial ones that have created men and making them inhabitable in a geographical region. The relation between ancestors and man is defined in their myth in which ancestor left the village because the man and woman of those days could not keep their laws and so polluted them. But once separated from the man they agreed to go on looking after them in return for worship such mythical relations are reflected in the rites. The ancestors control the fortunes of their several lineages and control the village as a whole. Koch people worship them and in return, they reinforce the village and help to survive. The mythology re-asserts the above idea through its various renderings.

Several spirits which are in and around the village roam as a living being in certain places and live in objects, people, or shrine. It is believed that spirits can walk with people who have special ties with them. [39] Sometimes, malevolent or benevolent spirits have no particular place and they are like the breeze that one cannot say exactly where there are. In their perception and belief systems, spirits are widely varied in nature and have relations with the visible and tangible world. It is believed that every person, plant, animal, and thing has its own particular spirit which is associated with it. Some of the spirits are once part of the living people and departed from their body at death and they pursue desires and values as similar to those they pursued in life. So, these spirits

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[39] Informant: Pramod Rajbongshi, Male, Age: 61, Bakhrapara. Interview date: 25/03/2018.

attack and look after for the welfare of the community or the villagers or the lineages or the family members or the individual. So, the variations of spirits in Koch community bring the relationship between nature and villagers that shape their village institutions. Visiting and meeting together in certain action exchange their socio-cultural values and norms that sustain their socio-economic and political life. Sometimes, myths are told and projected their inner world visually to the physical world in which social relationships are bound together. Moreover, Koch community is an agrarian-based community in which various religious practices are performed for getting prosperous life. In Koch community, nature has a fundamental feature that is believed to be having power and man are considered as common or ordinary. Like the village, the perception and belief system which is found in the homestead also reveals their world which is conceived by the community.
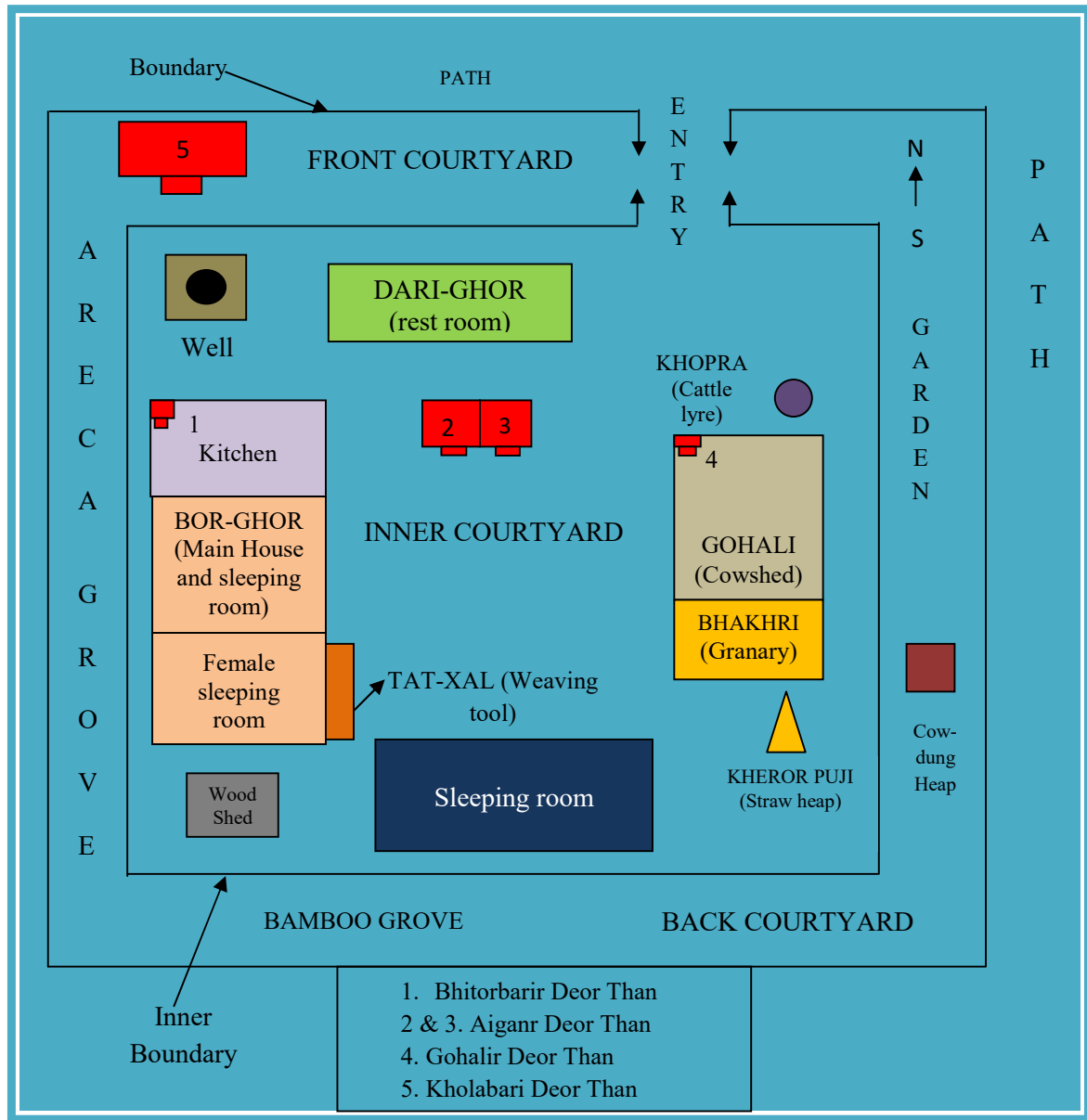
6.2.2: Homestead in Cosmic Context

In a Koch village, every family has its own territorial boundary occupying certain land in which they live together along with the family members. It is believed that the homestead or estate is guarded by the spirits of ancestor to protect all the family members from any external forces. Their territorial boundary of the homestead is deeply connected to their belief systems that neighbour could not take over the land area from others without consent. If a family member takes over some area from other greedily than the person may suffer an unpredictable disease that can kill his/her life. So, it is prohibited to take over land beyond their boundaries. The territorial boundary between the families has demarcated either imaginary or physically. The spaces of the homestead are defined when the house is constructed and its related household materials are kept at definite places. In Koch community, direction and position of the structure of the house and the household material are co-related to the human body itself. So, the human body and its position define their directional values for keeping material that reveals their perception which is shown visually. Their arrangement of household materials in the homestead is one of the cultural texts that reflect their world which is perceived and conceived by the community.

Like other community, Koch community constructs various houses of different purposes that create their real environment than live simply in nature. From the time immemorial, they construct traditional houses using the material available in their environment employing skills and techniques taught by their forefather throughout the generation. Their household structure is not only very related to the environmental condition but also it is related to their belief systems, values and norms constructed by them to define or manifested what they perceived and conceived about their real world. They acquire knowledge of skill and techniques from their experiences with their environment through the course of time made them construct a house in a certain structure. So, the traditional house structure of Koch community reflects their unique identity. Their geographical feature and climatic condition are one of the factors for shaping the structure of a house to serve the required purpose for meeting their satisfaction. The cultural knowledge such as verbal and non-verbal expressive behaviours is originated from their house which becomes their identity. Every family has their limited boundary in which the members constructed the house that defines their socially and culturally existence among themselves.

A Koch family constructs their house in a particular homestead for socio-cultural and economic life activities. The selection of a place for constructing a house is also important because the house is a sacred place in which different sacred and profane activities are performed to interact with the family members as well as the community. Moreover, it is also believed that there are some places where spirits have already existed and some places are considered as a path of the spirits. They do not construct without any performing ritual activity. The house of Koch community has various spaces in which every member act differently according to the space associated with belief systems. A diagram of the traditional Koch house structure has been given below:

Diagram No. 6.2: Koch House Structure.[40]

	1. Bhitorbarir Deor Than
Inner	2 & 3. Aiganr Deor Than
Boundary	4. Gohalir Deor Than
	5. Kholabari Deor Than

Traditionally, the structure of homestead can be divided into three parts- front courtyard, inner courtyard and back courtyard from the reference of the main house. There are two main thresholds or gates- the main gate and the imaginary gate. The main gate is the gateway for entering into the whole area of the estate which is considered as a part of closed and open space. The main gate is kept on the eastern side and east is

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[40] The same diagram has also been used in the chapter 5 to represent the sacred spaces in a homestead.

considered as a good luck and progressive. The imaginary gate is the gateway for entering the inner courtyard and the dwelling houses, the private space. The inner courtyard is demarcated imaginarily in which various houses are constructed. The front courtyard is an empty space in which a sacred place is kept on the north-eastern side. This sacred place is called *Kholanbarir Than*[41] which is considered as the abode of various deities to protect the homestead and family members from any threatening given from the outside the homestead. However, family members do not worship it every day. It is worshipped only when there is a ritual for the family. There is no specific deity to represent the sacred place. It is a place for dwelling numbers of deities. Every Koch family keeps the front courtyard neat and clean and they do not keep any household materials at the front courtyard as it is believed that this may harm the family either by the witchcraft or through the effect of the evil eye. There are other spaces in north, south, and west for gardening and bamboo plantation.

The main house is constructed on the north side facing towards the south. The structure of the house itself is a noticeable identity of the Koch community in which their belief systems are associated with it. It is believed that the roof of the house is a spinal cord of the human body. If the backbone is damaged, then the whole family is damaged. The main house has three rooms- the first room is a kitchen in the east, the second room is *bor-ghor* in the middle, and the third room is a woman's room in the western direction. Each room is demarcated by the wall and each room is connected through the doors.

In the kitchen, there are two spaces which classified from their arrangement of materials as well as the behaviour within the spaces. One side is considered as pure and sacred and another side is sacred and profane which depends on the context. All the associated kitchen materials are kept in the space which is considered as sacred and one cannot allow touching any material of the kitchen without the sanctification of the family members. In order to enter the cooking place, one should have maintained its purity and no one is allowed to enter inside the cooking place without taking a bath. All the associated cooking materials are kept near the cooking place. However, the prohibition is

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[41] For the list of the deities of *Kholabarir Than*, see the chapter 5, p. 257.

related to men folk. Generally, Koch community consider that kitchen is one of the spaces for woman folk and cooking and serving activities are also assigned to the women only. The sense of gender inequality and biases is visible even in the space of the kitchen. There is another space which is kept for gathering family members while eating a meal. During the meal, the head man sits on the side of the north facing towards the main door and woman sit on the west facing towards the kitchen. It is considered that head men are the protector of every member of the family. It is believed that sitting on the north side facing towards the main door is to protect the family members from the evil spirits or the threats that enters during the meal. Further, once the meal is prepared, the cooked food is offered to the fire and the *Akha* (stove) by the chef. It is one of the behaviours that signify their belief system to the food as well as to the stove. In Koch community, the stove is considered as the life of the family in which different foods are provided for the family which is given by the deities. The head man offers some food on the ground before having food for the ancestors to thanks them and to the spirits to appease them. Such behaviour is kind respect given to the deities for supply food for the family. Pleasing of deities from the deeds of the human being is concerned for a better life in their social and cultural life. In the kitchen, there is an abode of the deity on the southeast side which is known as *Bhitorbarir Than*. The three deities named *Ai Thansri, Lokkhi* and *Bastu Thakur* are worshipped in this sacred place. There a pot of reddish brown colour having a mark of vermilion colour on the wall is kept on the prepared pedestal. The family member puts full of rice in this pot. It is believed that keeping full of rice brings prosperity in the family. As a customary behaviour, taking a small three handful of rice at the time of preparation of the meal is one of the essential behaviours of the chef. The sense of sacredness is built visually from the allocation of a pot at the abode of the deity. So, the pot is used as a cultural symbol that signifies woman deities who give prosperity to the family and its members. In some of the Koch family, there is no representation of such material in this particular space. However, they keep the abode separately without installing any kind of materials. In some Koch family, the abode of the deity is represented by erecting a segment of the bamboo stick. In Koch community, the erection of a bamboo pole represents the deities. In addition, the preservation of food is also one of the important knowledge that has to be known by family members. Kitchen is the

space in which food like dry fishes, meat, vegetable are preserved by keeping on a rack made of bamboo hanging down from the roof just above the ground stove. Because keeping above the fireplace and giving off smoke protect foods from the spoiling. A household material like *kula/dala* (winnowing fan) is an object that Koch keeps only one in number in a house. They do not allow keeping two Kula in the kitchen which is considered as a bad omen. The materials which are related to the kitchen such as *dala, kula, sangli* etc. are kept inside the kitchen also. So, each household material has its own space that reveals their cultural meaning reflecting their worldview. Not only the associated material with the place but also the human behaviour is considered as one of the important expressive behaviours performed accordingly with their belief systems associating with the household material in relation to the spaces. One of the peculiar behaviours is that if a person is left outside of the house, he/she should enter after cleaning his/her feet. It is believed that cleaning of the body will help to ward off the spirits as well as they get purified from an impure state to come into the pure state.

The next room called *bor-ghor* belongs to the head of the family and the third room belongs to the woman only. In Koch community, the classification of gender and its hierarchical arrangement between the family members is seen clearly within the position and occupying space. Form this demarcation of rooms and allocation of people in relation to the family member demonstrates their social hierarchy in which women are under the control of the head man. The division of room is not an imaginary but a physical division, which is shown from their partition of wall between the rooms. Generally, women are more visible in other household activities- sweeping, mopping, cleaning, and in the arrangement of all the household materials and it is a common customary behaviour of every woman. It is believed that if a head man meets household material scattered around the inner courtyard and dirty in the early morning, then the head man reduces his life span. The main door of the *bor-ghor* is on the southern wall which is directly opposite to the *gohali*. From this structure of the house, it is also known that men are engaged in agricultural works. It is also said that looking at the cow after waking up early in the morning considered a good sign for the family that brings the wealth and healthy life. *bor-ghor* is the main house on the whole homestead and that is the universe of sacred-profane activities.

There is ak*Kathi* (veranda), an open space in which they keep looms. Most of the Koch women engage in weaving occupation for getting their self-sustained economy. There are two types of looms- *hat xal* and *tat xal*. Their weaving activities are associated with their belief systems and perceptions which are attached to their technology where women follow certain norms.[42]

On the western side, there is another extended house which is constructed for the unmarried man folk in which all the sons stay and sleep. The main door of this house is on the eastern wall. From such allocation, it is known that sons have freedom than a daughter even if they are under the control of a headman. At the corner of the north-west which is in between the main house and the house of the unmarried son, there is an open hut for keeping or storing firewood. On the southern side, there is a house which is divided into two sections- *gohali* (cow-shed) and *bhakhri/mashang* (Granary). In *gohali*, there is an abode of a deity called *Lakhol Deo* at the north-eastern corner of the cow-shed. This sacred place is known as *Gohalir Than*. This is an empty space in which there is no material that signifies the deity. It is believed that the *Lakhol Deo* is the caretaker for the cattle. If a cow suffers then the family member offers food to the deity for the recovery of the cow. The position of this house is in the opposite direction of the *bor-ghor*. It is believed that cow should be the first living being to meet when a head man woke up in the morning. It also reflects their main occupation and staple food of the community.

Bhakhri/Mashang (store house) is on the southern side and the location of this house is situated in such a manner so that it gets enough sunlight so that the grain stored inside the granary does not spoil. This is also reflected in the Koch proverbs of constructing household.[43] The agricultural equipment and tools of a family are kept on the west and south side of the main house so that the outsider may not see the object directly while entering into their house. It is also believed that seeing household material

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[42] For the beliefs and norms associated with weaving culture, see the chapter 2.

[43] The proverb "*Uttore guwa, dokkhine dhuwa, pube has, possime bash*" says to keep open the souther side of the house. This is because to get the enough sunlight in the winter time. For the other direction's explanation see the 'homestead' part of chapter 2.

by someone can cause the entry of evil spirits or can get easily affected through evil eyes and witchcraft which will harm the prosperity of the family. It is also known from their household material that the Koch family confined in the agricultural activities. At the corner of the south-west which is in between the house of unmarried son and *mashang* (granary), there is a space for keeping straw heap. From the placement of firewood and straw, it is known that Koch does not keep such stuff very openly in front of the house which is considered as a space for the public domain of life. On the eastern side, a house called *dari-Ghor* (restroom) is constructed facing on the west side for outsiders. The outsider does not enter inside the main core of the house and it is in their culture that the *bor-Ghor* is considered as private space for all the family members. On the southern side of the *dari-Ghor*, there is an abode of *Oindeor than* and there is a well on the northern side of the *dari-ghor*. In Koch family, construction of a well is an essential part which is built nearer to the kitchen part. The concept of purity and pollution and sanctification from the water is a common customary activity which is associated with their belief systems.

The inner courtyard is surrounded by the houses. At the centre of the inner courtyard, there are two shrines- *Tulsir Than* and *Oin Deor Than*. The *Tulsir Than* is dedicated to deity *Aideu* and the plant *Tulsi* represents the deity *Aideu*, who is the protector of the family. Simultaneously, the other shrine also includes the other deities like *Bura-Buri, Shiva* etc. along with the ancestors of the family. This is the point to refer to the entire creature and living beings which are originated. So, this place is a cultural symbol to relate all the family members that identify each member. Each individual of a family passes different life stages which are recognized through performing various rituals at this point. At the backside of the house, the third courtyard is situated which is believed as the abode of spirits and ghosts and each courtyard is separated with certain imaginary boundaries. So, the spatial construction of the house through the idea of the courtyard also reflects the three levels of the universe as same as the construction of the *bor-ghor*. This is represented through the following diagram.

Diagram 6.3: Positions of Supernatural Beings in a Koch House Structure.
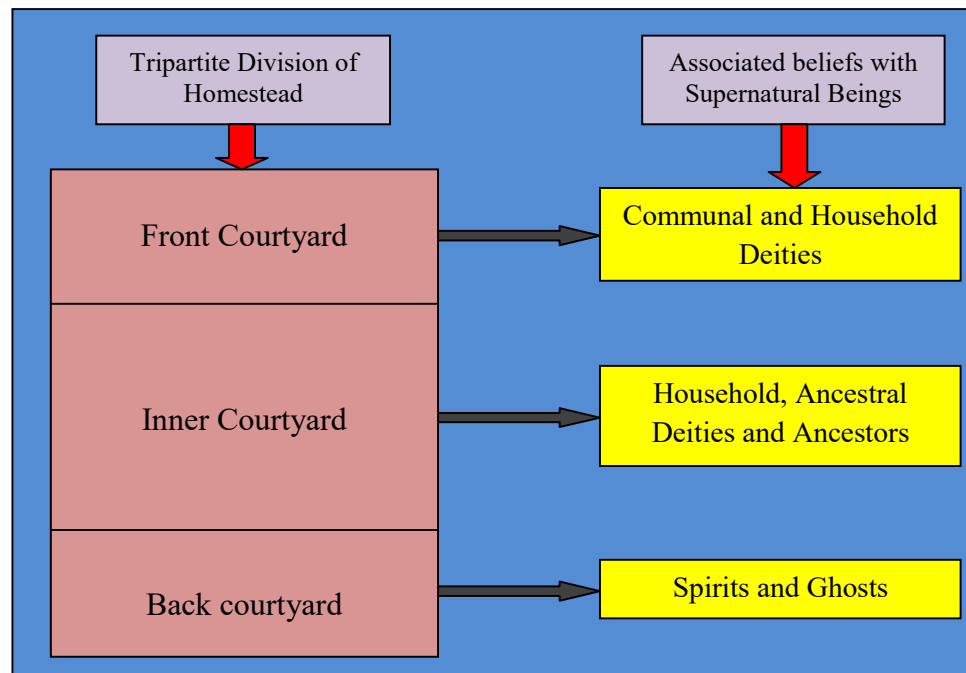
The space on the western side is also known as the back courtyard. Culturally, the back side of the body or the western side is considered as the place for keeping waste materials which are not considered as good items for exposing to the outsiders too. So, in a homestead of a family, there are two territorial boundaries- one for the whole main estate and another is for the small estate which is inside the main estate. In the small estate, the several houses are constructed in a particular direction and position for their different purposes which show their social structure and sense of sacred and profane, and private and public domain life.

Further, there is some variation in their allocation of house patterns for getting different purpose under a belief system. In this case, the kitchen is at the place where the restroom is constructed and the three rooms of the main house have only two rooms. From this house pattern, it is known that the kitchen is a sacred room in which any person does not enter without purifying themselves. Like other community, they have numbers of narrative that show their culture in relation to their house. Koch community is a joint family who believes in one power or authority. A house is constructed under certain belief systems to define their sense of perception and what they conceive their world.

Their house is not only for shelter but also a cultural knowledge hub which contains elements of what they dream about their community. The house itself is considered as a sacred place that can protect their lives. Belongings of every member of a family are shown in everyday socio-cultural and economic life in relation to the space formed by the structure of their house. Moreover, their religious sentiment and emotion with a particular space make them justify their way of existence in their environment.

6.3: Human Being

In almost all folk societies, human beings are considered as the central part of the universe surrounded by ideas conceived and perceived by them. As Redfield has pointed out that worldview "attends especially to the way a man, in a particular society, sees himself in relation to all else"[44], the understanding of self reveals the first element to see their worldview. In the Koch worldview, human beings are portrayed as the creation of God and it was the deity *Bura-Buri* who created the human being. Further, the creation myth of human being reveals that Koch is the first community of this creation and this is their worldview. Therefore, *Bura-Buri* is considered as the creator and guardian of the community. The myth is given below:[45]

Narrative 6.4: Creation of Human being

After the creation of the earth, *Bura* started cultivation process by ploughing the soil with his bull. So he brought the paddy seeds and started cultivation. After time passes, the paddy started to bloom. So he decided to create the human being to guard the crops. He builds one male and one female figure with soil with his own hand and let it dry. But the statues do not have any life. So he went to heaven to bring *Amrit* to give the male and female immortality. But unfortunately, at the time when Siva went to heaven, *Buri* came and she shows the two lifeless clay statues. Then she brought the water with a *Kosu pat* (taro leaf)[46] and pours that water to the

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[44] Robert Redfield, *The Primitive World View*, Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, Vol. 96, No. 1, 1952, p. 30

[45] Informant: Satish Das, Male, Age: 54, Bakhrapara. Interview date: 25/03/2018

[46] The saying "*Kosupator pani*" or the water of a taro leaf is a common and popular saying not only among the Koches but also among other Assamese communities. This saying is metaphorically used to refer the temporality of life. As the rain drops or morning dews do stay at a taro leaf but it can fell down at any time, even with a simple breeze also. It does not stay for a long.

mouth of the male and female statue. Because of that, the statues got the life but they were unable to live as immortals. Therefore, it is said that human life is unpredictable and doesn't stay for a long time like the water of a taro leaf.

This myth has explained that it was the gods who created humankind with their own hand and gives life to it with a purpose. Furthermore, it tries to demarcate the difference between a god and human being with the idea of life and death by explaining the idea of why human beings are mortal. Further, it reveals that human being is not only about their physical existence or as a single entity but rather a combination of body, mind and soul or spirit and have cycle of life and death. Moreover, among the Koch people, the body is considered as a temporary thing and is always believed that the body should be used for a spiritual purpose. This folk idea reflects through various folk genres. In one of the popular Rajbongshi folk song,[47] this ideology of the human body is very clearly represented. The song goes like this:[48]

"Ek bar Hori bolo mon roshona
Manob dehar goirob koriyo na
Manob deha matirore bhando
Bhangilei hobo khondo re khondo…."

The literal translation of the song is "At least chant the name of the God for once, feeling proud of your human body. This body is like a clay pot and once it is broken, you won't be able to restore again".

So as per the ideology is reflected in the song, the human body is considered as nothing but a temporary ornament and it was the mind that controls and governs the function and purification of the body. It is subtle and abstract in form; therefore, the mind carries the human body more into the psychological and mental level from the physical level. The mind always instigates the body to function a proper life and therefore it is said that a body with an ill mind cannot survive for a long and it was the idea of the God who purifies the negativity of the mind. Moreover, the existence of the human body is like other physical objects of the world which follows the natural law and physical order of nature depending upon its time and space. Most of the time, this material human life or

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[47] Rajbongshi folk songs are the songs that are sung in the Rajbongshi language by the community.

[48] Informant: Satish Das, Male, Age: 54, Bakhrapara. Interview date: 25/03/2018

body is surrounded by the idea of life and death. Birth and death are subtle and the life of a human being is influenced by this phenomena. The existence of life lives till the body exists; but once the death comes, this physical material perishes into dust or ashes and that is the end of the body. But according to the Koch belief system, soul or spirit of that body never dies. The soul is something that reveals itself through the body and body is considered as the mediator to the physical world. A person's soul or spirit is always believed to be as a binary to the body. While the body is concrete, the idea of the soul is considered as beyond human existence; it is the divine object that has an abstract idea. Even it is more abstract than the mind.

As per their traditional belief goes, Koch people consider the human body as the replica of cosmos. The human body reflects the three parts of the Koch cosmology, i.e. the sky from head to neck, the earth from shoulder to waist and the underworld from waist to sole of the foot and this is reflected in the death rituals also. When a person is dead, the bier is prepared by dividing them into three parts by tying three short pieces of banana trunk thinking into three body parts i.e. neck, waist and leg which are the symbolic representation of the sky, earth and underworld. This is represented through the following diagram:

Diagram: 6.4: Tripartite Division of Human Body and their connection to the Three worlds.
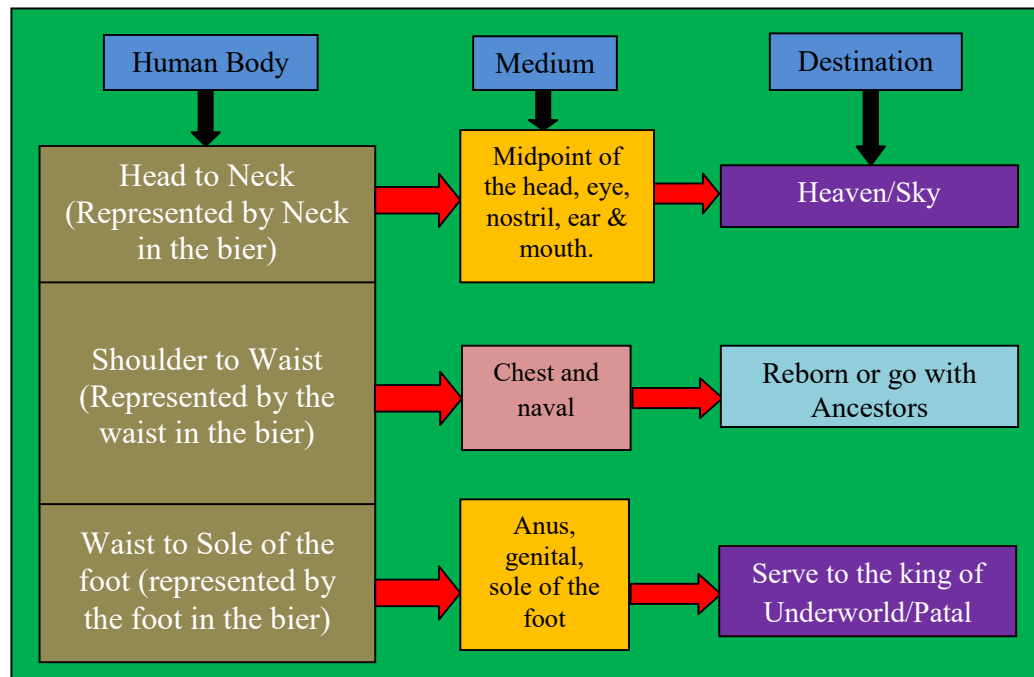
Moreover, after the death, the way from which the soul leaves the body is also considered as an important matter to reflect the Koch worldview. It is said that if the soul leaves the body from *Talu* (midpoint of the head) or from eyes or from ears or from mouth, it will go to the sky; if the soul goes from anus it will stay at the earth and if the soul goes from the sole of the foot, he/she will serve to the king of the underworld. The journey of the souls, according to belief, depends upon the deeds and misdeeds (*Karma*) in the world. So, this also reflects the tripartite division in the human being

6.3.1: Concept of death

According to the Koch belief, every human being has a definite destiny once they are dead. It is their own deeds that they have done in the mortal world that decide their *Bidhi* or destiny. As per the traditional belief goes, there is no deity or god who controlled the death. Although they do believe the existence of *Jom* (*Yama*), the Hindu god of death; but as per the data gathered from the field experience goes, people do not talk much

about *Jom* or *Yama* in their mundane life. It is their deeds and misdeeds that make the soul to rebirth again in the desired form.

Although there is no conceptual clarity about the existence of *Sorgo* (heaven) or *Norok* (hell); but people do talk about the existence of these. According to them, the *Sorgo* lies in the sky and the *Norok* lies in the below of the earth and in between them lies the mortal world. But for the souls, it is very crucial and tough to reach for heaven and it is said that only souls who had a pure heart in his living time can reach to heaven. Moreover, in order to reach that place, it is said that every soul has to cross *Boitoroni* - an imaginary river that is laid between the world and the land where souls rest. For that, the soul has to cross this river by a boat in order to reach its eternal home for souls. It is believed that this journey is so tiresome and long and to cross the river the soul has to pay a fee to the boatman in order to sit in that boat. That's why when a person dies the family of the man prepares the dead body by offering rice, water and money for that journey before taking the body to cremate. But it is believed that at the day of the *Saradho* ritual when food and water is offered to the soul of the deceased person, the deceased soul comes again to see the family by transforming him/her into any kind of animal and eats and drinks the food by weeping and crying and says that I will reborn into this family again. Traditionally, it is said that any human being reborn for seven births. Only after that, they will get *Mukti* (salvation). Until then, their deeds make them reborn again and again either as a human being or any kind of animals, birds, ants etc. Even though the concept of death goes very much similar with the Hindu religious ideology, the beliefs and practices associated with it make uniquely Koch in nature. Such a practice is the prediction of the future life of the deceased person. According to this, at the evening time of the day of *Dasha/Daha* ritual, an *Oja* spread some *Pithali* or rice powder the *Kamdhora* (the person who perform the death ritual) in the presence of the other family members and relatives in front of the place where bones are kept. This is then covered with either a *dukli/tukri* (bamboo basket) or by a banana leaf. Next morning the *Oja* will come and will search is there any footprints or not. If he finds footprints of animals, insects or human being, it is believed that he/she will reborn like that creature. If there is no footprint at all, he/she will get salvation or *mukti*. Although, most of the Koches now-

a-days do not perform ritual, still in some areas and villages this can be seen which can be said as the pure Koch practice.

6.3.2: Beliefs associated with death

The Koches follow several belief systems related to death. It is believed that certain unusual incident or situation brings or cause death to the family or the person who comes across the one's life. This situation is considered as the future prediction which can harm the person and can cause a permanent loss to the family. Various animals, birds, weather, even a certain day or time also symbolize the upcoming danger. Here are few examples of such beliefs related to the death that is still existed and practised by the members of the community.

i. It is believed that if a person dies on *Sokhabar* or *Khorabar* i.e. Tuesday or Saturday, it is bound to die another member of the family. It is said that if a person who dies on *Khorabar*, the soul of that person will come and take another person's soul of the family who is very close to him/her which ultimately cause another death into that family.

ii. Heavy raining on a bright sunny day is a bad omen which makes one to believe that some leader or honest or influential person has died.

iii. If a buffalo appears in someone's dream, it is believed that someone will die suddenly either from their family or from any relatives.

iv. The killing of a snake in a dream can also cause death in the family.

v. If an owl comes near the house and howls at midnight indicates a terrible incident will happen to anyone from the family or any relatives and someone will definitely die.

vi. Crossing of a river or pond in a dream by swimming and if he/she is unable to cross that river/pond is believed that this will bring death to someone from the family or relatives.

vii. Howling of a dog or cat with a strange voice at midnight can cause a bad incident to the family.

So, from the above description related to their belief systems on death, it is clearly shown that Koch community has a strong relationship to their daily activities in which certain acts are prohibited. The death of a person is also related to someone who is closed to their family members that can be predicted by another member in his/her dreams. Dying of an animal in a dream is metaphorically used to indicate the death of a family member. Moreover, the incomplete or the unsuccessful work is done by a person in his/her member indicates the consequences which lead to death. So, family members are concerned about other members and care for each other to abstain from the occurrence of death. On the other hand, it is also believed that dying of a person before performing certain activities given by the god is also considered as incompleteness in their life. They also take precaution themselves by performing a certain ritual or abstaining from activities considered as a prohibition for not to occur the abnormal death.

6.3.3: Perception of souls after death

According to the Koch perception, human beings grow and make an attachment with their family, relatives and friends. Such bonding and attachment keep a human with their family and friends even if the person dies. So, the deceased soul is attached closely with the family, relatives and friends. From such perception, it is believed that the soul loiters near the house for twelve days until the *Saradho* ceremony is done.[49] Moreover, it is said that human souls also have to face certain hardship in the journey towards heaven and the soul should be protected from the evil spirits, witches etc. Therefore, soon after the death, the deceased family members surrounded his/her dead body by touching to protect him/her from evil spirits. Further, while the dead body is taken out in the courtyard a *dharmasaki* (earthen lamp) is lightened and the body is kept near the home shrine. Since the Koch community believes the idea of rebirth, it is believed that every soul has its own destiny. But, the destiny of the new birth depends upon their deeds, misdeeds, time, causes and reasons of the previous death. Some of the idea and concept of souls after death and deceased person are found in their oral lore which has been transmitted from one generation to another. There are some beliefs transmitted orally and believed by the Koch people which are mentioned below:

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[49] For details about the death ritual see the chapter 3, pp. 155-169.

i.   The man and woman who did good deeds directly go to heaven. While the people who did bad deeds turn into evil spirits and ghosts. It is said that these evil spirits generally attack people and sucks their blood.

ii.   If a person dies unmarried or he has an unnatural death, it is believed that the soul will turn into a malevolent ghost. On the other hand, in the case of the soul of an unmarried girl, or a wicked woman or who has an unnatural death, the female soul turns into *pettani* (female ghost). It is believed that *pettani* attacks woman and creates some mental illness to that person.

iii.   It is said that when a pregnant woman dies before giving birth or while giving birth, then her soul becomes *poiri*, a malevolent ghost. It is believed that *poiri* generally attacks the pregnant woman and creates various pregnancy-related diseases and even kill the child in the womb.

iv.   When a pregnant woman dies with her child in the womb, she is buried with the child and a plantain tree is planted near the grave. It is believed that the soul of both stays in the tree and when the plantain tree bear fruit their soul goes to heaven. In some area, if the pregnant woman dies with her child in the womb, the husband takes the unborn child cutting the abdomen of the wife and buries the unborn child wrapping in a plantain leaf. Then, the dead body of the mother is cremated through following a particular ritual for the pregnant lady.

v.   If a person dies on a *Sokhabar* or *Khorabar* (Tuesday or Saturday), it is believed that his/her soul definitely become a ghost and tries to take another soul from the deceased family which lead another death in the family. Therefore, in order to protect the soul from becoming a ghost, the dead body is slightly mutilated. Moreover, in order to prevent another death in the family, a plantain tree is kept near the dead body on the bier and cremated with the body so that the soul of that plantain may give company of the person's soul and he/she may not crave for another soul.

So, the concept of good and bad in the soul of the deceased person is prevalent in their community that is linked to the deeds of the previous birth. Moreover, the possibility to create a bad and good soul for the next birth is determined during the

pregnancy of a woman. Therefore, the journey and destiny of the soul depends upon its deeds, misdeeds, time, causes and reasons for the previous and present death. Every Koch people wish to live a life without any diseases, hurdles, defects and abnormal death if they are born as a human being. It is also known that their spirits affect them to cause death. Such values of life and relation with the spirits bring them to perform several ritual activities occasionally and habitually for a better life. These values are also reflected through their material culture.

6.4: Material Culture and its Symbolic Meaning

In Koch community, most of the deities are not represented by an idol. They believed that God is unseen and there is no concrete figure to represent it visually. The sense of sacred and its representation are found by constructing simply a mound or a pedestal. This is very common in familial and communal sacred spaces. However, there are some places which are sacralised by instaling a material object by the community. This sacred installation of materials helps the members to connect the metaphysical world with their physical world through several ritual performances. Though they have the concept of an abstract nature, their religious act with the associated material culture manifests their perception of the existence of supernatural beings. But being a polytheistic group, it is difficult to demarcate one deity to another in terms of its representation of images. However, in the communal level, the construction of deity's house or shrines is one of the important cultural texts for understanding their cosmology that has religious and social significances. The behavioural patterns in connection to the place and the material culture suffuse the deep moral seriousness that reveals the sense of sacredness. Moreover, the sense of sacredness is not only from the devotion, but it is connected to an emotional commitment of the group. Their religion gives space for performing certain actions that connect the people with their supernatural world. The imaginary world is connected through the cognitive power of the communal psyche which is visually shown through material cultures. So, the sense of mythical connection with the people is developed from the material culture associated with the ritual that binds the people together encouraging the sense of identity. Annually, there are different ritual practices which have been done from time immemorial by Koches. Such gatherings

bind the deities with the community and the material culture use by the people creates a sense of belongingness in one community.

In Koch community, pith is one of the materials which are used to make the figure of deities. It is easily available in their environment abundantly. Such figure is made only when the ritual is performed by the community. One of the common sacred figures is *Kodom Phul* made by pith and in a flower structure which is look like inverted Y-shape. Three flowers are arranged on the top of the each shrine. This image is also hung on the main door of the *Bor-ghor* for prosperity and good energy to the family members. The erection of bamboo decorated with clothes in *Bas Puja* and construction of temporary small bamboo hut at the *Garja Puja* is one of the common religious elements that stand as a symbol of the community.[50] Such images are made by the community on the spot of the ritual to represent the deities. There is another sacred item which is made by erecting a *Jakhla* (bamboo ladder) on the ground and a *Jakhe-Khale* (traditional fishing equipments made with bamboos and are used only by the female) is kept on the top of the ladder.[51] Here, the bamboo ladder signifies the male and the *Jakhe-Khale* represent female. Among the household material, *Tukuri/Dukli* (round bamboo basket) is one of the materials used in the representation of the deity. In *Bura-Buri puja*, at the *Tukuri* mud is kept and a branch of either *Birina* grass or a branch of *Bogri* tree is erected to represent the figure of the deity. So, the material cultures are produced for the purpose of sacred and profane that signifies their cultural meaning.

On the other hand, the veneration to deities by Koch community can be seen in different ways of life expressed through customary behaviours and ritual activities which is connected to their belief systems with the natural environment. The material culture of the Koch is not just to fulfil their physical need but also a cultural element attached to certain belief systems. At some context, the existence of deities in their physical world is found from their veneration of space and material to their deities. Among the deities also, they have household and public deities who are given in their own particular space. These represent the closed and open domain of life as the existence and regime of the deities are

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[50] See the picture no. 2 in the photograph section, p. 395.

[51] See the picture no. 8 in the photograph section, p. 394.

different and specific. The form and matter of perception are in the limited horizon and ultimately in a specific context. There might be the same feature in the veneration to deities however the context and the space divide and define the associated deity also. They used minimum material; however, the material is used to generate the idea or to create the emotional attachment with space and people that connect to their divine world. The divinity attributed to the material objects strengthens the sense of the sacredness of the space allotted for a particularly sacred purpose.

Seeing from their household structural patterns, space is divided into two i.e. closed and open and it confirms that Koch is confined and attached among their group. Such closed spaces profound their belief systems and magico-religious practices in every family and villagers. So, the arrangement of material in and around the house is in proper structure and systematic. It is also known that they believe in nature spirits and evil spirits who always have a thirst for the blood, roamed in and around the house and the village directly or indirectly (through the material). So, the protection of their life from the evil spirits is one of the main reasons for constructing such a house structure in the Koch community that connect several deities. So, the threshold which is kept in their household structure is the physical manifestation to deal with spirits. They dealt spirits in different spaces where they kept their deities to protect from the unwanted forces that may cause diseases or death through the offering and sacrificing animal or bird. So, their small estate is more closed than the main estate which is under the protection of other influences. At the same, these spaces have their own values for the family that classify each of the hierarchal statuses among the family members and their physical and psychological demarcation of rooms defines private and public spatial identity. Their house itself is a design for a single family that shows Koch identity. Further, it assumes that there has been a nuclear family system in the community because of no extension of additional space for a house. In fact, the division of space of a house and its association of material is the central point for identifying the direction and location of the various sacred and profane that bring into the sense of closed and open. More or less images are demonstrated a meaningful relationship between the values of a people holds and the general existence of their deities to describe their existence in their world.

Not only the household materials but also the other materials used in ritual also connect to their belief systems. The cultural meaning is stored in symbols such as a stone, bamboo pole, tree and so on and so forth which are dramatised in a ritual or related myth that depicted about the way the world is. The checker patterns in the arrangement of food or the mark which is made by rice powder or seven types of ashes during the ritual reveal the existence of polytheism. At the same time, Koch believes that there is a supreme being above all the deities which are depicted by the circle marked on the sacred spaces during the ritual. Koch believes the circle to be sacred that define sun, sky, earth, moon, etc. which is found in their communal ritual either in figure or behavioural patterns that demonstrate the symbol of social solidarity. The pattern of moving deliberately in a circle in the ritual practice is done to evoke the spirits or to construe mythology. Their absence of material in the representation of supernatural figure is one kind of philosophical thought of the community which stands for their ideal ideology. The existence of good and evil spirits is pointed out in their communal ritual or the familial ritual and the evil spirits are dealt through offering food and the sacrifice of an animal or bird. However, the nature of food which is given to the spirits classified the nature of the spirit itself. Mostly, half cooked or burnt which are considered neither god's food nor human food are given to the evil spirits, ghosts and witches. They have belief in witch which is found when the nature of destructive forces is within the individual and their group. The finding of the witch or the recovering of the victim through the material used is one of the magical characters in their ritual practices. Such ritual practices associating with the various types of materials represent the power of the human imagination that shows an image of reality.

Additionally, in all the Koch rituals the number symbolism can also be noticed through the uses of various materials. Among the Koches, the use of *Bejor* (odd numbers) is culturally very much significant and among them number three, five and seven are frequently used. For the Koches, number three represents the three worlds as we have already discussed above. On the other hand, the philosophy of five is clearly shown in the arrangement of offering materials, food items or other natural items. Among the Koches number five carries a deep philosophical meaning of creation. One of the examples of

this is the festival of *Katigasa*,[52] where lamps are lighted on the cells of an *Ou fruit* (Dillenis indica). This fruit is considered as sacred as it has five cells on it and each cell represents one element of the world. According to the belief, Supreme Being created the universe and life through five elements which are Earth, Sky, Water, Air and Light/Sun.

As the Koch people are agrarian based family, the materials associate with them reveals their social lifestyle and occupation. In their agrarian annual ritual (thanksgiving for the harvest, securing fertility of the crops and human beings, and warding off evil spirits), the rhythm of religious life in which all the deities and ancestors spirits are invited to communal feasts is one the cultural space to appease the spirits through the food items. The natural misfortune such as death, illness, crop failure is because of the evil spirits through witchcraft. Moreover, the sacrality of the agricultural equipment is also shown from the arrangement of the materials itself which is kept inside the cowshed where woman are not allowed to touch during their menstrual period. The hierarchal classification within the social structure in association with the materials exists clearly. It is also found that some of the materials used for a particular purpose may be found in different context holding different symbolical meaning. Some are made for the sacred life in which technology is connected to the ritual itself. So, the concept of classification into different categories is found even in the production of the material itself. Each Koch family has an abode of deities represented by either by material or space to protect their life and to get prosperity. The existence of numerous deities which deals with the familial level to the community level makes a complex relationship to every individual or family or group or community. Classification of gender identity in Koch community is shown in the household material used by the family members. The weaving materials such as *Xal, Jotor, Muhra* etc. are associated with the female and the tools of agriculture such as *Nangol, Jungol, Moi, Kodal* etc. are associated with the male. These gender divisions of the materials echo the demarcation and division of labour among the people. The clothing patterns of traditional dress contextualized the sacrality as well as the solidarity for being as Koch identity. Lastly, such material carries the harmony and a sense of togetherness that identifies their identity. So, not only space and behavioural activities but also the

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[52] For the ritual, see chapter 4, pp. 212-214.

associated materials link to their psychological and emotional values of the community. The material culture of Koch community is a cultural paradigm that reveals identity, perception, belief system, values and notion that visualize what they perceive and conceive the world. Moreover, their religious activity shows their philosophy to represent a way of life that describes their world-view. Their sacred symbol which has metaphysical referent is related to ontology and cosmology that synthesize their world-view. The worldview of Koch community is the way things are projected in their physical world through their behaviours that connect their physical and eternal world perceived by them.

6.5: Conclusion

Thus in the conclusion, it can say that for the Koches the idea of fear, faith, and beliefs are cultivated from their surrounding environment. This leads to create a world that is perceived and conceived by the community. The existence of various spirits in their mundane world and its interaction through ritual activities provide a cultural identity in which the existence of Koch is manifested. Simultaneously, the material cultures made by the community shape their identity. The ritual activities and associated material cultures capture all possible aspects of their world even if it may not be the same as the physical world. Their concept of Supreme Being and the existence of three worlds reveal the collective belief system about the universe and life. Even though there is confusion in the division among the deities, the manifestation of Koch worldview through the universal tripartite division- man, nature and God ultimately connects them with spiritualism and this is the structure of their religious worldview. Thus, the existence of three worlds- underworld, living world and supernatural world is clearly shown from their mythologies, narratives, customary behaviours, ritual activities, and belief systems attached to their environment. Such activities are performed in their living world surrounded by various malevolent and benevolent spirits. Because of their nature of abstract and multifarious characters, lead them to perform several ritual activities according to the situation and context. So, the living world becomes the world which deals with both the greater worlds (under and the higher world). The perception and belief systems on the spirits associated with every person, plant, animal, and thing are

widely varied in nature and have relations with the visible and tangible world. Ultimately, even if there is no system for occupying a land area through their lineage system, the common ideology, belief system and perceptions of the people stand for Koch identity. It is also known that their religious tradition follows certain spiritual and philosophical beliefs carry the understanding of the world or metaphysics. There is a hierarchical space of the cosmos that lies in the Koch worldview. This hierarchy is seen not only in the patriarchal social life of the community but also at the hierarchical position of the cosmos.

One of the peculiar natures among the various spirits is that some of the spirits are once part of the living people and departed from their body at death and they pursue desires and values as similar to those they pursued in life. So, these spirits ready to attack the family. Some spirits such as ancestral spirits look after for the welfare of the community or the villagers or the lineages or the family members or the individual. The belief system attached to their territorial boundary, various places either known or unknown, road, rivers, streams, lakes, hills, and agricultural fields made them construct their specific feature of the village and homestead. The concept of tripartite division is also found in the structure of Koch house which has three parts- front courtyard, inner courtyard and back courtyard which is again relevant to the human body. Culturally, Koch has a connection and relation between the human body and their philosophy of spirituality. The direction and position of the structure of the house and the household material are co-related to the human body itself. The existence of any materials is defined from the position and direction of the human body that carries directional values for keeping material that reveals their perception which is shown visually. Even in the household structure, not only the sacred and the profane spaces are distinctly divided but also there is a space which is used both sacred and profane that is called contextual space. As per the house is constructed for safeguarding the family members, various deities are lived in various abode in the homestead. At the same time, fewer numbers of images are used to symbolise the sacred spaces which are closed to their abstract nature of the world. However, some are symbolised by locating material culture in the sacred spaces. This can be assumed that Koch belief in supreme god which is abstract and existence of multiples deities or various characters always fill in the vacuums. The existence of a sense of fear

around the space, witchcraft or evil eye is found in the arrangement and its allocation of the household materials in and around the house itself.

Further, the responsibility of the head, authority of the head towards the family members, gender inequality and biases is visible even in the structure of the house and allocation of family members in demarcated rooms demonstrates their social hierarchy in which women are under the control of the head man. The prohibition towards the family members in certain activities is also a kind of customary behaviour to take precaution from being polluted. So, family members perform ritual activities in their daily life to protect and to heal their life affected by the fear of witchcraft or evil eye. Importantly, appeasing deities and pleasing of deities from the deeds of the human being returns the better life in their social and cultural life. So, their culture is one of the important expressive behaviour performed accordingly with their belief systems and perception. Even if there is other houses structure within the homestead, the *Bor-ghor*, the main house is the universe of sacred-profane activities from which all the individual originated and connected in every stage of life. The inner courtyard of the house is a cultural symbol to relate all the family members that identify each member through performing various rituals at this point. On the other hand, the back courtyard is believed as the abode of spirits and ghosts, whereas, the front courtyard is the space that is an intermediary between the two spaces (household and communal space).

The creation myth of human being reveals the superiority of god and the idea of life and death. Moreover, the human being is a combination of body, mind and soul or spirit and its cycle of life and death. The human body is considered as the mediator to the physical world and as the soul or spirit. So, like the house, the human body is concrete in which the two greater worlds are dealt. Again, the perception of the soul when it is departed from the human being reflects the existence of three worlds. Even the body part connected to their soul is hierarchal in order and the soul or spirit of that body never dies. So, the cycle of birth and death of human being and their ritual activities associated with the materials manifested the tripartite division of worlds. When a soul is born into a human being and when it dies the soul may reach either under-world or heaven-world which is based on their deeds, misdeeds, time, causes and reasons of the previous death.

The relationship of two families is made through a marriage relationship which is done when the family members completed seventh birth that is considered as salvation. So, people wish normal death and certain activities are performed for not to occur abnormal death. Every Koch people perform several rituals to live a complete life without any diseases, hurdles, defects and abnormal death if they are born as a human being. In such ritual and customary behaviours, sacred spaces are sacralised with using material cultures. In some of the ritual, deities are not represented by the concrete object that signifies their concept of unseen and abstract nature. Their religious act and its associated material culture also manifest their perception of their existence of supernatural beings. The imaginary world is connected through the cognitive power of the communal psyche which is visually shown through material cultures. In their agrarian annual ritual like thanksgiving for the harvest (*Noya khawa* ritual, *Domasi* etc.), securing fertility of the crops and human beings (*Katigasa*, *Bhuita deor puja* etc.), and warding off evil spirits (*Garja Puja, Bisuwa, Thakurani puja* etc.), the rhythm of religious life in which all the deities and ancestors spirits are invited to communal feasts is one the cultural space to appease the spirits through the food items. So, the hierarchal classification within the social structure in association with the materials exists clearly where the cultural meaning of material culture is very contextual.

Chapter: 7

CONCLUSION

The present thesis, *Folk Religion and Mythology of Koch Community of Assam* broadly intend to study the religious life of the Koch community, especially how folk religiosity dominates their social life in chorus with the mainstream Hindu religion. Further, it also tries to understand how this folk religiosity is reflected in their various folk genres that construct their religious identity throughout the ages. Like any religious society, the religious life of the Koches are preserved in their lores, beliefs, ritual practices, and various verbal and non-verbal expressive genres hoard in their mnemonic practices. These traditions are learned and transmitted from one generation to another orally. The lore embraces the knowledge, experience, belief, faiths, superstitions and various institutions that manoeuvres the community to retain their identity as Koch despite of the changes of time. The rich source of Koch folklore that contains narratives, proverbs, beliefs, rituals, various performing forms, material cultures etc. is a strong basis to assemble and create their Koch identity differentiating them from others. The present thesis aims to bring the core elements of folk religious life that get illustrated in their folklore.

Historically it is said that the Koch community is one of the earliest Hinduised community among the Mongoloid groups of the Brahmaputra valley and closely related with the Bodo and Rabha community. Therefore, the cultural syncretism and influence is very much reflected through their various folk behaviours like beliefs, myth, rituals, rites etc. They inhabit not only in Assam, but also in Meghalaya, North Bengal, Nepal, and Bangladesh as well as in Bhutan. In Assam, the community is densely populated in undivided Goalpara district which is culturally known as "Goalpariya". It is also said that the then undivided Goalpara district is the hub of their main cultural representation. Therefore, the geographical scope of the study is the undivided Goalpara district of western Assam or *'Lower Assam'*. Although the term "Goalpara region" represents the erstwhile Goalpara district which does no longer exist as a political entity, the region

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"Goalpara" is still able to continue its distinctive homogenous cultural pattern of the then geographical area of the undivided district. In various cultural contexts, the people of this area try to associate themselves with the language, culture and old heritage of an "undivided" Goalpara region.

The present research on *'Folk Religion and Mythology of the Koch community of Assam'* studies the folk religious position of Koch community in the Goalpara region and how they are expressed and get reflected in various genres of Koch folklore in different ways. As an important fundamental genre, myth or mythology provides different perspectives to understand various practices that are associated with the community and its everyday functions. Myths are the narratives that have a sacred nature on it and often unite with some rituals. These narratives are intertwined with the religious practices of Koch community. These oral narratives are considered to be factual from the perspective of the community members and understood metaphorically as well as literally. It is the belief system connected with the gods, spirits or supernatural beings reflects the main character of the myths. It has been a part of their everyday life. The nature of the present study is to understand the folk religious life of the Koches in Assam through not only the myths but also from the experiences, tales, rituals as well as beliefs related to the supernatural beings. The main component of the religion is beliefs in supernatural beings which later transfer into the objects and finally gets into the sacred and profane world. Myths help us to understand the religiosity as it is connected with the beliefs system that is expressed through the narratives. For the Koches, these myths, beliefs, rituals, narratives, practices are interwoven in such a way that the present thesis looks at all these components in order to understand their religious identity.

Most of the independent works on Koch community are available only in terms of historical consequences and ongoing ethnic movements. A general introduction to the community is also available in vernacular works. However, the deities, the belief system, ritual performances, worldview were not constituted thick corpus data in the previous works. The schism of its traditional religion which constructed its own identity by showing deviations from official Hinduism was not being understood as to how

incorporative the Koch is. That is the reason religion the folklore genres like beliefs, narratives, ritual festivities, both communal and personal as customary and obligatory- which are the manifestations of people's worldview and expressions of the Koch identity, are paid much attention in the present studies.

In the whole work, the six chapters of present thesis try to fulfill the following aims and objectives which are:

- ➢ The relationship between the religious and social behaviour of the community.
- ➢ The role of folk religious beliefs and practices in the ritual life of the community and its interrelationship with the other greater religions that constructs its own Koch identity.
- ➢ Identify and classify the folk deities of the Koch community with the symbolic and semiotic values and connects the relationship between the images of the deities and their cultural practices and beliefs.

In another word, the present thesis tries to understand their religious worldview that will mirror their social structures and hierarchies.

The Koch culture represents an all-inclusive and well-knitted unit with its unique identity that gets reflected in various domains of its folklife. The folklife of the Koch community comprehends the symbolic representation of religious beliefs and practices in their mundane life. The symbiotic connection between religion and life is very much reflected through their lore. They originally belong to the Mongoloid race that has a close affinity with the other Mongoloid communities like Bodo, Mech, Rabha, Garo etc. Like other communities of Assam, the social life of the Koch people starts and gyrates around the village. The village with their community members, lineage, and family forms the social life, and are the fundamental concern of Koch people that build their social relationship. It is the highest forms of their social organization that bears the security with commonness in culture, practice, and beliefs.

For the Koches, family is the most central unit of social organisation that helps the society to achieve its best possible goals. It is the residential unit by shared relations and common economic resources where the members share their food in the common kitchen. The roles of the members of the family depend upon the belief and norms of the society as well as the family itself. The Koch society follows the patriarchal norms where father plays an important role. He is considered as the head of the family and children carry their respective father's family name. After marriage, the girl is accepted as a new member of the husband's family after going through rituals like *Ag Saul Diya, Marai Puja, Neotha* and *Athmongla* and the couple starts their new life in a separate house but in the same homestead. Although polygamy is not popular among the Koch family but in terms of the property sons from different mothers have the same legal property right and got the equal portion from the father's property. As the Koches are basically an agricultural community, the properties are fundamentally limited to the lands which are both by the ancestral and self-acquired property.

The dominance of the patriarchal structure of the community affected the Koch women's participation and decision making authority in the social affairs; ownership, control over and access to land. The norms related to inheritance rights in every aspect including land and other forms of property do not allow women to have ownership. A daughter among the Koches is always seen as an outsider who goes to a different house after her marriage. Although the birth of a daughter is not so much favoured as compared to sons in the community, in terms of labour they are also considered as a property to the family. The preference for son is because he is the one who forwards the lineage of the family and also the inheritor of familial property. In the case of a separated woman or a widow, the women can go for remarriage and that is accepted by society. But, in terms of property, it is the village authority that decides whether she will receive something on her separation from the husband.

Kinship is one of the most important parts of any social organization that forms the web of social relations in the lives of human. It represents the socio-culturally accepted relationships that are constructed either through marriage, breeding or by

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adoption. The Koch people follow the patrilineal system of descent where the affiliation of an individual comes through the father's side. Koch community is a unilineal descent group, who believed to have originated from one common ancestor, but the society is divided into two descent groups on the basis of blood lineage; the mothers and the fathers. Depending upon this blood lineage, marriage is conducted to the opposite moieties outside the mother's and father's bloodline.

In terms of the village administration, the village council plays a major role in the traditional Koch society. The *Gaoburha* (village head man) along with the elders of the village plays an important role in all village affairs and has the authority in all important matters, disputes, quarrels etc. that are related to the village. Moreover, all adult male can participate and be a member of the *Bisar* (village council). The structure, function and way of punishment differ from village to village. But generally, the *Bisar* has the main jurisdiction in most of the affairs related to the village and they are related to multiple functions of the village like developmental, judicial and administrative.

As in the case of the Koch people, the main economic sustenance comes from the agricultural production and most of the time this is reflected in their folklife. The land is considered as the most important asset to signify a strong economy in the Koch society. Generally, in a Koch village, the land belongs to either the individual or the village. The individual land is owned by each family and these are used either for dwelling or for the agricultural purpose. This individual land always remains under the control of the head of the family and handed down between the male members of the family. Agriculture is the main economy of most of the Koch families where they are mostly engaged with the paddy cultivation. In addition to agriculture, the women folk are engaged with weaving also to earn the economy for the family. Other than agriculture and weaving another economic source for the Koch people are animal husbandry and fishing.

The Koches are very much rich in folklore including both verbal and non-verbal traditions. The rich material cultural gets reflected through their house architecture, food culture, costumes, weaving and so on. But the most important aspect one can find that the

attachment of various beliefs and taboos along with it. Beliefs play a major role in their daily life to construct their religious identity. Various occult or magico-religious practices, beliefs in magic, charms, witches etc. represent the religious life of the Koches. These also get reflected in their practices of various rites and rituals.

The agriculture-based Koch community follows various traditional rituals and rites in their social life circle in order to maintain their communal unity. These rituals and rites connect the individual family observances with the communal level in order to socialize and bind the members with the community. The life cycle ritual covers a set of symbolic methods that change the identity of the individual who is participating in that ritual. These are the ritual that is observed to give a new social status to an individual and to mark a gradual change of the status from one stage to another. Among the Koches, birth, marriage and death are considered as the major life cycle ritual.

While discussing the life cycle ritual of the Koches from the ritual model of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, a different and unique native structure has appeared. The childbirth ritual is observed in three phases i.e. pre-delivery, delivery and post-delivery. In the Koch society, the actual childbirth ritual begins once the woman comes to know about her pregnancy i.e. the pre-birth stage. Among the Koches, the first period which is the separation period starts with a prescribed code of conduct and taboos not only to the pregnant wife but also to the husband. A series of taboos and restrictions are attributed to both couples starting from dietary taboos to some behavioural taboos in order to protect the unborn life from the malicious spirits, ghosts and witchcraft. So, for that various magical objects like enchanted chords, amulets, charmed water, charmed oil, etc. are used. On the other hand, the lady is again separated from her previous environment and status when the labour pain started and she is transferred to the *suwaghor* (delivery hut). This period stays for a short period of time. Here, she is again separated with new restrictions, behavioural acts and dietary taboos. Regarding the liminal period, Victor Turner has identified this as the period of confusion where the liminoid or the ritual passenger has to stand in the betwixt and between. Further at that period, the neophyte is neither here nor there with no status. But in the case of the Koch

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birth ritual, the identity of the whole family including the mother, the child and the rest of the family is constructed through rituals that are observed soon after the child is born. Burying of the placenta, beating on the *bera* (wall of the house) for boy and *Kula* (winnowing fan) for girl, giving a touch of the mother earth (*Ai Basumoti*), keeping of iron made *jinjiri/jijri* (sickle) or *katri* (knife) under their bed, keeping of a small fire inside the delivery room, keeping of some thorny branches of the tree, shell of the dead snail are hung on the main door and window, cleaning of the child's tongue, armpit and other corners of the body by the hair of the mother reflects the identity of the family. The name giving ritual on the fifth or seventh day which is itself in the liminal period establishes the individual identity of that child. Most importantly, the observation of *Suwa* itself identifies the family identity of childbirth.

The Koch marriage ritual is another important life cycle ritual which has been observed in three phases: pre-marriage, marriage and post marriage. Like the birth ritual, in the Koch marriage also liminality does not appear. Instead, the whole marriage ritual appears in two separation phases. From the selection of the bride and confirmation of marriage, we can see the first phase of separation. While the second phase of separation starts at the *Adhibas* ritual once the bride and groom start to fast. Further, soon after the marriage ritual, they are considered as husband and wife. The incorporation period into the new family and society is completed with a feast.

The death ritual of the Koches mirrors the belief, practices and understanding of souls and the life after death which gets reflected metaphorically in various rituals. Koch people also follow certain rituals and rites after someone is deceased. The Koch understanding of the souls is as the human who faced hardship in their journey towards heaven. For that, the family observed certain ritual for the deceased souls for their peaceful and easy journey to heaven. The Koch death ritual is quite intricate where the *suwa* or impure stage remains for twelve to thirteen days for the family and one year for the *kamdhora* or the person who performs the ritual.

Hence, these rituals, associated beliefs, practices, associated supernatural beings, engagement of different material culture and so on all together construct the identity of the individual, familial, communal and Koch's religious identity. The existence and belief in various spirits or various non-Vedic deities in their each and every life cycle rituals definitely opens up their folk beliefs in a supernatural being and this is one of the important factors of their religious ideology. While it has been seen that the threatening of malevolent spirits and ghosts are far stronger in the birth ritual; the existence and the venerations of the household deities are more in the marriage, while at the death ritual the spirit and ancestor worship comes first. On the other hand, the belief in magic, witchcraft and sorcery can be seen in each and every ritual. The death ritual of the Koches opens the scope to study their religious ideology very well. Further, the concepts of death, soul, heaven, hell etc. clearly carry their cultural heritage and worldview which can be identified as their own and which is still practiced orally.

Other than the life cycle ritual that marks the changes in the social status of individuals there are a good number of rituals and rites which are calendrical. These calendrical events are based on a fixed period depending upon the day, week, month or season of the year. Although like other communities of Assam, most of the Hindu religious festivals are also celebrated by the Koches, there are certain festivals and rituals that can be said to be the torch bearer of the true Koch identity. The Koches follow Assamese Lunar calendar and most of their folk festivals and fairs are confined to that calendar. On the basis of the nature of their beliefs, practices, times, and season the rites and ceremonies of the Koches can broadly be divided into two categories: 1. Communal Rituals that include the territorial rituals which are observed to venerate the village deities, and 2. Agricultural Festivals and Rituals that are annual and strictly follows the agricultural calendar.

The communal rituals observe by the Koch people as a part of their calendar, reflects the interlinking nature of one ritual to another. Moreover, all these rituals are the village level rituals which marks their territorial boundary and where all the deities are worshipped and they are believed to have certain specific characters and functions. The

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ambivalent nature makes these deities unpredictable. Their binary character of benevolent-malevolent makes people organise their beliefs to act according to their nature. The understanding of these deities as benevolent if they are pleased and malevolent if they are not satisfied reveals the common perception of their folk mind. Therefore, to safeguard their life and to protect from various calamities the community tries to appease these deities through several rituals throughout the year. But what is important to note is that these are the rituals where the community people gather, venerates, and celebrates. This reflects their communal identity as well as social solidarity. These are purely religious festivals and hence, rituals are done by offering and sacrificing in order to satisfy them seeking protection, fertility and good health.

On the other hand, as agriculture is the main source for survival, they follow various rituals and festivals related to agriculture which are much loved and valued. They treasured their age-old ritualistic tradition. These are carried orally and are performed every year without any fail in order to make their life happy, prosperous and peaceful. For that, obviously, deities of village and family as well as the ancestors are venerated and respected during these days. Starting from the land preparation to the crop harvesting, the Koches strictly follow a particular calendar and these rituals are performed as a part of their agricultural festival. Further, these agrarian calendrical rituals are observed in order to celebrate for their hard work and the production and to honour the deities and ancestors for protecting and giving a good crop. For the Koches the main cultivation process starts once the New Year begins and they celebrate their seasonal festival called *Bisuwa*. Although, this is considered as a seasonal and New Year festival, the preparation for the cultivatable land for seedling after this festival carries the relevance of this festival as an agricultural festival.

Koch ritual life including private and public has mostly governed by several supernatural powers. The reflections of various folk deities and their associated belief system metaphorically reveal the existence of their folk religious practices in the ritual life. The religiosity of a particular community can be identified by the numbers of the deities that are worshipped. Like any other folk religion, in the Koch religion deities play

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an important part to provide the symbolic appearances of their behavioural pattern and worldview of the Koches. The number of Koch folk deities is a very extensive one and most of these folk deities carry their tribal origin. Interestingly in due course of time, a good portion of those deities have borrowed some practices and mythologies from their Hindu neighbours. Most of the deities that belong to the Koch community have very similar essence in terms of practice, nature, and functions. Only the difference comes to their names and mode of worship.

Being a polytheistic community, a traditional socio-religious Koch life is noticeably influenced by various deities of different natures. The vernacular attribution of the deities also reveals their understanding of supernatural powers. Generally, in order to refer to the Supreme Being, Koch people use the word *Isshor*. This shows the patrilineality of the society as well as the connection with Hinduism. In general, *Mao*, *May* or *Ai* that carries the meaning of 'mother' is attributed to a female deity. In the Koch religious life, a deity is termed either as *Deo* or as *Thakur*. The regional variation of Koch folk deities can be noticed in the two zonal division i.e. eastern and western zone of the region. But, the existences of these folk deities that are considered peculiarly to the Koches remain same except some. Moreover, the beliefs and concepts related to the supernatural being remain the same. These are the deities and spirits that purely carry the essence of Koch identity.

Various Koch folk deities operate and govern the mundane life of the Koches at the point of familial, lineage, village and regional. Most of these forms got assistance with various beliefs, rituals, and rites that are practiced by the member of the community. The Koches offer their worship towards *Siva, Parvati, Chandi, Kali*, snake goddess *Manasa* in their *Puranic* forms. Most of the times, these Sakta and Puranic forms are then assimilated and adopted into various native Koch forms. Like the Bodo and the Rabha community, the worship of Siva with his various names exists among the Koch people. Almost all villages and areas of Goalpara region that have Koch inhabitants, Siva is considered as a dignified and central male deity. The assimilation process with Hinduism has an impact on the construction of the various forms of the deities. As Saktism and

Saivism are the two major sects worshipped by the Koches, the adaptation of various pantheon of these sects gets infused with the folk deities. Therefore, it has been seen that most of the Koch folk deities are either considered as a form of Siva or Parvati and also sometimes a connection is established with both of them. Other than that the existence of Saktism and Saivism, the practices of Neo-Vaisnavism[1] culture have their influence among the Koch people, though not that much widespread. The Koches also worshipped various natural objects, spirits, and ancestors along with the mainstream deities.

Considering the sacred sites associated with deities and spirits, every Koch family has certain places that are purely dedicated to those deities and spirits. An individual household, as well as village area, have their different sacred spaces called *thanshali.* In a Koch socio-cultural life of the Goalpara region of Assam, this *pat* or *than* is considered as a very important religious matter. This *pats* or *thanshali* is the sacred space that exists inside, at the border and some time at the outside of the household and the village. Each sacred place is considered as the abode of the deities and spirits and therefore is considered as the sacred place which is positioned at certain special areas depending upon the nature and function of the deities and spirits.

As far as the characters of the deities are considered; the conception of Koch people is blurred and region wise it varies significantly. The idea of the Koch deities includes a beneficiary character as well as the evil one. But most of the deities are believed to have both characters and that characters are mostly reciprocal. As per the belief goes the deities should demands offering of *Pujas* and sacrifices in certain time and

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[1]Vaisnavism came into prominence in Assam as a popular form of religion when Neo-Vaisnavite movement gained its popularity in the 16th century under the leadership of Srimanta Sankardeva and his disciple Madhavdeva. Srimanta Sankardeva, who leads this new form of religion, is attributed with the title *Mahapurux Srimanta Sankardeva* and this new religion came to know as the *Mahapuruxiya Dharma.* But officially this new form of the sect is known as *Eka-Xorona Nam-Dharma.* The followers of this religion believe that there is only one God and he is the supremacy of all (*Eka-Xorona*). He is Narayana or Vishnu and preached devotion towards him only by uttering his different names (*Nam*). *Shravana* and *kirtana* are considered by Srimanta Shankardeva as the sufficient worshipping modes for devotion to god as set down by *Bhagawat Purana.* Idol worship is completely rejected in the system propounded by Shankardeva. Instead of Bhakti, Shankardeva advocated *dashya* which means servitude to god and there are four fundamental elements in the neo-vaisnavism system and they are God, *Guru, Bhakta* and *Nam.* The Neo-Vaisnavism movement in Assam tries to uplift the social status of the backward classes and to minimize the painful caste distinction.

season, otherwise, there are possibilities that they will take offences. There are deities simultaneously who has a transparent nature and character to shift from a benevolent to a fierce one. The benevolent deities are mostly the household deities who are worshipped for the prosperity, fertility, wealth and protection of the family from various kinds of calamities. While talking about the worshipping of the communal deities the function expand from an individual perspective to a communal level perspective. Thus, with regards to the most fundamental function of the deities is concerned it is seen that most of the deities are attributed a function to the removal of diseases and calamities and protection from the evil spirits. Like their character, the function of the Koch deities is also varied in contexts. The function of an individual deity is not clearly demarcated in the belief systems of the Koches. A single deity can be simultaneously worshipped for the protection of the family as well as for the removal of the diseases. Mostly the function depends upon form and time when the *Deo* is worshipped.

For the representation of each deity, the Koch uses of materials and symbols are as diverse as their characters and functions. Even though, most of the Koch folk deities do not have a particular idol or image dedicated to a particular deity, many times the materials and symbols are also differ depending upon the types of the ritual and the economic condition of the family. On the other hand, in the familial level, most of the time the altar represent the deity. But interestingly, in the course of time visual representations through idols and images came into the Koch belief systems too. Among the Koches, the worship of a clay idol is done mostly in the case for the Puranic or Vedic deities and the temples or shrines of those deities are also situated in the town areas only where mixed populations inhabited. But rather than a clay image, perhaps the most popular image in the western part of the region is depicted through the pith work which can also be considered as a peculiar form of folk art of the region. Other than the clay idol and pith images, the Koches use stones to visualize and worship a deity. But the stone as a conception and symbol of a god or goddess is not confined to a particular deity only. Stones are used to symbolising a deity despite their nature, function, gender or position.

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Koch people used various material that is available in the environment they inhabit to represent the deity. Like the deities, their representation and visualisation also vary depending upon the context, ritual, region, association and the availability of the materials. The visualisation of the Koch deities is as diverse as their characters and functions. Most of the Koch folk deities do not have a particular idol or image. Many times the images and symbols to represent the deity are also differ depending upon the types of the ritual. But in the progress of time, the influences and assimilation from other cultures slowly boost the idol worship into their religious spheres. So, the idol worship has existed, but the worship of a clay idol is noticed only in the case for Puranic or Vedic deities. Further, the temples or shrines of those deities are also situated in the town areas only where a mixed population inhabited. But in most of the village areas except for the mainland Indian Gods and Goddesses the permanent image of the folk deities can be seen in a less manner where worships are done in various manners.

The varieties of worshipping methods among the Koches depend upon the deity to deity and area to area. Among the Koches of the whole region, sacrifice reflects the most common act of worship and sacrificing something is a part of a ritual which will believe please the deities and in return, deities will protect them from various calamities. So in order to satisfy the supernatural beings, regular worship is done. Among the Koches the pattern of worship can be categorized into three main ways and they are the prayer, the offering, and the sacrifice. While generally, sacrifice means the ritual gift of blood or life, offering implies to the bloodless sacrifice of food or objects. These types of worship are not done on a regular basis. On the other hand, prayer is done on a regular basis which is an act of remembering the deity. These aspects reflect their religious worldview that constructs the Koch identity.

Koch community has certain religious understanding and ideologies that bring their perception about the cosmos and the world which is conceived by them. In their local language, there is no vernacular term to explain the concept of Koch's worldview or the way they perceive the world. However, it can be understood from their mythologies, religious practices and cultural products which are associated in their socio-economic

life. The religious life of Koch community is very much influential with the aspects of nature and its relationship with the sacred-profane concept. Moreover, not only the belief towards the folk deities and social practices associated with the life and worship of deities but also the Hindu Vedic influence significantly shapes their worldview. The existence of multiple deities and supernatural figures registered their religious beliefs as polytheism. Koch community believes that their polytheistic gods are responsible for various natural phenomena either by destruction or by restoration that has an impact on human life.

Various myths and narratives disclose the creation of various entities that have been transferred orally throughout the generations. It gives an explanation the creation of how supernatural beings like gods, spirits, ghosts, witches, sun, moon etc., various lives, nature, natural occurrences like day, night, earthquake etc. are created or come to existence. Their concept of Supreme Being and the existence of three worlds reveal the collective belief system about the universe and life. Even though there is confusion in the division among the deities, the manifestation of Koch worldview through the universal tripartite division- man, nature and God ultimately connect them with spiritualism and this is the structure of their religious worldview. Thus, the existence of three worlds- underworld, living world and supernatural world is clearly shown from their mythologies, narratives, customary behaviours, ritual activities, and belief systems attached to their environment.

The belief system attached to their territorial boundary, various places either known or unknown, road, rivers, streams, lakes, hills, and agricultural fields made them construct their specific feature of the village and homestead. The concept of tripartite division is also found in the structure of Koch house which has three parts- front courtyard, inner courtyard and back courtyard which is again relevant to the human body. Culturally, Koch has a connection and relation between the human body and its philosophy of spirituality. The direction and position of the structure of the house and the household material are co-related to the human body itself. The existence of any materials is defined from the position and direction of the human body that carries directional values for keeping material that reveals their perception which is shown

visually. The creation myth of human being reveals the superiority of god and the idea of life and death. Moreover, the human being is a combination of body, mind and soul or spirit and its cycle of life and death. The human body is considered as the mediator to the physical world and as the soul or spirit.

Thus, after discussing all the chapters of the present thesis, it is found that:

➢ The Koch community of Assam carries a very much diverse and rich tradition of folklore. This knowledge may be dated back to the primordial age about which written documents is not that much clear. But still, it is intrinsically woven in their folklife that helps us to understand their socio-political, economic and cultural life.

➢ In the religious life of the Koches, myths, beliefs, rituals, narratives, material culture and its practices etc. are interwoven in such a way that one has to look at all these components in order to understand their religious identity.

➢ Most of their social, economic and cultural aspects are directly or indirectly related to the religious beliefs and practices. Here, religion plays an integral part in their mundane life where magico-religious practices are common in their daily activities. Existence of various beliefs related to deities, spirits, ghosts, and witchcraft also gets reflected in their songs, house structure, weaving, folk medicine, and so on.

➢ Through various ritual practices including both life cycle and communal helps the community to organise various social institutions like family, village, marriage, kinship etc. and construct the Koch identity at the individual as well as communal level.

➢ Though now a day the Koches fully adopted Hinduism and various Vedic rituals, the folk religious practices and beliefs still gets replicated symbolically in their ritual practices. These socio-religious practices are an important part of their folk

religiosity that forms their Koch identity with synchronised religious rituals even in the present time.

➢ In the Koch life cycle ritual courses, identity is being constructed in almost all the rituals through certain acts and rites. The absence of the liminal phase in birth ritual but having a second phase of separation engulfed in ritualistic fervour is a unique ritual model for the Koches. This is quite different from the western and African model proposed by Victor Turner and Arnold van Gennep. For Turner, the liminal phase is the stage of confusion where the ritual passenger stands in betwixt and between position and they do not have any identity. For the Koches, on the other hand, the new identity is constructed in that period only. The Koches do stand in a betwixt and between position, but in their own way. Later, the ritual passenger is incorporated through a purification ritual and with a feast for the society they end up the ritual process by approving their new identity.

➢ It has been found that the threatening of malevolent spirits and ghosts are far stronger in the birth ritual. That is why quite a lot of superstitions and the resolutions through rituals and occult practices play a major role in the birth ritual. The existence and the venerations of the family or household deities are more in the marriage, while at the death ritual the spirit and ancestor worship comes first. On the other hand, the belief in magic, witchcraft and sorcery can be seen in each and every ritual. In all these junctures, folk religious practices help the community to surf through the fear and continue their faith in the supernatural powers to maintain the equilibrium at the family and the community level.

➢ It is observed that the supernatural beings that are venerated by the Koch people consist in the communal ritual are in three forms. They are: (i) Deities, (ii) Ancestors and (iii) Evil spirits. Further, the offerings to the supernatural beings also include three forms i.e. (i) Raw, (ii) Cooked and (iii) Half fry or burnt. The communal and household gods and goddesses are always offered the raw food items like fruit, uncooked rice, milk, soaked mung bean and chickpeas etc. On the

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other hand, cooked foods are normally offered to the ancestors or terrestrial deities and spirits, only half cooked or burnt foods are offered to the souls, ghosts or any evil spirits. This shows the animistic ways of offerings still persist along with the mainstream Hinduised practices among the Koches.

➢ The attempt done for classification of the deities worshipped by the Koches is complex because most of the deities carry a flexible character and functions. Most of them have multiple functions, associated spaces, visual icons and venerated with variations in the worshipping methods by the community. So, they are not confined to one single category and most often the categorisation depended upon the contextual relevance.

➢ Koch folk deities are represented as formless and shapeless who is omnipresent. In other word, Koch deities are represented in an abstract form. For the community, they are superior to human beings that give their ability to control various natural phenomenon as well as human affairs. The corresponding myths and narratives legitimise their superiority.

➢ For the Koches, the binary of sacred and profane forms the basic structure of their religious belief system. But in addition to that, for the Koches, there is an existence of an intermediary phase can also be noticed. Koch deities whether communal, ancestral or familial, the sacrality is always maintained through *hierophany* that establishes their sacred realm. Most of these deities are worshipped on a regular basis seeking for protection and prosperity. But there are certain spirits and ghost who are also worshipped by the Koches that do not fall under the rubric dichotomy of sacred and profane. The idea of sacred for the Koches are situational where the sacrality depends upon what types of supernatural being is associated with it.

➢ The influences of the patriarchal structure are seen in the hierarchical position of the cosmos in which the sky is considered as the father who is the creator and the earth is considered as the mother who nurtures all the living creatures of the

world. The hierarchal classification within the social structure in association with the materials exists clearly.

➢ Purity and pollution, gender identity, hierarchy in social structure, occupation and living style which reflects the Koch worldview are clearly found in their household structure.

In short, Koches are a distinct ethnic community that preserves their age-old religious practices safely along with the mainstream Hindu religion. They are a distinct folkloric community who unites their strength with the practices of various verbal and non-verbal expressive behaviours. Although, sometimes, their folk religiosity get tangled with the Vedic tradition in surface level, in the core level the imprint of various folk practices are still alive in their beliefs, myths, rituals and rites. These reflect their religious worldview that carries the true Koch religious identity.

Finally, to surmise the thesis and to argue the main structural pattern of the Koch religious status, we can say the existence of the tripartite model represents the core structure of their folk religion. We can notice this tripartite division in their every religious aspect of folklife including rituals, beliefs, narratives, material culture, as well as in the worldview. Various supernatural beings and their connection with the community is the element that consolidates their religious status. This is represented through the following diagram.
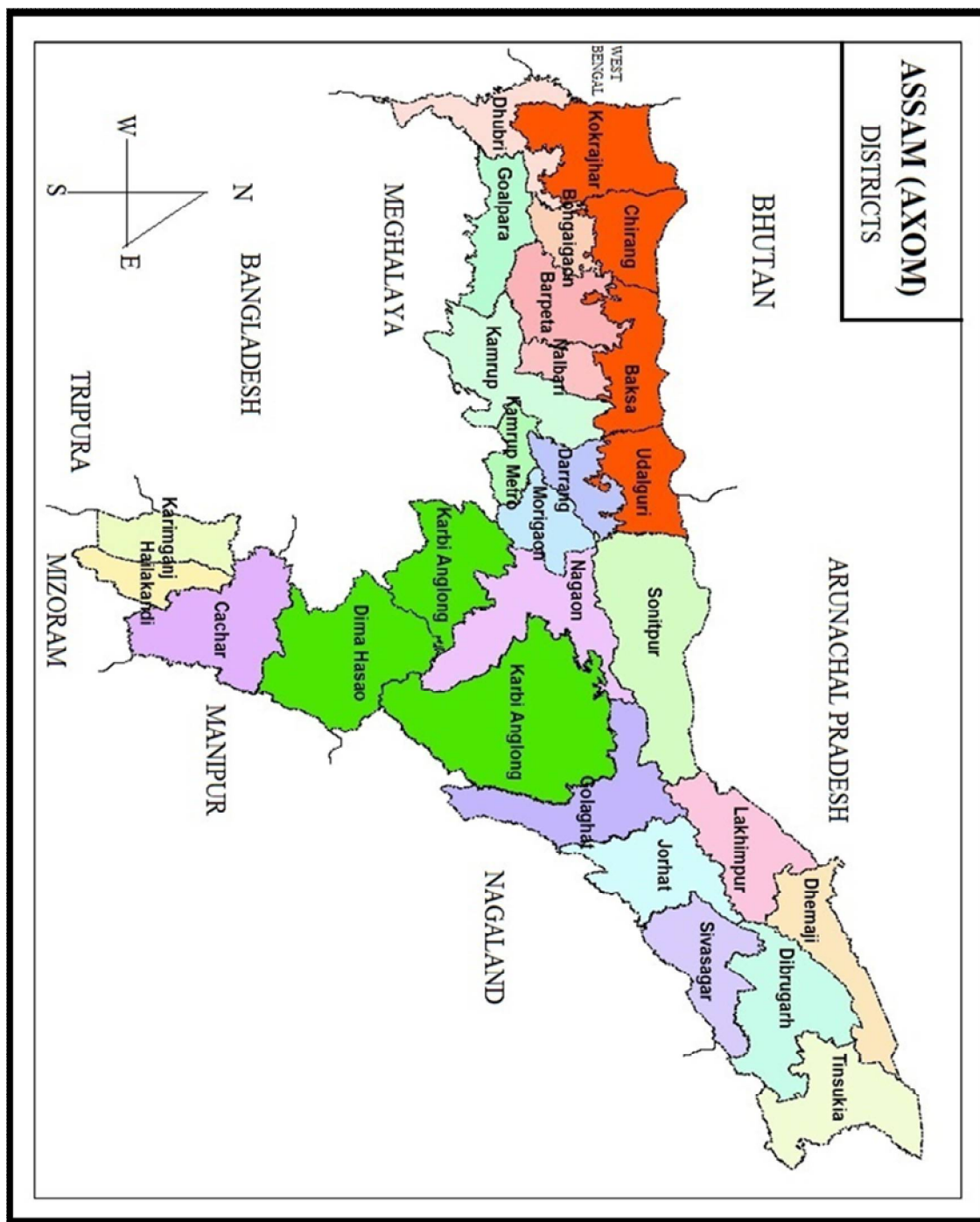
Diagram 7.1: Tripartite Model of the Koch Religion.
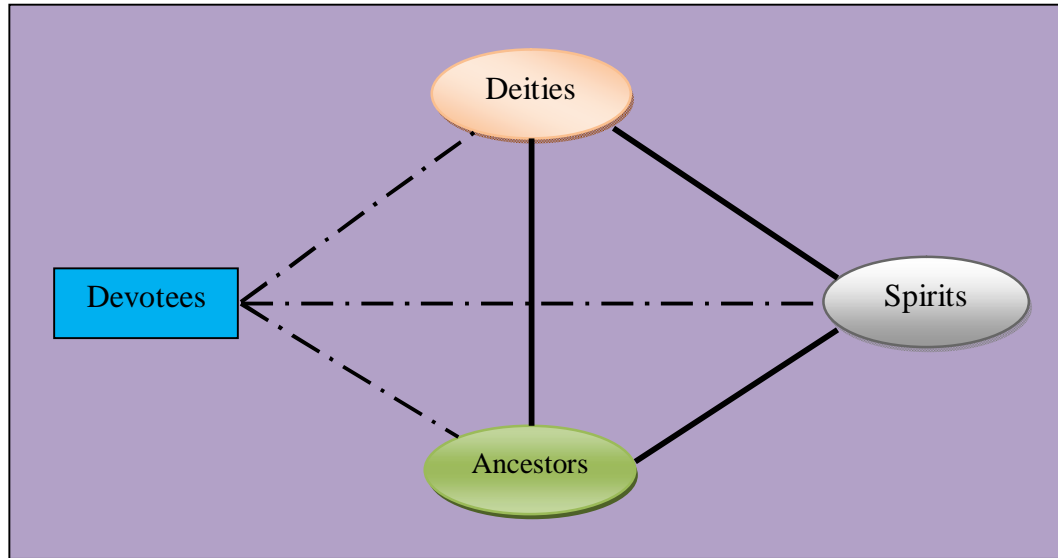
The above diagram represents the relationship of the community members as a devotee with supernatural beings. As we have found that the Koch socio-religious life is surrounded by various malevolent spirits and ghosts, the influence of these spirits can feel in their every aspect of life. This is quite native to their religion. The fear and superstitions related to these spirits and ghosts turn their religious life with full of rituals and practices. They try to appease them or satisfy them by venerating them. Moreover, in order to protect their lives from the evil they venerate ancestors and deities. Ancestor worship, as Frazer has mentioned is one of the parts of the primitive religion is still prevalent among the Koches. The existence and veneration of the deities and ancestors act as a hope that will safeguard their life. So, the presence of these three supernatural entities makes the structure of the Koch folk religion quite unique. This creates communal unity and solidarity among them and in turn solidifies their identity.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Political Map of Assam.

Appendix 2: Basic Statistics of Assam

Total Geographical Area	78438 sq. km.(as per 2011 Census Report)
State Capital	Dispur
Population	31,169,272 (as per 2011 Census Report)
Rural Population	26,807,034 (as per 2011 Census Report)
Urban population	4,398,542 (as per 2011 Census Report)
Density of Population	397 per sq. km. (as per 2011 Census Report)
Sex Ratio	954 : 1000; Female : Male (as per 2011 Census Report)
Literacy Rate (Total)	73.18% (as per 2011 Census Report)
Literacy Rate (Male)	78.81% (as per 2011 Census Report)
Literacy Rate (Female)	67.27% (as per 2011 Census Report)
Official Languages	Assamese (Brahmaputra Valley), Bodo (B. T. A. D. Area) and Bengali (Barak Valley)
Districts	27 (Dhuburi, Goalpara, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Chirang, Barpeta, Nalbari, Kamrup Metro, Kamrup Rural, Baksa, Udalguri, Darrang, Nogaon, Morigaon, Karbi Anglong, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sibasagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Dima Hasao, Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi)
Sub – Divisions	56
Revenue Circle	184
Block	219
Gaon Panchayat	2202
Autonomous Councils	1. Bodoland Territorial Council, 2. Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, 3. Dima Hasao Autonomous District Council, 4. Mising Autonomous Council, 5. Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council, 6. Tiwa Autonomous Council, 7. Deori Autonomous Council,

	8. Thengal Kachari Autonomous Council and 9. Sonowal Kachari Autonomous council.
Number of Villages	26395 (as per 2011 Census Report)
Number of Towns	214 (as per 2011 Census Report). Statutory Towns – 88 and Census Towns – 126.
Official Language	Assamese, Bodo (in BTAD area) and Bengali (in the Barak Valley).
Other Languages	Rabha, Rajbongshi or Deshi, Mishing, Karbi, Tiwa, Garo, Hindi etc.
Major Religions	Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Budhism, Traditional Religions.
Major Communities	Bodo, Koch, Karbi, Missing, Dimasa, Deuri, Tai-Ahom, Rabha etc.
Major Festivals	**Agricultural Festival:** Rongali or Bohag Bihu, Kati or Kongali Bihu, Magh or Bhogali Bihu, No Khoa, Ali-A:ye-Ligang, Bwisagu, Bishuwa etc. **Religious festivals:** Ambubasi Mela or Amoti Suwa, Marai puja, Doljatra, Kali puja, Lakshmi Puja, Id, etc. **Other Folk Festivals:** Garja puja, Me-Dam-Me-Phi, Rongker, Chomangkan, Jonbil Mela etc.
Main Rivers	Brahmaputra and Barak
River Islands	Majuli (largest river island), Umananda (smallest river islands)
Major Crops	Tea, Paddy, Jute, various kinds of pulses, Sesame seed, Mustard seed etc.
Natural resources	Oil, Natural Gas, Coal, Mica, Limestone
National Parks	1. Kaziranga National Park, 2. Manas National Park, 3. Nameri National Park, 4. Dibru – Soikhowa National Park and 5. Orang National Park.
Sanctuaries	18 Wildlife Sanctuaries.
Major Economy	Agriculture, Petroleum, Crude Oil, Natural Gas, Tea, Coal, Timber etc.

Airports	1. Lokopriyo Gopinath Bordoloi Internationa Airport, Guwahati. 2. Mohonbari Airport, Dibrugarh. 3. Lilabari Airport, Lakhimpur. 4. Xalonibari Airport, Tezpur. 5. Kumbhirgram Airport, Silchar. 6. Rowroia Airport, Jorhat.
Railway Head	Maligaon, Guwahati (North East Frontier Railway)
Commercial Centre	Guwahati, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Barpeta Road, Bongaigaon.

Appendix 3: Religious Portfolio of Assam (According to 2011 Census Report).

Name of the Religion	Assam (Population and Percentage)	Meghalaya (Population and Percentage)
Hindu	19,180,759 (61.47%)	342,078 (11.53%)
Christian	1,165,867 (3.74%)	2,213,027 (74.59%)
Muslim	10,679,345 (34.22%)	130, 399 (4.40%)
Buddhist	54,993 (0.18%)	9,864 (0.33%)
Jain	25,949 (0.08%)	627 (0.02%)
Sikh	20,672 (0.07%)	3, 045 (0.10%)
Other Religion	27,118 (0.09%)	258,271 (8.71%)
Not Available	50,873 (0.16%)	9,578 (0.32%)

Appendix 4: Basic Statistics of the Districts of Goalpara Region.[1]

Sl no	Districts	Area	Population	Head Quarter	Major Communities
1	Bongaigaon	2510 Sq. KM	732,639	Bongaigaon	Koch, Bodo, Rabha
2	Chirang	11670 Sq.KM	481,818	Kajalgaon	Bodo, Koch

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[1] According to 2011 Census Report of India, Assam Series, p. 19.

				Muslim, Koch
3	Dhubri	2838 Sq.KM	1,948,632	Dhubri	
4	Goalpara	1911 Sq.KM	1,008,959	Goalpara	Koch, Rabha, Bodo, Garo
5	Kokrajhar	3169.22 Sq.KM	886,999	Kokrajhar	Bodo, Koch, Santhal

Appendix 5: Supernatural Beings Associated with the Birth Ritual.

Sl. No.	Name	Time	Offerings/Other information	Belief
Pre-Delivery				
1	Jokh-Jokhini (Evil spirits)	Once the pregnancy is confirmed	*Kasni* (Charmed chord) is given to the pregnant woman.	To protect the unborn child
2	Pettani (Female ghost)	When the mother feels pain at her lower abdomen	*Jara-pani* (Charmed water) is given to drink and *Kasni* (charmed chord) tied to the woman	The appease the spirit and to relief the pregnant woman from the pain
3	Family deity	At the month of six or nine	Offerings of rice, banana, milk, sweets and also sacrifice of pigeon or goat or duck	To protect the mother and the child from the attack of various evil spirits
4	Moila deo (Evil spirit)	When the woman is too weak	Offerings of uncooked rice, banana, flower, sweets and sacrificing the animal.	To protect the immature delivery
5	Aideu	At the time of *Sadh* ceremony	*panchamrit* prepared with *seni* (sugar), *mou* (honey), *doi* (curd), *ghiu* (ghee), and *awa gakhir* (raw milk)	For the protection of the mother and child
6	Family deity	At the *Jeora Diya* ceremony	Offers Prasad, flower, betel nut-leaf, fruits and in some families sacrifice also.	For the protection of the mother and child
Delivery				
7	*Daini deo* (witch)	When problem occurs in delivery	Sacrifices are made and cooked foods are offered.	To resolve the delivery issue and to remove the pain
8	*Ai Basumoti*	Soon after the	A touch of the soil is given	As it believed that

		birth of the baby	to the new born child	human being is constructed through the soil
		Post Delivery		
9	*Jokh-Jokhini* (Evil spirits)	After the delivery is done	Garland is made from shells of snails and hang in front of the door along with thorny branches are hanged.	To protect the newly born child and mother
10	*Bidhata* (Deity of the fate)	The night of the fifth day after the birth	Earthen lamps are lighted inside the room of the mother and child and religious songs are sung for the whole night.	Deity writes the fate of the child.
11	Ancestors	At one month of *Mahika* ritual	Offers cooked food	Invites in the ritual to participate and to protect the child
12	*Bura-Buri*	At the first rice eating ceremony	Offers Prasad, flower, betel nut-leaf, fruits and sacrifice of animals also.	For the protection of the child.
13	Family deity	At the first rice eating ceremony	Offers Prasad, flower, betel nut-leaf, fruits and sacrifice of animals also.	For the protection of the child.
14	Ancestors	At the first rice eating ceremony	Offers cooked food	Invites in the ritual to participate and to protect the child
15	*Aideu*	At the first rice eating ceremony	Earthen lamp and incense sticks are lighted	For the protection of the child.
		No fixed time		
16	*Phul Deo*	From pregnancy to after the child birth when the mother of child is attacked by this spirit	Offers a garland of flower	For the protection of the child.
17	*Khetor*	From pregnancy to after the child birth when the mother of child is attacked by this spirit	Sacrifices are made and cooked foods are offered.	For the protection of the child.
18	*Moila Deo*	From pregnancy to after the child birth when the mother of child	Offerings of uncooked rice, banana, flower, sweets and sacrificing the animal.	To appease the spirit

		is attacked by this spirit		
19	*Pettani*	From pregnancy to after the child birth when the mother of child is attacked by this spirit	Sacrifices are made and cooked foods are offered.	To appease the spirit

Appendix 6: Deities Associated with the Marriage Ritual.

Sl. No.	Deity Worshipped	Other deities	Ritual Name	Time	Place	Space	Performer of the ritual	Offering Items
				Pre-Marriage				
1	Subasini	Poharadar Soddarbura, Dharma Deo and Newri-Newri	*Sura/Khara Puja or Guwa Pan Soja*	Any Tuesday or Saturday after the conformation of the marriage	At the Bride's house	At the main courtyard in front of the shrine	Any elder female person or by an *Ojani*.	Betel nut-leaf, lime and tobacco
2	Baus Thakur	Subasini	*Jopsira diya*	Few days before the marriage	At the Bride's house	At the main courtyard in front of the shrine	Any elder person	Betel nut-leaf, Prasad, fruits, flower.
3	Household deities	Aideu, Bura-Buri, Bishihori etc.	Guwa-Pan Kata	Few days before the marriage	At the Bride's house	At the main courtyard in front of the shrine	Any elder person	Betel nut-leaf, Prasad, fruits, flower.
4	Ai Basumati	Guardian of the area	Akha Bana	Ten to fifteen days before the marriage	Both party	Temporary made shrine at near of a stream or any other place the sticky soil is available	Two Boirati/Airok	Earthen lamp, flower, vermillion, rice for Ai Basumati and a coin is for the Guardian of the soil.
5	Agni Deo	……	Gon-tel Bhaja	One week before the marriage	Both party	The place where akha (oven) is prepared	Boirati/Airok	*Duni* made with rice, pair of betel nut-leaf and a coin along with an earthen lamp.
6	Agni Deo	…..	Sira Khunda	One week before the	Both party	The place where akha (oven) is	Boirati/Airok	*Duni* made with rice, pair of betel nut-leaf

							and a coin along with an earthen lamp
7	Household deities	Aideu, Bura-Buri, Bishihori etc.	Panchini/Tel or Bhar Niya	One week before the marriage	At the bride's house	At the main courtyard in front of the shrine	Any elder person	Betel nut-leaf, Prasad, fruits, flower.
8	Subasini	Other household deities	Juron	One day before the marriage day	At the bride's house	At the main courtyard in front of the shrine	Any elder female person	Betel nut-leaf, Prasad, fruits, flower
9	Bastu Thakur	Hari Thakur	Adhibas	The day before the marriage day	Both party	At the main courtyard in front of the shrine	Adhikari (traditional priest)	Betel nut-leaf, Prasad, fruits, flower and one *Angsa*.
				Marriage				
10	Bishori/Kani Bishohori	……	Marai puja	Some people observe it at the day of Adhibas and some at the main day of the marriage	Traditionally who has Bishohori shrine in their house (both party)	At the Bishori than at the front courtyard	Deusi/Deuri	Betel nut-leaf, Prasad, fruits, flower and sacrifice of goat, duck or pigeon.
11	Deity of water and other spirits	….	*Sorogpani tula/Pani tula*	Early morning of the main marriage day	Both party	At the river/stream/pond	Female members	Betel nut-leaf, flower and a coin
12	Village deity like Garja Thakur, Ai thakurani etc. and the	…...	*Tel sora*	After sorogpani tula ritual	Both party	At the community shrine and at the household shrine	Female member of the family.	Gon-tel (scented oil), betel nut-leaf, vermillion, flower, earthen lamp, and incense sticks

	family deity like Baus thakur, Mao Aideu, Subashini etc.						
13	Ai Thansri	….	*Ai Thansri puja*	At the morning	Bride's home	At the Thansri shrine inside the kitchen	By the mother of the bride	Betel nut-leaf, Prasad, fruits, flower
14	To prevent Evil spirit and witchcraft	……	Gao-Bandha	Normally at the morning.	Both party	Any where inside the house	By the Oja	Kasni (charmed cord) and Jara-behor (charmed mustard seeds)
15	16 forms of Har-Gauri/Shiva and Parvati	…..	Sol-Matrika Puja/Har-Gouri Khisa	At morning	Both party	At the main courtyard in front of the mandap	The person who will conduct the Kanyadan ritual under the guidance of a Brahmin priest	Betel nut-leaf, Prasad, fruits, flower
16	Ancestors	……	*Propita puja*	At morning	Both party	At the main courtyard in front of the mandap	The person who will conduct the Kanyadan ritual under the guidance of a Brahmin priest	……

17	Mao Aideu	Poharadar (gate keeper) of Mao Aideu and Bura Soddar	*Aideu puja*	Before noon	Both party	At the *Aideu* shrine	The main male member of the family under the guidance of a Deosi or Deodha	Betel nut-leaf, Prasad, fruits, flower and sacrifice of goat, duck or pigeon.
18	Akha	Agni deo	Akha Puja	Before noon	Both party	At the Kitchen	Boirati/Airok	On a plantain leaf some uncooked rice is kept and over the rice, ripe banana, sugar, raw milk, some flower, dub grass and tulsi leaf are placed
Post-Marriage								
19	Bishohori	…….	Marai Puja	Next day after the marriage	At the groom's house	At the Bishori than at the front courtyard	The groom and the bride under the guidence of a Deusi/Deuri	Betel nut-leaf, Prasad, fruits, flower and sacrifice of goat, duck or pigeon.
20	Household deities	Aideu, Bura-Buri, Hari Thakur etc.	……	Next day after the marriage	At the groom's house	All shrines of the house	The groom and the bride	Betel nut-leaf, flower, earthen lamp and incense sticks.

Appendix 7: Assamese Lunar Calendar

Sl. No.	Assamese Month	Rajbongshi Term	Gregorian Month
1	*Bohag*	*Bwisag*	April-May
2	*Jeth*	*Jeth*	May-June
3	*Ahar*	*Asar*	June-July
4	*Xaon*	*Shaon*	July-August
5	*Bhad*	*Bhador/Bhadro*	August-September
6	*Ahin*	*Ashin*	September-October
7	*Kati*	*Kati/Kartik*	October-November
8	*Aghon*	*Aghon*	November-December
9	*Puh*	*Push*	December-January
10	*Magh*	*Magh*	January-February
11	*Phagun*	*Phagun*	February-March
12	*Chot*	*Choit*	March-April

Appendix 8: Some Folk Forms and Other Related Deities with *Siva* and *Parvati*

Sl. No.	Folk Forms of Siva	Folk Forms of Parvati	Other related deities
1	*Sanyasi*	*Tistaburi*	*Manasa*
2	*Dhumsia*	*Bhandani*	*Bishohori*
3	*Mohakal*	*Mohamai*	*Masan*
4	*Raja thakur*	*Dhoulimai*	*Jokha*
5	*Dhang-dhing*	*Dhangdhari*	*Jokhini*
6	*Garam*	*Mecheni*	
7	*Deonia*	*Kuchuni*	
8	*Dangdhora*		
9	*Pagla thakur*		
10	*Madan kam*		

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I. Primary Sources

(A) Informants (In alphabetic order)

Sl.No.	Name	Gender	Age	Place/Village
1	Ajay Ray	Male	37	Boripara
2	Amarendra Ray	Male	65	Chandrapara
3	Anamika Ray	Female	65	Patiladaha
4	Babul Sarkar	Male	60	Boitamari
5	Bajeswari Koch	Female	79	Udaipur
6	Balen Ray	Male	44	Boripara
7	Bhubaneswari Choudhury	Female	79	Borpara
8	Bimala Ray	Female	51	Patiladaha
9	Biren Ray	Male	70	Khuksigao
10	Bokul Chandra Ray	Male	56	Chandrapara
11	Bonga Ray	Male	51	Dimalgao
12	Brahmananda Ray	Male	30	Abhayapuri
13	Buddheswar Ray	Male	56	Kokrajhar
14	Chitra Bala Ray	Female	42	Bijni
15	Dandipani Adhikari	Male	45	Boitamari
16	David Ray	Male	46	Joypur
17	Debojani Talukdar	Female	72	Bakharapara
18	Dhananjay Barman	Male	53	Kalipukhri
19	Dhananjay Ray	Male	50	Kolbari
20	Dharani Ray	Male	54	Bijni
21	Dimala Ray	Female	50	Khuksigao
22	Funul Barman	Female	45	Dimalgao
23	Geetarani Koch	Female	45	Udaipur
24	Golapi Rajbongshi	Female	76	Bakharapara
25	Hemchandra Ray	Male	59	Chandrapara
26	Hiranmay Barman	Male	46	Gosaigaon
27	Hiren Choudhury	Male	52	Atugao
28	Jayanti Choudhury	Female	54	Borpara
29	Jonmeswar Ray	Male	49	Kakoijana
30	Kabita Ray	Female	34	Boripara
31	Khajin Ray	Male	56	Dimalgao
32	Kripadhar Ray	Male	54	Boripara
33	Kripasindhu Ray	Male	48	Boripara
34	Krishna Datta Barua	Female	54	Kokrajhar
35	Krishnakanta Ray	Male		Dumardah
36	Kumud Rajbongshi	Male	29	Kakoijana
37	Kunjalata Das	Female	78	Bakharapara
38	Lachit Sarkar	Male	49	Mamugao

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39	Mahendra Choudhury	Male	58	Boitamari
40	Maheswar Barman	Male	92	Boitamari
41	Manik Ray	Male	34	Pareyapara
42	Minabala Ray	Female	65	Kahibari
43	Mohini Mohan Khetri	Male	65	Boitamari
44	Mridula Barman	Female	36	Gosaigaon
45	Paharuram Ray	Male	90	Koakoijana
46	Parbati Bala Ray	Female	75	Aolaguri
47	Pramod Rajbongshi	Male	61	Bakharapara
48	Purnima Datta Barua	Female	63	Kokrajhar
49	Raghunath Choudhary	Male	54	Futkibari
50	Rahul Singha	Male	30	Deohati
51	Sadananda Singha	Male	60	Xaonagao
52	Santana Ray	Female	42	Boripara
53	Sarbeswar Koch	Male	61	Dotma
54	Sarbeswar Konwar	Male	58	Pareyapara
55	Sarmila Bala Ray	Female	41	Kolbari
56	Satish Das	Male	63	Bakharapara
57	Seno Bala Ray	Female	43	Kolbari
58	Sumesh Barua	Male	53	Mamugaon
59	Tulika Ray	Female	47	Chandrapara
60	Uttam Rajbongshi	Male	81	Panbari

*The above mentioned informants were part of the primary data collection through interviews at various stages of the research work during 2015-2019.

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PHOTOGRAPHS

1. Folklife of the Koches

*The attached photographs were part of the primary data collection at various stages of the research work during 2015-2019.

The people

Traditional dress (*patani* on the left and *bukuni* on the right)

Performing *Goalini* dance wearing traditional dress

Kodom phool

Sikihar (a kind of necklace)

Old lady fishing with *Jakhe*

A *Sangli* (sieve)

Ethno-medicine (charmed chord and enchanted water)

House structure (Cowshed and *Borghor* with loom and spinning wheel)

Food culture (smoking process and traditional way of roast)

2. Rituals and Festivals

Birth ritual (Rice eating ceremony)

Worship of household deities in birth ritual

A *mandap* for the marriage ritual

Garja puja

Ma Thakurani Puja

Ai puja

Bash Puja

Ap-jhap used in *Bisuwa* festival

Ap-jhap along cow dung and broom are kept outside the rode at the *Bisuwa* festival

Katigasa (grandmother is preparing the wick and in the evening time the mother is lighting lamps on the *ou* fruit to the ancestors)

3. Sacred space and Shrines

Aignar deor than

Gohalir deor than

Kholanbarir deor than

Garjashali

Thansali or *Dasjania dham* (Communal Shrine)

4. Visualisation of the Deities and Spirits

Clay image (*Sanyasi thakur*)

Pith image (*Bura-Buri)*
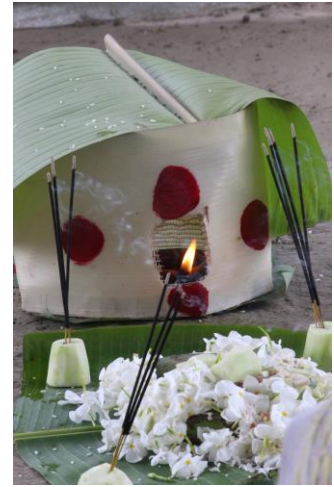
Banana trunk (*Ai*)

Bouna deo and *Bishohori* by a dhip (altar)

Stone

Tongbura-Tongburi

Jokha-Jokhini and *Mada- kam*
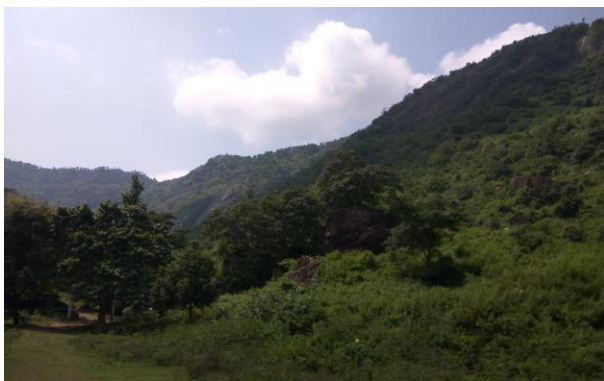

Various evil spirits of water

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Ganesha   Various *Garja* deities represent by huts

Siva

Bhoirob deo (Siva)

Raja Thakur by the hill

Haluwa deo by a *japi*

Ai Thansri by the pot

Sonaray Thakur

Spirits of water body

Dhip (altar)

5. Worship patterns

Offerings (*Sonaray puja* and *Marai puja*)

Sacrifice of duck and *kumra* (ash guard)

Animal sacrifice at *Thakurani puja*

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by Kaushik Das

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