

# **Translation as Act and Art of Reading: A Case Study of Rajbanshi Rituals**

*A Thesis Submitted to the University of Hyderabad in Partial Fulfilment for the*

*Award of*

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**IN**

**TRANSLATION STUDIES**

**BY**

**PRAGYA SENGUPTA**

**12HAPT01**



**Centre for Applied Linguistics and Translation Studies**

**School of Humanities**

**University of Hyderabad**

**Hyderabad – 500 046**

**OCTOBER 2020**

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## DECLARATION

I, Pragya Sengupta (12HAPT01), hereby declare that this thesis titled “**Translation as Act and Art of Reading: A Case Study of Rajbanshi Rituals**”, submitted to the University of Hyderabad, under the guidance and supervision of Dr. Sriparna Das, Centre for Applied Linguistics and Translation Studies, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, India, is a bonafide research work which is also free from plagiarism. I also hereby declare that it has not been submitted in full or in part to this university or any other university or institute for the award of any degree or any diploma, in India or any place in the world. I hereby agree that my thesis can be deposited in Shodhganga/INFLIBNET.

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(Research Supervisor)

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Name: Pragya Sengupta

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## CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis titled “**Translation as Act and Art of Reading: A Case Study of Rajbanshi Rituals**” submitted by **Pragya Sengupta** bearing registration number **12HAPT01** in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of **Doctor of Philosophy** in **Translation Studies** is a bonafide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

This thesis is free from plagiarism and has not been submitted in part or in full to this university or any other university or institution for the award of any degree or diploma.

Parts related to this thesis have been:

A. published in the following:

1. Sengupta, Pragya and Sriparna Das. “Reading Rain, Reading River: An Interpretative Discussion on Rajbanshi Folk Ritual”. Translation Today (2016): 84-92. (ISSN 0972-8740. E-ISSN 0972-8740).

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B. presented in the following conferences.



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

| Course Code | Name                                                           | Credits | Pass/Fail |
|-------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|---------|-----------|
| TS-801      | Research Methodology                                           | IV      | Pass      |
| TS-821      | The topic related to be offered<br>by the Concerned Supervisor | IV      | Pass      |
| TS-831      | Academic Writing                                               | IV      | Pass      |

Supervisor

Head of the Department

Dean of the School

*Dedicated to all the grandparents  
who keep the tradition of oral narratives alive  
and continue to live in our memories*

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## Index of Transcription

| Transcribed Words           | Transliteration and Meaning                                                                                            |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| θ <sup>h</sup> a:n          | Thhan, a sacred place in village or within home for worshipping                                                        |
| K <sup>h</sup> ari:f        | Kharif, crops grown during the monsoon season                                                                          |
| θi:sθa                      | Tista, a Himalayan river which flows through North Bengal                                                              |
| θi:sθa buri                 | Tista buri, the deity attributed to Tista River                                                                        |
| Pu:ja:                      | Puja, the act of worshipping a deity                                                                                   |
| Me:ce:ni                    | Mecheni, A goddess who is worshipped by Rajbanshis                                                                     |
| M:ce:ni k <sup>h</sup> ela: | Mecheni khela, The ritual of collecting offerings while singing and dancing by Rajbanshi women for worshipping Mecheni |
| Me:ce:ni ɖol                | A group of women who participate in Mecheni khela                                                                      |
| ma:reja                     | Mareya, a man who vows a ritual to a deity                                                                             |
| ma:reja:ni                  | Mareyani, a woman who vows a ritual to a deity                                                                         |
| C <sup>h</sup> a:θi         | Chhati, an umbrella used in Mecheni ritual                                                                             |

|                    |                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|--------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Kula               | Kula, a winnowing tray                                                                                                                                                           |
| ḍa:n               | dhan, paddy or husked rice                                                                                                                                                       |
| tsa:l              | chal, unhusked rice                                                                                                                                                              |
| pĩ:ɿ               | piri, a wooden stool                                                                                                                                                             |
| k <sup>h</sup> e:θ | khet, crop-field                                                                                                                                                                 |
| bḥŋɔ/ bi:f         | bhong/ bish, the bhong/ bish songs are the ones which have discussions on nudity or conjugal relationships                                                                       |
| dḥŋa:              | donga, a small alter shape structure made with plantain stems                                                                                                                    |
| Pḥncḥpu:ja:        | Panchapuja, a ritual of worshipping five deities including Mecheni; performed after a few days of Mecheni puja. The five deities are Mecheni, Kuchuni, Natkiburi, Dhola and Shib |
| Pḥncḥḍebḥa pu:ja:  | panchadebota puja, same as Panchapuja                                                                                                                                            |
| Ku:cuŋi            | Kuchuni                                                                                                                                                                          |
| ḍ <sup>h</sup> ḥla | Dhola                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Na:tki             | Naatki                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Si:b               | Shib; Shiva, The God of creation and destruction in Hindu mythology                                                                                                              |

|               |                                                                        |
|---------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| De:vʃi        | Deusi, a Rajbanshi priest                                              |
| Binda ɖɛbi    | Binda devi, the deity attributed to<br>Tulsi/basil plant               |
| kʰu:qʃija     | Khugshiya                                                              |
| ʃəθəɔpi:r     | Sotyopir                                                               |
| Θulʃii        | Tulsi                                                                  |
| Cəŋət         | Cangat, a fan made of cow's tail                                       |
| Σənnə:ʃi Baba | Sonnyasi baba, an incarnation of Lord Shiva                            |
| Qəwʒpi:r      | Khowajpir                                                              |
| Peθθani       | Pettani                                                                |
| məndəp        | Mandap, a sacred place constructed outside<br>the house for doing puja |
| Tsəkkudə:n    | Cokkudaan, giving sight                                                |
| prəʃa:ɖ       | Prosad, offerings made to deities                                      |
| Bʰəkθə        | Bhakta, disciple                                                       |
| biʃhəhəri     | Bishahari, the Goddess of serpents                                     |
| Kāli          | Kali, the black goddess worshipped by<br>Hindus as well as Rajbanshis  |
| Ōðhika:ri     | Adhikari, a priest in Rajbanshi community                              |
| Pa:tɖari      | Paatdhari, the priest who holds Pattavastra                            |

|                            |                                                                    |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Ka:nθulʃi                  | Disciples of Paatdharis who later on become priest themselves      |
| Bɔiʃa:k                    | The first month in Bengali Hindu calendar                          |
| Ctsɔiθrɔ                   | The last month in Bengali Hindu calendar                           |
| Ḍoma:ʃi                    | Domashi, the last date of Chaitra                                  |
| bɔnni                      | Bonni, the ritual of worshipping Ganga                             |
| gɔŋgaḍɛbi                  | Gangadebi, the deity of River Ganga; also known as Bonni           |
| biʃuwa                     | Bishua, the Rajbanshi ritual celebrated on last date of Ctsɔiθrɔ   |
| K <sup>h</sup> aʈam        | Katham, a ritual on structures or masks of mythological characters |
| Duli- K <sup>h</sup> aʈam  | Kathams made of bamboo                                             |
| Ga:ɽi- K <sup>h</sup> aʈam | Kathams which are carted on carriages                              |
| Manuʃ- K <sup>h</sup> aʈam | People who dress like mythological characters                      |
| θel ʃiḍu:r                 | Tel-Sindur, a mixture of Mustard oil and vermillion powder         |
| dʒ <sup>h</sup> u:ɖi       | Jhuri, a bunch of garlic and onion tied together                   |
| bi:sti                     | bisti, a herb; also known as brihati                               |

|                                      |                                                                         |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| gɔŋjayi                              | ganjai, the weed plant                                                  |
| pa:nimuθari                          | panimuthari, a herb                                                     |
| B <sup>h</sup> ajab <sup>h</sup> uja | bhajabhuja, a snack made of beaten rice,<br>grams, peas, lentil, dal    |
| Ponθa                                | ponta, cooked rice left overnight with water<br>for consumption         |
| uluð <sup>h</sup> ɔni                | uludhwani, or ululation; sound uttered by<br>women on festive occasions |
| ʃɔŋkɔð <sup>h</sup> ɔni              | shankhadhwani, sound made by blowing a<br>conch-shell                   |
| pa:n                                 | paan, betel leaf                                                        |
| ʃupa:ri                              | supari, betel nut                                                       |
| bəθa:ʃa:                             | batasha, a sweet candy made with sugar                                  |
| g <sup>h</sup> ɔt                    | Ghot, pran earthen pot                                                  |
| Θulʃii                               | Tulsi, the sacred basil plant                                           |
| ð <sup>h</sup> ɔrɔm puja:            | Dharam Puja, worshipping the Sun-God                                    |
| ma:tir prɔðip                        | matir prodip, earthen lamp or diya                                      |
| noibedðɔ                             | noibidyo, offering of rice, banana and<br>sweets made to deities        |
| a:ʈija kɔla                          | aathiya kola, a variety of banana                                       |

|                           |                                                                                       |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| a:ɽθi                     | aarati, greeting a deity by weaving a lamp, incense sticks etc.                       |
| ʝɔɡɡɔ                     | yajna, a religious sacrifice by burning the offerings                                 |
| ð <sup>h</sup> u:nuçi     | dhunuchi, an incense burner                                                           |
| pa:tk <sup>h</sup> əʈi    | Paatkathi, stalk of a jute plant                                                      |
| prɔna:m                   | Pranam, An act of salutation by prostrating on the ground                             |
| a:ka:ʃhka:muri            | Aakashkamuri, the deity vested with the power of curing epilepsy                      |
| a:ka:ʃh ba:θi             | Aakashbati, the lamp lit at a height in the<br>θa:n of a:ka:ʃhka:muri                 |
| karθik                    | Kartik, seventh month in Bengali Hindu calendar                                       |
| ɔgra:ʝɔn                  | Aghrayan, or Agrahayan, eighth month in Bengali Hindu calendar                        |
| Nōja: k <sup>h</sup> ʝja: | Noya Khoya, the ritual of celebrating with the harvesting of new rice and other crops |
| bɔɽɔma sa:nθi             | Baroma Shanti, a ritual dedicated to Lord Brahma                                      |
| bōiððɔ na:θ               | Boidyonath, an incarnation of Lord Shiva                                              |

|                      |                                                                                                                                             |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Pɔiθa:               | Poita, a sacred thread worn by the Rajbanshi priests                                                                                        |
| guwa pa:n            | Guwa Paan, a variety of betel leaves                                                                                                        |
| ʃa:k                 | Shak, green leafy vegetables                                                                                                                |
| tʰa:ku:r kʰɔlai da:l | Thakur kalai dal, the unpolished version of black grams                                                                                     |
| tsa:θa:l             | Chatal, an elevated place like cleat built within a house                                                                                   |
| məhaba:ɪ             | Mahabari, owl/a bird which is offered food on the day of Nōja: kʰɔja:                                                                       |
| gussa:               | Guca, semi-circular ring like structures made of bamboo sticks fixed on plantain stems where lamps are placed on the occasion of kʰāli Puja |
| bʰa:nda:ni           | Bhandani, the deity attributed to the protector of forests as well as granary. Also known as bənbibi or bən Đurga or bən Đebi               |
| bənbibi              | Banbibi                                                                                                                                     |
| bən đurga            | Ban durga                                                                                                                                   |
| bən đebi             | Ban debi                                                                                                                                    |
| bɔɹɔ bʰa:nda:ni      | Bara Bhandani, the larger θa:n of bʰa:nda:ni                                                                                                |



|                                            |                                                                                                                                            |
|--------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| c <sup>h</sup> əʈə b <sup>h</sup> aːndaːni | Choto Bhandani, the smaller θaːn of<br>b <sup>h</sup> aːndaːni                                                                             |
| pir piːni                                  | the Islamic saints worshipped by the local<br>people                                                                                       |
| brəθə                                      | brata, penance                                                                                                                             |
| θiθ <sup>h</sup> i                         | Tithi, a lunar day. Hindu rituals as well as<br>Rajbanshi rituals are performed on<br>particular θiθ <sup>h</sup> i is designated for them |
| nəvami                                     | Nabami, the ninth lunar day                                                                                                                |
| ðəʃəmi                                     | Dashami, the tenth lunar day                                                                                                               |
| ekaðəʃi                                    | Ekadashi, the eleventh lunar day                                                                                                           |
| mənθrəpθə ʃəl                              | Mantraputo jol, water that has been<br>sanctified by words of prayer                                                                       |
| ʃiːjal <sup>h</sup> aːkur                  | Shiyalthakur, the deity attributed to jackals                                                                                              |
| ʃiːjal                                     | Shiyal, jackal                                                                                                                             |
| bəsuməθi                                   | Basumati, the mother earth                                                                                                                 |
| Σalesʃəri                                  | Saleswari                                                                                                                                  |
| gaːram θ <sup>h</sup> aːn                  | Garam Than, a sacred place in village for<br>worshipping                                                                                   |
| ð <sup>h</sup> am seba                     | Dham Seva, a ritual performed in Garam<br>Than                                                                                             |

|                |                                                                                       |
|----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ḍua:ri tʰa:kur | Duari Thakur, the deity attributed as the gatekeeper of Baikunthapur forests          |
| Kɔntʰɔpal      | Kanthapal, a folk-God from Mech community who saved lives of people living in forests |
| kʰela:         | Khela, a folk drama. Also known as kʰeli, kʰila:ni or kʰeil                           |
| kʰeli          | Kheli                                                                                 |
| kʰila:ni       | Khilani                                                                               |
| kʰeil          | Kheil                                                                                 |
| ḥɛvmθi ḍʰɔn    | Heunti Dhan, a variety of paddy                                                       |
| gacʰ           | Gaach, tree. Also known as gɔcʰ                                                       |
| gɔcʰ           | Goch, tree                                                                            |
| gacʰ bija:ḥ    | Gaach Veyah, marriage of trees                                                        |
| bɔt            | Bat/ Vata, banyan tree                                                                |
| pakuɾ          | Pakur, a species of fig tree                                                          |
| Ḍʰɔrɔla        | Dharala, a Himalayan river                                                            |
| Ḍʰɔla bura:    | Dhala Bura, the deity attributed to Ḍʰɔrɔla river. Also known as Ḍʰɔlja:              |
| Ḍʰɔlja:        | Dhalya                                                                                |

|                               |                                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Me:ci                         | Mechi, another name for river ʰi:sθa in mythologies. She is believed to be the wife of ʈʰərɔla and mother of a son, Kərɔla and a daughter, ʈʰulali |
| Kərɔla                        | Karala                                                                                                                                             |
| ʈʰulali                       | Dulali                                                                                                                                             |
| bi:ɟmənθər                    | Bijmantar, words or chants that are recited silently by a devotee                                                                                  |
| fʰəθa                         | Fota, a traditional dress worn by Rajbanshi women in Bengal                                                                                        |
| gɔɟi                          | Goji, a traditional dress worn by Rajbanshi women in Assam                                                                                         |
| tsɔiθrer pənθa boiʃa:ke kʰa:y | Choitrer Ponta boishakhe khay                                                                                                                      |
| ðərmer na:me ʃhãɪ cʰaɪa       | Dhormer name shaanr chhara                                                                                                                         |
| gɔcʰ kʰaɪa hɔa:               | Goch khara howa, a ritual of remarrying a widow                                                                                                    |

## **Chapter: I**

### **Introduction**

This thesis titled ‘Translation as Act and Art of Reading: A Case Study of Rajbanshi Rituals’ aims to read select folk narratives of the Rajbanshi community for understanding their experiences, and their world-view embedded in those narratives. Reading as a process includes the realisation of the materiality of the texts and involves understanding the experiences of the speakers and performers who execute them. Translation remains as both a process and a metaphor in this thesis. According to John Leavitt, “The idea that ethnography is translation has largely been treated metaphorically, as an implication of the broader movement to see cultures as texts to be interpreted” (194). As a result, the entire community becomes a text and the people within the community become the carriers of the text. It includes their belief system, their social position in relation to other communities in a given location, their life style and behaviours, the objects needed for their regular life, their artefacts as well as their mentifacts. This thesis will remain with the study of the select folk narratives of Rajbanshi community, which would mean the folk songs, dances, and other cultural performances associated with the Rajbanshi ritual practices. These narratives are mostly oral and performative in nature, and these texts are comprehended by the people within the community by acts of repeating, memorising and re-enactment. The aim of this thesis is to observe, listen and read through these narratives and interpret the meaning of every object and action involved in those narratives. The significance of reading these narratives is to understand why there is a difference between the cultural dimensions of the Rajbanshis and the mainstream Bengalis.

## 1.1 Rajbanshi Community

Rajbanshi (pronounced as ra:jbɔnʃi), also spelled as Rajbongshi, Rajbansi, or Rajvanshi<sup>1</sup> are found in North Bengal, Bihar, West Assam, Meghalaya, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan<sup>2</sup> (Koch Rajbongshi People). According to the 2001 Census Report, within the state of West Bengal, the Rajbanshis are found in Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Darjeeling, Malda and Murshidabad. Charu Chandra Sanyal writes that the term ‘Rajbanshi’ came into existence since the sixteenth century, when Bisu, the ruler of Cooch-Bihar state, assumed the name Biswa Singha, and rejected his tribal identity. The same was practiced by his brother, Sisu, who became Siva Singha, and their other followers. Bisu and Sisu were the children of Haridas Mech, who was the head of Mech tribe in Goalpara, Assam. Their mother Hira was the daughter of Hajo, the Koch general who had ruled the Western Kamrup from 1510-1587 A.D. Under Hajo’s rule, the Koch tribe had occupied Western Assam, Eastern Nepal, the land between Dhaneswari river on the east, Konki river on the West, Dalimkotte hills in Darjeeling in the North, and Ghraghat region of Bangladesh on the South (Sanyal 5-6). The Rajbanshis believe themselves to be the descendants of *Kshatriyas* who had fled the wrath of Parasurama. Charu Chandra Sanyal quotes from the *Imperial Gazette of India* and writes, “While Bisu himself was declared to be the son, not of humble Haria Mondol, but of the god Siva who, assuming Haria’s form, had intercourse with his wife. Hira herself an incarnation of Siva’s wife Parvati” (Sanyal 6). The community’s origin is not only enclosed in the mythical narratives of Siva-Parvati or the *kshatriyas* fleeing away from Parasurama, but also an Indo-Mongoloid lineage. From the observations of Professor Suniti

---

<sup>1</sup> Different spellings of the Rajbanshi community’s name pertains to how it is pronounced in different places. These spellings are documented in the website of *Egiye Bangla e-Bangla*, a portal of West Bengal Development Department. <http://wbnorthbengaldev.gov.in/htmlpage/Rajbongshi.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> “Apart from Indian states the Koch Rajbanshis are found in Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan, who are being regarded as the indigenous people and known as banshi, rajbanshi, kshatriya, deshi, rangpuria, jharua or dakoriya, ujani at different places. Moreover, they are given different status of caste at different states” (Halder 597).

Kumar Chatterji, it appears that Rajbanshis are the Hinduised Kochs who belonged to the Bodo tribe. He describes the Koch community as:

Hinduised or Semi-Hinduised Bodo who have abandoned their original Tibeto-Burman speech and have adopted the Northern dialect of Bengali (which has a close affinity with Assamese); and when they are a little too conscious of their Hindu religion and culture and retain at the same time some vague memory of the glories of their people, particularly the days of Viśva Simha and Nara-nārāyaṇa, they are proud to call themselves *Rāj-baṃśīs* and to claim to be called Kshatriyas (Chatterji 112).

Dwijendra Nath Bhakat gives a note on further expansion of Rajbanshis into seven different royal families. They are Coochbehar Rajbanshi (Coochbehar), Raykat Rajbanshi (Jalpaiguri), Pangar Rajbanshi (Rangpur, Bangladesh), Kachar Rajbanshi, Darang Rajbanshi, Bijani Rajbanshi, Beltala Rajbanshi (Guwahati) (Bhakat 34). These seven groups have facilitated the expansion of the community and its culture in the Kamrup region. In the beginning of twentieth century, social reformer and leader of Rajbanshi Kshatriya community, Ray Saheb Panchanan Berma had begun a movement for the upliftment of the community in social order of caste system. During this movement, the kshatriya identity of the community was foregrounded, shielding the Koch lineage. Rajbanshi community has not only gone through this transition from Koch tribe to Hinduisation, but consequently they adopted other religions as well. As George Grierson reports, “Those Kōch, who are now Hindūs, are primarily known under the name of Rājbangśī. But large numbers of them have become Musalmāns, so that the mere number of people of the Rājbangśī tribe affords no idea of the number of people of Kōch extraction in the country” (163).

The inclusion of Islam is visible in the contemporary practices of Rajbanshi community as well. The temples of researched villages in this project include a  $\theta^h a:n$  of  $Q\omega wjpi:r$  or  $\Sigma\omega\theta\theta\omega pi:r$  along with other deities. There are influences of other tribes like Mech, Rabha, Khem, Toto etc., in the practices of Rajbanshis. The Kamtapuri movement in North Bengal had aimed to bring all ethnic communities living in North Bengal to be a part of larger Kamtapuri population. However, the influence of this movement is not dominantly visible among the Rajbanshis of Jalpaiguri. They prefer to adhere to the idea of Rajbanshi community's identity.



Pic 1.  $\theta^{\text{ha:n}}$  in a Rajbanshi house of Dakshin Mouyamari village





Pic 2. Deities in the  $\theta^h a:n$  represented by clay-mounds



Pic 3. Deities in the  $\theta^h a:n$  represented by stone





Pic 4. Stone 0<sup>a:n</sup> built next to a tree within the house





Pic 5. Temple structure made of bamboos built around a stone  $\theta^h a:n$





Pic 6. Smt. Rupeswari Debi, a Rajbanshi informant from Dakshin Mouyamari village



Pic 7. Smt. Dinobala Debi, an informant from Dakshin Mouyamari village





Pic 8. Traditional Rajbanshi dress worn by a couple in Assam

### 1.1.1 Location of Rajbanshi Community in North Bengal

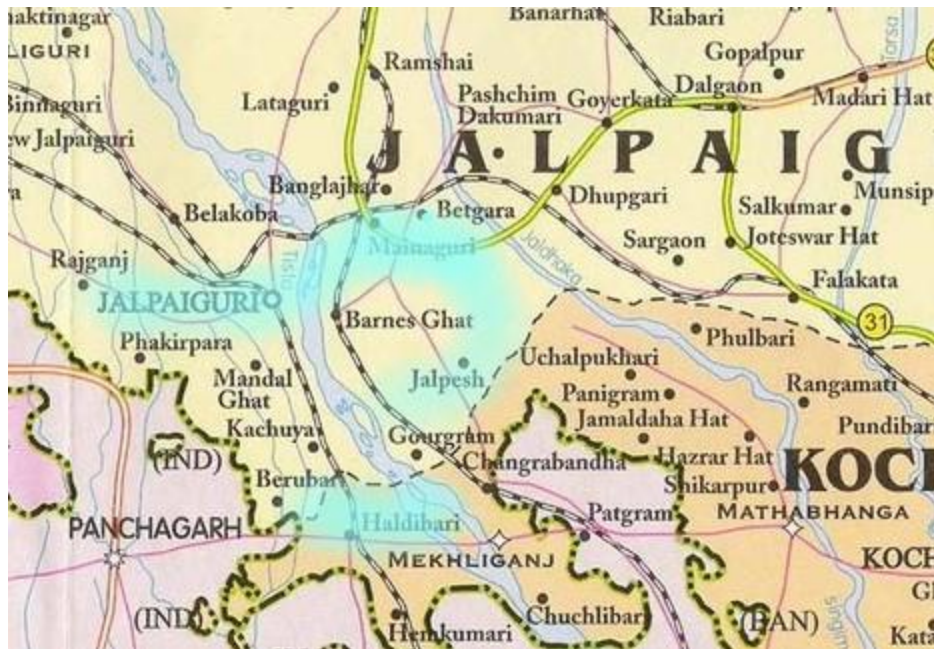
The primary data has been collected from the Rajbanshis residing in the villages of Jalpaiguri district, particularly near the town of Mainaguri which is about 10 km northeast of Jalpaiguri. Apart from that, some villages of the Haldibari area of Koch-Bihar district has been explored for the purpose of this thesis. The residents of these villages included a denser section of Rajbanshis, who consider themselves as Bengali Rajbanshis. They follow the rituals and traditions of Rajbanshi communities as well as mainstream Hindu Bengalis. Given below are the maps of North Bengal and the location of the researcher's field work.



Map 1: Jalpaiguri and its adjacent districts, Koch Bihar and Darjeeling<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> This map has been collected from 'Environmental, Economic and Agricultural Surveys of an Ecologically Important Forest-edge Hamlet in Darjeeling District', West Bengal, India - Scientific Figure on *ResearchGate*. [www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-showing-the-areas-of-North-Bengal-India\\_fig1\\_316581371](http://www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-showing-the-areas-of-North-Bengal-India_fig1_316581371).





Map 2: Locations of the research conducted in Jalpaiguri, Mainaguri and Haldibari

### 1.1.2 Language of Rajbanshi Community in North Bengal

The primary sources of information are in Rajbanshi and Bengali language, which have been translated to English while writing the thesis. The language gap is also realised in the communication between the community members and the researcher, as the former are from within the community while the latter is an outsider. The researcher belongs to a mainstream Bengali community with no prior linguistic acquaintance with Rajbanshi. The researcher is fluent in English, Bengali, Hindi and can understand Assamese. Since the researcher is not acquainted with Rajbanshi, the informants were asked questions to explain the meanings in Bengali. The old Rajbanshi ladies who were not able to speak in Bengali were some of the primary informants. Their family members, the succeeding generations who knew both Rajbanshi and Bengali, acted as mediators and had helped the researcher in explaining the meanings of Rajbanshi words at such circumstances. Therefore, the researcher mostly had to



depend on these mediators. This also posited a limitation on the researcher to verify the meanings. Also, when the mediator is unable to explain a certain word or phrase, or when the mediator is absent, certain words could not be deciphered. Since the researcher was a member of the mainstream society, information on ritual practices was not readily available, and only after a long process of visiting and acquainting with the Rajbanshi villagers, introduced through other Rajbanshi researchers, the data collection was possible. The researcher's position in this process was objective and her reading of the data was directed towards finding alternative narratives. She considered the Rajbanshi cultural practices as distinct narratives of their community, and not an integral part of greater Bengali mainstream narratives. While doing so, the researcher also made observation on the tendency of the people who belonged to Rajbanshi community to be a part of mainstream Hindu Bengalis. As per the researcher's observation, this tendency is a manifestation of the 'othering' of Rajbanshis that has been practiced by mainstream Hindus. Therefore, they are hesitant to discuss their rituals, practices, and language in the presence of any members of the mainstream. The data collected also varies in the time and space dimensions, as a result of which the language variation again becomes visible. The displacement, migration and assimilation of communities have further assisted in the variation of the languages. Since the researcher is not acquainted with the language as a native speaker, and the speakers of the language could not deliver the meanings of every word in Bengali, many of the words and phrases have not been translated. The dichotomy of the community's identity is also manifested through their language. The Rajbanshi community claims that they are descendants of Parashurama and deny their association with Kochs, which is reflected in their language as well. Dr. Deepak Kumar Ray, who is an academician belonging to the Rajbanshi community had informed in direct conversation with the researcher that their language is more similar to that of Bengalis and

Assamese rather than other clans which came from Koch tribe. According to George A. Grierson's Survey, Rajbanshi is a dialect which bears close resemblance to the dialect of Eastern Bengal (163). The area covered by this dialect in Grierson's opinion:

...extends into the Goalpara district of Assam, in which it gradually merges into Assamese. It is the language of the West and South-West of that District. To the south it is stopped by the Tibeto-Burman languages of the Garo hills. In Bengal it is bounded on the east by the Brahmaputra, with the Garo hills on the opposite side. In its extreme south east corner, it just touches the Eastern Bengali of Maimansingh, also across the river. On the south and west, it is bounded by the Northern Bengali already described, and on the north by the Tibeto-Burman languages of the Lower Himalayas. It is spoken in the following districts, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri, the Tarai of the Darjeeling District, the Native State of Cooch Behar, together with the portion of Goalpara in Assam, already mentioned. In the Darjeeling Tarai, the dialect is influenced by the neighbouring Northern Bengali, and has a special name, as a sub-dialect, viz., Bāhē (163).

While Grierson has given the status of a dialect to the language of Rajbanshis, Charu Chandra Sanyal refers to it as "the spoken language" (*Chalit-Bhasha*) of the villagers of the above area. This spoken language differs in many cases widely from the standard colloquial Bengali (250). Dwijendranath Bhakat lists out different names given by the scholars who researched on the language of Rajbanshis. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee has elaborated on Grierson's opinion and has named it as dialect of Bengal's northern region. Sukumar Sen has also referred to it as North-East Bengal's dialect. Panchanan Berma has termed it as "*Kamta Behari Bhasha*", Dhiren Das called it *Kamtai Bhasha*, Dr. Upendranath Goswami named it "*Goalpariya Bhasha*" and Birendra Nath Dutta referred to it as "*Deshi Bhasha*" (Bhakat 24). In Bhakat's opinion, the

Rajbanshi community has incorporated other minor communities living in Western Kamrup region, and their contribution in the social, political, cultural and linguistic history has been abundant. Therefore, the entire region's language can be termed as Rajbanshi itself (25).

Also, under the spell of Kamtapuri Movement, there has been an attempt to give a unified linguistic identity, known as 'Kamtapuri', to the Rajbanshis belonging to Kochbehar district. As Deboprasad Bandopadhyay observes, the word Kamtapuri is supported by the people who demand a separate state of Kamtapur in North Bengal and believe that Kamtapuri as a language will be a unified language of "Muslims, Rajbanshis, Kayasthas, Brahmins, Khens and other people of old Kamtapuri Kingdom" (40).

The rendering of dialect or language position for Rajbanshi is evident in the scholars who belonged within and outside the community. Since there is no separate script for Rajbanshi, it is written in either Bangla or Assamese script. The language is practiced and promoted primarily through oral medium. Bandyopadhyay observes this as a "nation statist political construction" (55). In his opinion, "The genealogy of language is a nation statist fantasy guided by the dominance of "culture of writing" and the notion "writing means civilization." Any demand for linguistic state in India shows no subversion as it subscribes to the basic premise of linguistic state formation and follows the nation statist paradigm" (Bandyopadhyay 55).

Bandyopadhyay writes this in the context of dichotomy between Bengali and Kamtapuri. This is a result of two opposite positions of West Bengal, as a unified state, and Kamtapur, as a separate state, attempting to exercise their power. However, in this thesis, Rajbanshi is being identified only as a separate language with which people within the community communicate with each other, practice their cultural norms and share their worldview. It is an attempt to recognise their oral language as a potential medium of continuing the above mentioned linguistic performances.

### 1.1.3 Challenges of Research

Though Rajbanshi community's existence is tracable from 16<sup>th</sup> century, the availability of secondary resources on the community is available in limited quantity. The existing researches have mostly looked into the community as a part of greater Assamese or greater Bengali cultures. The identification of Rajbanshis as a distinct community, and not as a sub-section of mainstream Hindu Bengalis or Hindu Assamese culture, is novel and can be observed in the researches done by scholars like Deepak Kumar Ray, Nirmalendu Bhowmick from West Bengal and Dwijendra Nath Bhakat from Assam. The previous research projects have tried to uplift the Hinduised and Kshatriyaised identity of the community and related their practices with the same.

Even though most of the Rajbanshis of Jalpaiguri district speak in both Bengali and Rajbanshi languages, the ritual practices are mostly performed in Rajbanshi. The women who perform the folk songs and folk dances related to the rituals are mostly rural and their performances are only in Rajbanshi language. They cannot explain the same in Bengali. Since the researcher did not belong within the community, comprehending the meanings of each and every word was not possible. Often the members of the Rajbanshi community, who had the knowledge of Bengali language, explained the meanings to the researcher partially.

Among the currensnt researchers on Rajbanshis, there is already an existing binary of people. One group follows the idea that Rajbanshis have an unique ethnic identity, which is distinct from the mainstream Bengalis. The second group believes that Rajbanshis are a part of the greater Bengali culture in North Bengal. Being an outsider, the primary sources of information cannot be collected without interacting with them. The primary informants usually do not reveal any information to the outsiders without any prior connection. They are secretive of the knowledge

of their ethnic practices, and it was evident in some of the rituals where the *mónθros* or the hymns were never shared.

## **1.2 Reading as Translation**

Both the acts of reading and translation engage in the act of comprehending the meanings of a particular text. Borges presents the idea of reading falls within a larger realm of translation.

Gadamer opines that reading is comprehending the meaning of a text and translation is a process of interpretation. In this process, translation helps in survival of the text through language (Cook 143-145).

According to Deborah Cook, a text's translatability depends on the reader's understanding of the possible meanings of the text. If a reader is able to comprehend its language, then only the text's translation becomes possible. Therefore, the act of translation of a text becomes reader dependent. The imagistic and affective sides of a text is reflected through its interpretation, and thereby translation. At the same time, the reader's capability of imagination and creativity comes into play when he/she interprets it. Reading occupies a significant process in the interphase of translation and the original text. A translator, by virtue of reading, becomes a co-creator of the text, and that's how he/she no longer remains just a reader and becomes a reader-translator (143-145).

Translation in this thesis is both a process and metaphor in which reading plays a significant role. The objective of translation is to perceive how experiences convert into the episteme of the community's collective memory and manifest themselves when the community's transition take place over time and space.

The idea of researching on the folk narratives of Rajbanshi community of North Bengal began with the enquiries on how a tribal society survives their own social system and live up to their culture in spite of dominant mainstream forces on them. However, while selecting a particular community for this purpose, the researcher explored the other methodological approaches which were not confined only to history but also relies on anthropological linguistics and folklores. In this process, the availability of Rajbanshi literature itself posited a challenge because written evidences are limited. Therefore, what stimulated this research was not only to search the past of this community by looking only into their history but to investigate what is available in the present. This could only have been done by looking into what narratives do we have about them in the present and more so, what narratives do the community people have about themselves in the present. The researcher's objective of gathering the narratives was not limited to any specific form, rather a cumulative organization of folktales, songs, rituals, proverbs, and food habits etc. in the everyday practices of Rajbanshi community.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

This thesis will deal with the following research questions:

How the experiences of a community contribute towards the formation of knowledge and thereby, the construction of narratives? This primary question will be addressed in relation to the study of Rajbanshi folk narratives. To explore further, the researcher will look into the associated questions like, what are the different forms of folk narratives available in Rajbanshi community? What are the contents of these narratives and how do they associate with the idea of sacredness? How has the idea of sacredness shifted from nature to man-made objects? The second important question of this project is how have the cultural accumulation contributed to these narrative discourses? How the act of documenting folk narratives becomes an act of translation? What are

the different methods of reading them and what is the need of reading them? How the community and its narratives complement each other? Lastly, whether these narratives and their translations can resist the mainstream cultural intervention and posit an alternative identity?

This research applies both ethnographic and narrative methodologies so that on the one hand, cultural aspects of Rajbanshi community can be explored and interpreted, and on the other, it can be diagnosed whether the meanings have also shifted in the narratives. According to Gabriela Saldanha and Sharon O'Brien, ethnographic approach of researching in translation requires an understanding of human behavior through lived experiences. Participant observation and interviewing along with researcher's own observation and interpretation of data play the key roles in this thesis (208).

The data collected on Rajbanshi culture includes surveys, social history, language, music, dances, cultural anthropology, myths and rituals. From this wide range, the researcher has selected the rituals and other narratives associated with them to understand the function of translation in them. This is followed by reading the narratives as a store-house of knowledge. In this thesis, the Rajbanshi rituals are understood as a store-house of their ethnic knowledge which is undergoing changes. Time and space are two major factors that contribute to this knowledge structure. If we trace the changes, then a shift in the knowledge structure can be found. This shift is gradually distancing the community from their natural surroundings and the effect of modernization is acutely visible. Therefore, translation can act as a process of transferring the knowledge and also preserving the knowledge.

## 1.4 Select Literature Review

The secondary sources of information on Rajbanshi folk narratives have been studied from the writings of Charu Chandra Sanyal, Girijasankar Roy and Ranajit Deb. Charu Chandra Sanyal, in his book, *The Rajbansis of North Bengal*, has given a detailed description of Rajbanshi community settled in the districts of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch-Bihar. The book is a retrospect of their geographical location, history, material culture, customs, social relations, religious beliefs and practices, folk traditions, songs, folk-stories and language. Girijasankar Roy's *Uttarbanger Rajbanshi Kshatriya Jatir Puja-Parvana* describes the rituals followed by the Rajbanshi community and the beliefs associated with each of these rituals. He also gives a brief account of the priests who perform these rituals. Ranajit Deb describes the rituals of different communities in North Bengal in his book *Uttarbanger Puja, Brata-O-Utsava: A Socio-Cultural History of North Bengal*. It includes the puja:s, marriage rituals, and religious beliefs followed by different communities in North Bengal including Rajbanshi, Tamang, Oraon, Toto, Lepcha, Limbu etc.

To understand how the folk-narratives help in understanding the knowledge structure of a community, Hayden White's *The Content of the Form* has been read. The events that the readers can find in a community's oral narratives are both real and imaginative. The oral memory of the community's members assists in carrying over the narratives and at the same time, constructing new narratives. Ricoeur's "Narrative Time" has been studied in this regard to understand why the carriers of the narratives repeat the same content differently. Maria Tymoczko's *Enlarging Translation, Empowering Translators* has been referred for looking into the repetition of the narrative texts and the capacity of these texts to hold different meanings. The process through



which the translators allocate these meanings becomes a decisive factor for the survival of the texts.

### **1.5 Research Methodology**

This thesis is a case-study of Rajbanshi folk narratives, where the texts are studied within the contexts in which they are being produced. As Saldanha and O'Brien suggests, the context-oriented researches in Translation Studies emphasizes on “contextualization and a real-life setting” (207). The Rajbanshi folk-texts that have been observed in this research are also seen within the contexts of their production and their intrinsic changes are also seen as a result of the altering space and time. Şebnem Susam-Sarajeva opines that the ‘power differentials at play in each situation influence the reception of theories in the target system’ (Saldanha and O'Brien 210). In this project, the formation and continuation of Rajbanshi folk-narratives through translation practices have been studied. Translation is understood here “as a form of re-narration” (Baker 159) that helps in construction of a world-view of the Rajbanshi community. The community members act as translators who transfer this world view, and as Mona Baker writes, “they are embedded in the narratives that circulate in the context in which they produce a translation and simultaneously contribute to the elaboration, mutation, transformation and dissemination of these narratives through their translation choices” (159). In this project the Rajbanshi folk-narratives are seen from this narrative theory of translation.

Field work had been adapted to collect the data from primary observations, interviews, and verbal reports. Also some secondary sources of information and reviews have been used in this project. Field work in the areas of Moynaguri, Jalpaiguri, and Haldibari included the watching of Rajbanshi rituals. The interviews made during the field works was unstructured and mostly in the forms of conversation with people from the community including Rajbanshi researchers,

academicians, villagers who participated in ritual acts and performances, the Rajbanshi priests, and children. In the process of doing so, many of the information had been imparted by the informants in fragments. Particularly, the old women, who in the process of narrating an incident, may forget some parts of it or stopped themselves from telling the secret facts on their rituals. The main focus of data collection was the observation of ritual acts, which included the ritual objects, ritual practitioners, their language and behaviour. The researcher had observed the data as a non-participant in order to follow the behaviour of both the devotees and the priests in Rajbanshi rituals. Also, it helped her to witness the participants distinctly and question them on the acts of the rituals. The ritual acts, including the songs performed during the rituals, have been documented and translated by the researcher for further analysis. The analysis of the data is made on the basis of their existing practices and the differences that have occurred in them when compared to the secondary sources. Once, the Rajbanshi rituals are observed, the researcher has tried to understand the belief system that is operating within them. Therefore, the changes in the narratives and their reasons have been recognised.

## **1.6 Chapterisation**

Apart from introduction and conclusion there are three core chapters in this thesis, namely:

Chapter 2: Ritual Practices, Myths and Sacred Spaces

Chapter 3: Oral Narratives and Historiography

Chapter 4: Reading as Act and Art of Translation

The second chapter, ‘Ritual Practices, Myths and Sacred Spaces’ is divided into two parts, Part A and Part B. In the Part A, Rajbanshi rituals are read in order to understand a connection between man, nature and super-nature. These rituals are observed by the researcher during field work, namely Me:ce:ni, Pəncəpu:ja:, B<sup>h</sup>a:nda:ni, Ð<sup>h</sup>ərəm pu:ja:, K<sup>h</sup>aṭam pu:ja:, Bənni pu:ja:, Kāli

pu:ja:, A:ka:ʃh ba:θi, Bəɹɔma Sa:nθi, Nōja: kʰɔja:, and ja:θra pu:ja:. Also, secondary sources like Girijasankar Roy's *Uttarbanger Rajbanshi Kshatriya Jatir Puja-Parvana* ([*The Religious Festivals of Rajbanshi Kshatriya Community in North Bengal*]), where documentation of these rituals has already been done, are read simultaneously for a comparative analysis of the rituals described in the secondary sources and those observed through primary observation. The comparison of the two sources have helped in understanding the pattern of changes in the ritual practices. The primary focus is given to Me:ce:ni Pu:ja: or the ritual of Me:ce:ni. This chapter, also, throws light on the conceptualization of sacred spaces formed due to ritual practices and their existence in post-ritual time. In the third section, the relationship between myths and rituals has been established. In the fourth section, 'Liminal spaces in Rajbanshi Rituals' the researcher has tried to explain the liminal spaces in these rituals much owing to their transition from one phase to another. It also postulates the possibility of rituals being transferred from natural surroundings to man-made structures, thereby assigning a transfer of belief-system altogether. Usage of language in this liminal phase is also significant because the influence is not only on the ritual practice but also individual participants. At the same time, it addresses the spaces of rituals where boundaries are transcended, and questions the origin of these rituals being only a tradition of practices or if it is more than that. In a nut-shell, Part A of this chapter examines the dependency of human beings on natural sources for livelihood and the researcher has tried to see how the ingredients required for any Rajbanshi ritual connects with natural surroundings in order to comprehend the origin of the rituals.

This connection between man and nature is elaborated in the next part, Part B of the chapter, 'Transformation within the Rituals', and it presents an overview of changes within rituals due to advent of modernism within the society. Part B of this chapter begins with the concept of sacred

space created around natural objects, like trees or rivers, and glorifies the belief-system or faith associated to them. It also throws light on the concept of exchange of power between man, nature and super-nature. The first section discusses the Rajbanshi rituals which have become extinct now and whose detailed references can be found only in secondary readings. Among such rituals, the rituals which are connected to plants, for example; *Σalesjori pu:ja:*, *Konthopal*, and *Huðum ðeo pu:ja:* are selected in order to understand how the concept of sacred spaces around a plant gives birth to the concept of sacred groves. The relationship of sacredness and trees are also found in the tradition of *gac<sup>h</sup> bija:h* or tree-marriages in Rajbanshi culture. The second section, therefore, concentrates on this ritual. Interestingly, this particular ritual is innately connected to fertility of human beings as well because there are three kinds of tree-marriages found in Rajbanshi culture. Firstly, a marriage between two trees, secondly between woman and tree and thirdly between man and woman where the man is considered as a tree. The third section of Part B deals with the rituals that indicate the process of life-cycle in different ways, and hence, their celebration is found in folk music and compositions as well. These performance arts like songs and dances are different narrative forms through which the Rajbanshi myths are expressed. On the one hand, these performance arts are supplements to the rituals and on the other, they also exist as methods of entertainment.

The researcher has transcribed and translated the songs relating to rituals collected during fieldwork. In this attempt, the content of the songs and their intensions are elucidated, and at the same time, the myths behind the rituals are also explained. The variations in the mythical narratives are also expressed through the songs. The songs are categorized by the researcher according to their contents. The *bðŋo* songs are highlighted because they stress on man-woman relationship, nudity and sexuality. Relationships between the divine and the sexual, the pure and

the pollutant have been discussed while analyzing these songs. This leads to the fourth section which focuses on how body is objectified in these narratives. The last section highlights on the refuting of mainstream rituals through these ritual narratives. By mainstream the researcher implies that the Bengali Hindu rituals are more prominent in North Bengal. Here, an attempt has been made to establish an identity of Rajbanshi community through the practice of indigenous habits in Rajbanshi rituals and their belief-system and life style, including the literary practices.

These two sections of the second chapter describe the existing and extinct rituals of Rajbanshi community. These rituals are the markers of their ethnic identity. The narratives related to these rituals will help in understanding how this community is slowly changing with time and space. A detailed analysis of these rituals will also reflect on the significance of their oral narratives and how the versions of narratives have changed through memorization and repetition. The acts of memorizing and repeating will reflect how the members of the community transferred or translated the knowledge through generations. Therefore, the community's identity is also formed on the basis of reading these narratives, by the members of the community as well as the mainstream society.

The third chapter of this thesis is titled as 'Oral Narratives and Historiography'. Here, the researcher has tried to see the potential of Rajbanshi rituals mentioned in the previous chapters to form a historiography of the community. In the first section, the relation of narratives in formation of knowledge structure has been analysed in details by reading Hayden White and G. N. Devy. The relationship between the known and the unknown, the real and the imaginary, the magic and the religion have been explained in this chapter. Simultaneously, their contributions in oral narratives have also been described and established in order to observe the belief system of Rajbanshi community and the changes occurring in them. It discusses why rituals need oral

memorization and how these memories give birth to contents and forms of narratives. It also emphasizes on aural learning and acts of repetitions by the virtue of sub-conscious habits formed in their community gatherings. The next section of this chapter observes the changes in oral texts over a period time. It is an attempt of reading time through reading of oral texts. For that purpose, referring to Ricouer's 'Narrative Time' allows us to read a narrative which is more present and available at the first. In the third section, a relation between what is given and what is created through imagination while meaning making has been analyzed. The dialogic relation between what is said and what can be the possible meanings of the utterances are also explained. This includes the taboos attached to rituals, the factors of purity and pollutant used in languages itself. It is followed by the fourth section where decisions made by translators who assign their meanings and the factors depending on which they make their decisions. The process of interpretation requires an understanding of looking into the history and looking back into history definitely signifies the politics of the translator. In case of ritual narratives, the translators are also the performers of the rituals and hence, their decisions are more likely to be influenced by the folk-minds that depend mostly on traditions. Hence, when knowledge is re-told, the part of re-telling includes not only what has been learnt but also to which direction the translators want them to proceed to; whether they are ready to comply with the changes or they prefer to stick to their traditional methods.

In the fourth chapter, 'Translation as Act and Art of Reading', the objective of a Translation Studies researcher has been described where translation primarily operates as a process. The idea of 'situatedness' as proposed by Munoz Martin (Saldanha and O'Brien 110) explains the contexts and contents including all the agents in a translation work and associates with the social behaviours and symbolism connected to the rituals as well as document the entire ritual which

contain the transformations within itself. It is followed by an account of theories on myths and rituals put forth by William Robertson Smith, E. B. Tylor, Sir James George Frazer, and Jane Harrison and S H Hooke. Among them, Harrison and Hooke's idea of myth as a series of contemporary events and not merely an explanation of rights seems more relevant for this research. In this chapter, the researcher has tried to explain how reading and documenting are innately connected with translation, with specific references to myths and more particularly, with rituals. The first section of this chapter focuses on the idea of a text and why rituals can be considered as independent texts. A text's semantic features which allows it to be translatable has been discussed and its potency of accommodating various meanings at the same time has been elaborated. Apart from it also shows how creativity and imagination assists a reader while interpreting a text, aided with preceding knowledge and political dimensions. Taking the cues from reader response theory promoted by Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish, the artistic and aesthetic features of a text depends on how an author represents and how a reader perceives. The experiences of readers are inclusive of the diversified settings of communities in which they belong to and from where the text is coming from. In the second section of this chapter, the researcher has tried to justify the need of documenting not only oral texts, but also the behavioural actions of people. The work of documentation is also supplemented with readings from secondary reading materials like *The Rajbanshis of North Bengal* by Charu Chandra Sanyal. In the process of ethnographic documentation, we cannot segregate only rituals from daily activities of people, because here people or folks form the centre of research. Therefore, the everyday language of people also needs to be recorded for the purpose of understanding and analysing. In the final section of this chapter, an attempt has been made to portray how Rajbanshi community's language and culture have undergone different changes under the influence of

modernization and how their cultural markers are getting lost. The tendency of adaptation into a mainstream thought and lifestyle slowly brings to an end in the indigeneity of a community and hence, documentation is much needed for protecting their knowledge structure.



## Chapter II

### Ritual Practices, Myths and Sacred Spaces

“Narratives are continually open to change with our exposure to new experience and new stories” (Baker 3).

#### Part A

Rituals are forms of narratives. Mythical contents are embedded in rituals. The changes in a ritual occur due to the interaction of different experiences. As the rituals move in temporal and / or spatial dimensions, the embedded myths also get transferred. As the nature of embeddedness of a myth undergoes changes, it results into various transformed narratives. According to William Robertson Smith, the existences of rituals are indispensable for myths.

While Smith was the first to argue that myths must be understood vis-à-vis rituals , the nexus by no means requires that myths and rituals have to be of equal importance. For Smith, there would never have been myth without ritual, whether or not without myth there would have ceased to be ritual (Segal 62).

This chapter will establish how rituals adapt themselves in a socially variant culture and yet transfer a myth through the narratives used in practicing it. As Rajbanshi rituals are oral and performative in nature, the idea of fixedness is not found in their culture. Therefore, it is flexible for them to adapt the ritual practices of other communities. Also, the idea of following the mainstream practices in order to uplift their social position and be equally significant operates as one of the reasons of this flexibility. At the same time, the changing need of humans and the availability of resources to cater to those needs result in the change of the rituals as well. This chapter, further, will discuss how sacred spaces are created to follow the practices of the rituals

and how each sacred space is associated with the concept of transcending boundaries. It will also show how liminality becomes an important factor while practising these rituals. After describing the rituals, as observed by the researcher, a comparative analysis with the help of secondary sources will be done. The analysis of the texts is done from the perspective of literature and not from a folkloristic approach. The interpretation of the rituals includes the observation of ritual objects and the ritual acts, followed by understanding the changes occurring in both of them. The variations in the ritual objects and ritual acts convey different narratives associated with them. Thus, interpretation of a ritual offers multiple narratives for us to compare. If these narratives are studied as individual texts, then each of these texts will be a translation.

This chapter will provide information on eleven Rajbanshi rituals that the researcher observed during her field work. Secondary sources like Girijasankar Roy's *Uttarbanger Rajbanshi Kshatriya Jatir Puja-Parvana [The Religious Festivals of Rajbanshi Kshatriya Community in North Bengal]* will be used to complement and re-evaluate the data collected during field work. For example, the discussion on Me:ce:ni ritual will point out that the ritual portrays a re-telling of the mythical story of Daksha in the Puranas where Σοθi had sacrificed her life to safeguard her husband Siva's honour, whereas the secondary source discusses the myth of Σi:b and Me:ce:ni's relationship without mentioning the Purana elements. Thus, it may be perceived that these two myths are reflection of two different cultures, mainstream Hindu culture and tribal Rajbanshi culture. Therefore, Me:ce:ni ritual becomes an interface of these two cultures coming together and promoting a text of its own.

## **2.1 Description of Rajbanshi Rituals**

Eleven rituals have been documented during the the months of March to June and October to December, 2015. Basically, these months account for the festive seasons since Rajbanshis are

primarily a farming community and their rituals are mostly associated with agricultural practices. These festivals mostly are harvest festivals. The months of March to June is the harvesting time of Rabi crops and the months of October to December is the harvesting time of K<sup>h</sup>ari:f crops.

### 2.1.1 Me:ce:ni

The ritual of Me:ce:ni has been observed in the Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal. Me:ce:ni pu:ja: is the other name of ̐i:s̐aburi pu:ja: which is performed during the month of b̐iʃa:k . It is performed along with Me:ce:ni k<sup>h</sup>ela: which involves collecting rice, paddy and vegetables from the village households. Me:ce:ni k<sup>h</sup>ela: is performed throughout the month of b̐iʃa:k. The main devotee is usually an older woman, who is known as the ma:reja:ni, takes a bath in the morning and performs the regular household pu:ja: first. She is the one who keeps a vow along with some other women, mostly neighbours or relatives, go to every Rajbanshi house in the village to collect ingredients for Me:ce:ni pu:ja:.. This group of women is known as Me:ce:ni ḍol<sup>4</sup>. They carry a C<sup>h</sup>a:θi<sup>5</sup> with them which is decorated with flowers and they tie a small piece of cloth containing ṡsa:l in between the runner and the top spring of the C<sup>h</sup>a:θi (Pic 9). Before the C<sup>h</sup>a:θi is taken out of the ma:reja:ni's house, it is worshipped along with the other household deities. The chief devotee or ma:reja:ni holds the C<sup>h</sup>a:θi in her hand and one of the members in Me:ce:ni ḍol holds a sacred bamboo stick which they symbolise as Σi:b (Pic 13, Pic 14 and Pic 17). The ḍol starts singing the Me:ce:ni songs from the ma:reja:ni's house and continues to perform even when they are walking towards the houses of other villagers. Before entering each house they make Uludhbani, after which they enter and inform the residents that they have come for Me:ce:ni k<sup>h</sup>ela:..

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<sup>4</sup> The word ḍol means a party or a group. In the context of this ritual, the word dala refers to the group of women who are actively engaged in performing me:ce:ni k<sup>h</sup>ela

<sup>5</sup> Earlier the umbrella used to be of bamboo sticks. Nowadays, because of unavailability, a normal black umbrella is used for the purpose.

The womenfolk of each house place a pī:ii<sup>6</sup> in front of their household temple. The ma:reja:ni places the C<sup>h</sup>a:θi there to cover the pī:ii. The married women in each house bring θel jīḍu:r and kula or θ<sup>h</sup>a:la full of ḍa:n or t̃sa:l<sup>7</sup> and vegetables grown in their k<sup>h</sup>e:θ. The ma:reja:ni makes a mixture of θel jīḍu:r and puts three red marks on the C<sup>h</sup>a:θi and the stool. She collects the rice and other crops in her bag and leaves a few grains of rice from the cloth attached to the umbrella in the plate asprɔʃa:ḍ. During this entire process, other women in Me:ce:ni ḍol sing songs and dance around the C<sup>h</sup>a:θi. After the k<sup>h</sup>ela: is performed in a particular household, any diseased person from the same household is asked to sit on that stool. The Me:ce:ni ḍol proceeds to the next house in the village. Once the collection is over for a day, the Me:ce:ni ḍol assemble in an open space or field where they make a circle and sing the Bōḅo/ bi:j<sup>8</sup> songs or vulgar songs. Me:ce:ni k<sup>h</sup>ela: is performed for a month until the ḍol collect alms from each household in the village. Finally on the last day of Boiʃa:k, Me:ce:ni pu:ja: is performed. On that day the ma:reja:ni takes bath in the morning, worships the household deities and the C<sup>h</sup>a:θi and takes it to the Jalpesh temple. A local priest or Oḍ<sup>h</sup>ika:ri assists in worshipping the deities in their house. The other women in the Me:ce:ni ḍol also join her and they perform the Me:ce:ni songs and dances while they walk to the temple. In the temple, first they enter the temple building with the C<sup>h</sup>a:θi, worship Lord Si:b and return the temple ground where other groups have also assembled. They make a Dōḅa:, a small alter shaped structure (Pic 18, Pic 19, Pic 20 and Pic 21), with plantain stems and mark it with θel jīḍu:r. They place a bunch of bananas, a pair of eggs, flowers and sweets on that Dōḅa: and keep it under the C<sup>h</sup>a:θi. Another series of songs and dances are performed. They also light some lamps and incense sticks to pray. Finally the devotee lifts the Dōḅa: on her head and carries it to the

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<sup>6</sup> A wooden stool which symbolises the seat of me:ce:ni

<sup>7</sup> tsa:l is the unhusked rice which, apart from cooking, is also used in many rituals.

<sup>8</sup> Bish can be literally translated as poison. The Bish songs refer to those which cannot be sung or heard in public because of their contents which mostly discusses nudity and conjugal relationships.

temple pond/lake. The other women in *ḡol* also accompany her, and one of them hold the *C<sup>h</sup>a:θi*. The *ma:reja:ni* prays to the sun god and immerses the *Dōṅa:* in the water and takes a dip in the pond. The flowers and rice bag on the *C<sup>h</sup>a:θi* are also immersed in water. The *C<sup>h</sup>a:θi* is washed. Finally they return to the ground where the entire community sits in a circle and have their meal.



Pic 9. *Me:ce:ni*'s *C<sup>h</sup>a:θi* with *tsa:l* or rice tied in a cloth





Pic 10: Me:ce:ni gəl led by Budheswari Debi from Nirendrapur village



Pic 11: Visiting the ga:ram θʰa:n with Me:ce:ni's Cʰa:θi



Pic 12: Me:ce:ni's C<sup>h</sup>a:θi positioned above a pī:ti





Pic 13: Offering  $\theta el \text{ } \tilde{J}du:r$  to Me:ce:ni's C<sup>h</sup>a:θi





Pic 14: The bamboo stick representing  $\Sigma i:b$





Pic 15: Performance of Me:ce:ni songs and dances during M:ce:ni k<sup>h</sup>ela:



Pic 16: M:ce:ni k<sup>h</sup>ela: in Nirendrapur village





Pic 17: M:ce:ni k<sup>h</sup>ela: in Dakshin Mouamari village led by Dinobala Debi



Pic 18: Making of Dõᅇja:





Pic 19: Offering eggs, aṭṭija kōla, ḡupa:ri in Dõḡa:



Pic 20: A complete Dõḡa:





Pic 21: Emersion of Dõḥa: in water



Pic 22: Taking a holy bath after emersing the Dõḥa: in pond



Pic 23: Community lunch after completion of the ritual

### 2.1.2. P̄ncɔ pu:ja:

P̄ncɔɖebθa pu:ja: or P̄ncɔ̄pu:ja: is performed a few days after immersion of Me:ce:ni. This is basically offering prayers to four other deities along with Me:ce:ni and they are Ku:cuŋi, ɖʰɔla, Na:tki and Σi:b. On this day, the ma:reja:ni invites a priest or ɖe:vʃi to perform the pu:ja: in her house. The ɖe:vʃi first worships Binɖa ɖebi and other household deities. Binɖa ɖebi is another name for ʈulʃi or Basil plant. Then the priest, along with Ma:rejani and other villagers proceed to worship the deities in village θʰa:ns<sup>9</sup>. It has been observed during the field work in Niredrapur village, they first visit Σonna:ʃi Baba's θʰa:n. It consists of five deities namely, kʰu:qʃija, ʃɔθθɔpi:r,

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<sup>9</sup>θʰa:n is a traditional Rajbanshi alter where the stones or clay mounds representing their deities are kept. Usually θʰa:ns are of two types: a village tha:n and a household tha:n. Household θʰa:ns are built within the courtyard of the house, in an open space and guarded by bamboo fences. Village tha:ns or ga:ram θʰa:n is owned by the entire community or the entire village. The clay mounds or stones of various deities will be placed together in the middle of a field or non-farmland and the deities will be worshipped in ga:ram θʰa:n only on special occasions.

Kāli, Σonna:ʃi and Θulʃi. Among them, only Σonna:ʃi and Kāli have idols made of clay. Two stone mounds represent K<sup>h</sup>u:qʃiʃa and Σoθoʃpi:r, and on the other hand, Θulʃi plant itself represents the deity in the above mentioned θ<sup>h</sup>a:n. The priest offers beaten rice, fruits and sweets in a plantain leaves or plantain stems to each deity (Ref. Pic 31). He takes water and flowers in his hand and chants some mənθrəs, which are inaudible to rest of the people present in the venue. First he sprinkles the water on these deities and then offers flowers to them. Then he performs an a:rθi with a Cəŋot (Ref. Pic 37). In the second θ<sup>h</sup>a:n, the deities worshipped, Jalpesh, ʃonna:ʃi, Qowʃpi:r, Peθθani, and Kāli, are in the form of stones, except for Peθθani which is signified by an adjacent pond. Same ritual process is followed in the second θ<sup>h</sup>a:n and then the priest returns to the venue of actual Pəncə pu:ʃa:. In a separate məndəp constructed outside the house, the priest places offerings for the five gods (Pəncəḍebθa). The offerings consist of a bunch of bananas, a pair of beetle nuts, beetle leaves, flowers, and sweets on a plantain leaf. Unlike the worshipping of deities in village θ<sup>h</sup>a:ns, the worship of Pəncəḍebθa is not offered to any idol. A pair of black wooden staffs or sticks are needed for this pu:ʃa:. One of them is shorter in length and pointed at one edge. The priest holds both of them in his left hand, purifies a small portion of soil with flower and water and pours some water on them from a conch shell with his right hand. He digs the smaller stick on the purified area and keeps the longer stick aside. During this entire process he continuously chants mənθrəs. He forms a triangular structure by thrusting three pieces of bamboo stems in the smaller stick (Ref. Pic 44). This becomes the symbol of Pəncəḍebθa:. He sprinkles some rice grains and flowers on this structure. He takes a tub of flowers and scatter them on each of the offerings and lights some incense sticks and performs an a:rθi. This entire process can be termed as the initiation rite for the deities. Next begins the initiation right of the priest where he is given a new shawl to put on his body. He takes a large piece of plantain leaf, keeps it in the middle and takes some rice

grains in his hand. He touches the ceiling of the mōndōp with the rice grains, chanting mōnθrōs and sprinkling them on corners of the plantain leaf. This arrangement is made to form a sacred seat for the priest in the mōndōp. Then he rubs the rest of the rice in his left hand with his right palm and sprinkles some of them on his own body, keeps some of them in right corner of his Dhoti, and drops a few more on the triangular structure. Meanwhile, the ma:reja:ni places the c<sup>h</sup>a:θi of Θi:sθa buri decorated with flowers outside the mōndōp of Pōncōḍebθa:. Ma:reja:ni and other women devotees also make a dōṇja: with plantain stems and keep a bunch of bananas along with a pair of beetle nits and two pairs of eggs. They place this dōṇja: under Θi:sθa buri's c<sup>h</sup>a:θi. In a separate plate, they put sweets and rice flakes, and a bowl of milk. They also keep a pair of hens in a bamboo cage near the c<sup>h</sup>a:θi. After the pu:ja: gets over, these hens are released. This process of releasing hens is called Tsōkkuḍa:n. The Ḍōḥika:ri or the priest who performs the worship uses a black cane to complete the ritual. While performing the ritual, he is said to be possessed with the divine spirit when he starts shaking his head holding the cane. The devotees address their problems to the Ḍōḥika:ri, who then offers solutions to the problems, whether it is related to a disease or family-problem or child-birth etc, on behalf of the deity and also offers them a pinch of soil and flowers as prōḥa:ḍ. The devotees consume that pinch of soil considering it as the blessing of the God. While giving solutions to the problems, the priest addresses the devotees as “B<sup>h</sup>ōkθō” (O devotee) and uses slang languages in loud voice. After the pu:ja: is performed, the women again sing Me:ce:ni songs and dance with the chati. They immerse the Dōṇja: in a local pond and wash the chati, take bath and return to the venue of the pu:ja:. All the devotees assemble and have a community lunch.



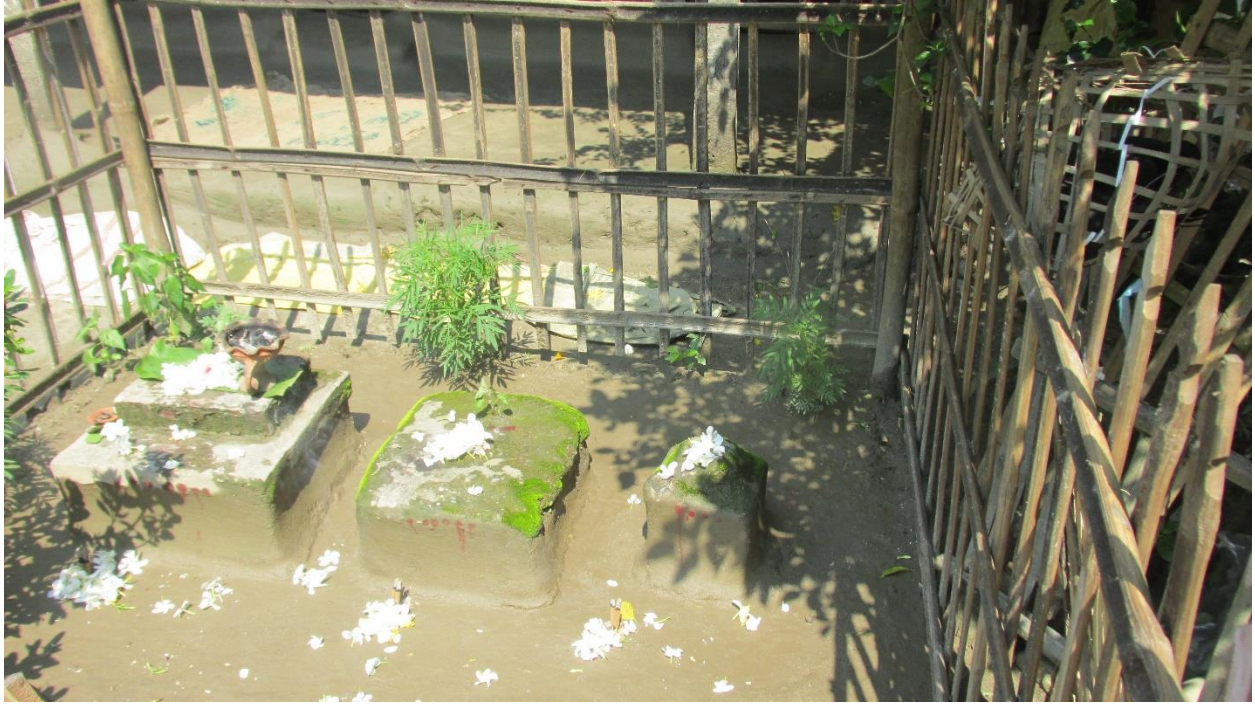


Pic 24: Worshipping of deities in the household  $\theta^{\text{ha:n}}$



Pic 25: ma:reja:ni Budheswari debi helps the  $\text{de:v}\text{\AA}$  to conduct the pu:ja: at her home





Pic 26: After the completion of pu:ja: at household 0<sup>h</sup>a:n



Pic 27: A pair of hens kept in a bamboo cage for the pu:ja:



Pic 28: Məndəp constructed for conducting the Pəncəpu:ja:





Pic 29: A concrete temple of Radha-Krishna in Nirendrapur village



Pic 30:  $\theta^h$ a:n of  $\Sigma$ onna:fi Baba





Pic 31: Thaan of Oulfi



Pic 32: Sonna:ṣi and Oulṣi in ga:ram θ<sup>h</sup>a:n





Pic 33: Ȯa:n of Kālī





Pic 34:  $\theta^{\text{h}}\text{a:n}$  of  $\Sigma\text{i:b}$  on one side of  $\text{ga:ram } \theta^{\text{h}}\text{a:n}$





Pic 35: 0<sup>h</sup>a:n of Ku:gfija and Σο00οpi:r





Pic 36: ʘʰa:n of Qəwɟpi:n





Pic 37: Priest performing a:ɪθi with a Cəŋət θ<sup>h</sup>a:n of Jalpesh and Kāli





Pic 38:  $\theta^{\text{h}}_{\text{a:n}}$  of  $\Sigma_{\text{onna:}\text{fi}}$





Pic 39: 0<sup>h</sup>a:n of Pe00ani





Pic 40: M:ce:ni's C<sup>h</sup>a:ṭhi and other ingredients of Pōncō Puṛjā: arranged in mōndōp



Pic 41: āṭija kola and fupa:ri arranged on plantain leaves





Pic 42: Dõŋa: and a pair of hens kept under M:ce:ni's C<sup>h</sup>a:θi



Pic 43: bəθa:ʃa:, ãt̪ija kɔla, and eggs marked with θel ʃiḡu:r





Pic 44: Triangular structure made of bamboo stems symbolising Pōncō ḡebṡa:



Pic 45: Oḍḥika:ri covering his mouth while uttering the monṡrō





Pic 46: Rubbing the tsa:l or rice grains in palms



Pic 47: Chanting the mənθrəs of worshipping





Pic 48: Performing a:100i



Pic 49: Completion of a.ṛṇi





Pic 50: The process of shaking head rapidly and getting possessed by the divine spirit



Pic 51: Oðhika:ri addressing the problems of devotees





Pic 52: Dhikari offering prasad to the devotees



Pic 53: Blessing made by the Dhikari using a conch





Pic 54: a:ɽθi of Me:ce:ni's C<sup>h</sup>a:θi by the ɔðhika:ri



Pic 55: Venerating to Me:ce:ni's C<sup>h</sup>a:θi





Pic 56: Performance of Me:ce:ni songs and dances by Rajbanshi children



Pic 57: Carrying the C'ha:θi and Dõṇa: by Me:ce:ni ḡol



Pic 58: Emersion of Dōṇa: in a local pond

### 2.1.3 Bifuwa

Bijūwa is celebrated on the last day of *ṭṣoiṭrō* month in a Bengali calendar. The Rajbangshis, on this particular day, clean their houses thoroughly. The utensils, tools and other appliances in the household are washed and cleaned on that day. The guardian deity is worshipped in each household either by the residents themselves or by the local priest, known as the *Ṭḍhika:ri*.

The household deities in Rajbanshi community are located in an open space within the boundary of the house and that space is demarcated by a slightly elevated area built with clay. This sacred space is often bordered by wooden hedge or surrounded by some small plants. The deities are constructed not in the form of idols but in the shape of clay or soil mounds or round stones. Each mound signifies a deity, be it Σi:b, Bɪʃhəhəɪ, Kāli, or Ɔi:sθaburi. This is like a primary small temple present in every Rajbanshi house. On bɪfuwa, the temple place is cleaned and all the deities are offered flowers. A semi-liquid mixture of θel ʃɪdu:r is made and all the deities are marked with

it. Some household items like utensils and other tools are also marked with it. Some fruits like banana or seasonal fruits or sweets are offered to the deities in a plantain leaf. One of the notable features of this ritual is the practice of tying peeled garlicks and onions on a bamboo stick and implanting the stick on the ground. It can also be tied to the *Θulfi* or basil plant within the temple. This bunch of garlic and onion is called *dʒʰu:ɖi* and each *dʒʰu:ɖi* contains four to five garlicks and onions. Several *dʒʰu:ɖis* are made on that day and tied to the ceiling or wall of almost each room of the house, including the kitchen, barn, cow-shed, and bedroom. Apart from garlic and onions, there are certain leaves and herbs like *bi:sti*, *gəŋjayi*, *pa:nimuθari* etc. are also tied to the rooms.

On the day of *Bifuwa*, the *Rajbanshis* avoid eating rice during lunch. Instead they practice the eating of *bʰajabʰuʒa*. The *bʰajabʰuʒa* is made of beaten-rice, grams, peas, *ma:ʃkəlai*, moong, lentils fried in oil or ghee. The children follow the practice of gathering in a group and hunting on this day. Earlier the hunted animal was sacrificed and feasted upon but nowadays the animal or the bird is released after being trapped. The *Rajbanshis* prepare rice at night and some leftover rice are kept to be eaten on the next day, i.e the first day of the New Year. The phrase used for this practice is called *‘tʃəiθrer ponθa bəiʃa:ke kʰa:y*, which literally means “eating the stale rice of month *Ctʃəiθrə* in the month of *Bəiʃa:k*”.





Pic 59: Household  $\theta^{\text{ha:n}}$  worshipped on the day of Bifuwa



Pic 60: Dʒʰu:q̣i made of onions and garlics



Pic 6: pa:nimuθari leaf





Pic 62: Bi:sti leaf





Pic 63: gongjayi leaf



Pic 64: Bhajabhaja

#### 2.1.4 K<sup>h</sup>aṭam

The word k<sup>h</sup>aṭam can be associated with the Bengali word ‘K<sup>h</sup>aṭamṁ’ which means framework. K<sup>h</sup>aṭam puṇja: is worshipping the hand-made structures of epic characters like Śiḥb, Kālī, Pandavas and others. made by the Rajbangshis and it is usually performed on the day of Dṛomaḥi, i.e, the last day of Cṭṣaiṭhṛ. Each K<sup>h</sup>aṭam will try to represent a story that can be related to the ancient epics like Mahabharata or Ramayana. There are various types of K<sup>h</sup>aṭams, for instance Duli-K<sup>h</sup>aṭam, gaḥi-K<sup>h</sup>aṭam, Manuḥ-K<sup>h</sup>aṭam etc. Duli-K<sup>h</sup>aṭams are made of wood or bamboo sticks. gaḥi-K<sup>h</sup>aṭams are the vehicles which carries some structures. Manuḥ-K<sup>h</sup>aṭams are human beings disguised as the epic characters or Gods/ Goddesses. Girls or women do not take part in this ritual and for the female characters, men usually cross-dress and perform. This performance is actually a procession of all the K<sup>h</sup>aṭams in the village streets where rest of the villagers assemble and watch their silent acts.

This pu:ja: can be done as an intentional vow, like a prayer for new offspring, or as a thanksgiving ritual. The person who is offering the pu:ja: is called ‘ma:reja’<sup>10</sup>. He intakes only vegetarian food on the day of the ritual. The money is collected from the entire village or neighbourhood. The madeya employs the people who will construct the K<sup>h</sup>aṭams. The researcher has been able follow the narratives of one Duli-kāṭhām and one Manuḥ-K<sup>h</sup>aṭam. The Duli-K<sup>h</sup>aṭam represented characters from Mahabharatha like Pandavas, horse, bear and Dronacharya. The bamboo structures were covered and glued with newspapers and paintings were made on them. A Ḍe:vḥi, Rajbangshi priest, worships all the structures. As per the local informers, the Ḍe:vḥis can be of two types: Pa:tḍai and Ka:nṭulḥi. Once the pu:ja: is conducted the K<sup>h</sup>aṭam is taken through the streets for mime display. The K<sup>h</sup>aṭam pu:ja: involves very little ingredients and performances. The K<sup>h</sup>aṭams are offered flowers, fruits and sweets. The priest burns some incense sticks and resins. For Manuḥ-K<sup>h</sup>aṭams, the masks worn by the performers are worshipped. A pair of pigeons are released after the pu:ja: is done. In the mime display the K<sup>h</sup>aṭams are taken around the village streets where people assemble to watch them.

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<sup>10</sup> A ma:reja is a person who vows a ritual to a deity. Usually a mareya is the prime devotee who takes the responsibility of conducting the ritual. He is joined by his family members or neighbours when the ritual takes place.





Pic 65: Duli- K<sup>h</sup>aṭam



Pic 66: Duli- K<sup>h</sup>aṭams representing Pandavas





Pic 67: Making of Duli- K<sup>h</sup>atam



Pic 68: Pigeons caught for the K<sup>h</sup>aṭam puṛja:





Pic 69: Masks used in K<sup>h</sup>atams



Pic 70: Worshipping of masks used in K<sup>h</sup>atams





Pic 71: Manuf- K<sup>h</sup>aṭam representing Śi:b



Pic 72: Manuf- K<sup>h</sup>aṭam representing Kālī





Pic 73: Man disguised in Duli- Khatam



Pic 74: Procession of Pandavas as Duli- Kḥaṭam



Pic 75: Śi:b and Kāli in Ga:ri- Kḥaṭam





Pic 76: Depiction of Ramayana in Ga:ri- Khatam

### 2.1.5 Bōnni Puṛa:

It is another name for gōṅga puṛa: among the people of Jalpaiguri district. This information is collected from the villagers of Dokkhin Mouamari. The women of the village gather near a river where they take bath. After bathing, they take a plantain leaves and place pa:n, ṣupa:ri, bəθa:ṣa: and some flowers on each of those leaves and float them in the river. The entire procedure is accompanied by uluḍʰoni and ṣonkoḍʰoni. Following this, they perform a puṛa: near a Ṭulṣi plant on the bank of the river which is supervised by a Brahmin priest. After this, the priest and the women gather near an idol of gōṅgaḍebi which is in the human form and one more puṛa: is performed there. Next to the idol, a Ṭulṣi plant is kept. A pair of plantain stems are cut into cylindrical shapes and kept in a vertical position in front of the idol. In two of the longer stems, plates consisting of bōtshas are kept. In the shorter stems, a pair of ma:tir prōḍip are placed on top of them and lighted. In the centre, a ḡḇṭ, i.e, an earthen pot, consisting of coconut is kept. A dozen of āṭṭja kōla is also offered. Apart from this, a plate of nōibeḍḍo and several vessels of fruits and other sweets are also offered to the deity. The priest performs an act of invoking the deity while four women hold a piece of cloth to separate the rest of the crowd from seeing it. Then he performs an a:ṛoḥi with incense sticks, earthen lamps, conch shell, and a fan. After a:ṛoḥi a small ṛōḡḡo is executed. The entire puṛa: is completed as the devotees offer a token of currency to the priest and the fruits and sweets are distributed among the crowds.





Pic 77: Devotees gathered near a river for Bonni puja:



Pic 78: Worshipping Oulfi plant in the bank of river





Pic 79: The priest instructing the devotees



Pic 80: Pa:n, bəθa:ʃa and other items kept on a plantain leaf





Pic 81: A devotee praying to the Oulsi plant





Pic 82: Praying to the river during the puja:





Pic 83: Floating the offerings in river water by the devotees



Pic 84: A Rajbanshi child performing prana:m to the priest





Pic 85: Oulfi plant which has been worshipped in the bank of the river





Pic 86: Prōṣaḍḍ of the puja: offered by the priest



Pic 87: Plantain stems into cylindrical shapes kept in front of idol





Pic 88: Coconut on a red ghot placed at the centre





Pic 89: Invoking the Goddess



Pic 90: a:᳚᳚᳚ performed before the idol of ᳚᳚᳚᳚᳚᳚





Pic 91: gongadebi and Oulji plant are worshipped together



Pic 92: Demarcating the space for joggō





Pic 93: Assembling of pa:tkʰəʈi for ʒəggə



Pic 94: Performing the ʒəggə





Pic 95: Completion of ꠘꠗꠗꠗ

### 2.1.6 ꠘꠗꠗꠗ ꠘꠗꠗꠗ :

ꠘꠗꠗꠗ ꠘꠗꠗꠗ is another name for worshipping the Sun-God. It is performed during the month of Karṭik. The time is usually early morning before the sun rises or in the evening before it sets. The devotees are women and priests are not required to conduct the ꠘꠗꠗꠗ. For this ꠘꠗꠗꠗ, a duck is required and it is tied and kept separately. A Kula is placed in the devotee's courtyard. She faces the sun and lights a ꠘꠗꠗꠗ. A dozen of ꠗꠗꠗ ꠗꠗ is placed in the Kula along with some flowers on a plantain leaf. A ꠗꠗꠗꠗ and few incense sticks are lit in the middle of the Kula. A ꠗꠗꠗ ꠗꠗꠗ is also lit in the kula. An offering of ꠗꠗꠗꠗ is made in three small pieces of a plantain leaf. The devotee holds the duck by her left hand and brings it near the kula so as its head and a part of its body touches the kula. She sprinkles some holy water on its head and body with her right hand. While she does that, the rest of the women make Uluꠗꠗꠗ. Following this, she sets the duck free and one of the family member catches it for feasting on it later. She touches the ground

with both her hand and does *pr̥na:m* thrice and then goes to touch the feet of an elderly woman in the venue. Then she holds the *kula* and touches it to her head while standing and keeps it back on the ground. This act is repeated twice after which she prostrates on the ground and pushes her head to the *kula* twice. This completes the *pu:ja:* and the offerings are served.



Pic 96: *aṭṭija kola* placed in the *Kula*





Pic 97: Lighting of ḍʰu:nuçi



Pic 98: Duck tied for sacrifice





Pic 99: Preparing the ingredients for Ðʰərɔm Puja:



Pic 100: Bathing the duck





Pic 101: Untying the rope from the duck's leg



Pic 102: Sprinkling holy water on the duck





Pic103: Setting the duck free



Pic 104: Lifting the Kula and praying to the Sun-God or Ðʰorom tʰa:kur





Pic 105: Performing prana:m to an elderly woman



Pic 106: Performing prana:m to Dhorom th'a:kur

## 2.1.7 A:ka:jh Ba:0i

A:ka:ʃh Ba:θi<sup>11</sup> is a practice of lighting a prōḍip on top of a bamboo tree in the evening time. This is followed in the entire month of karθik and it is performed within the household temple space. Usually, the prōḍip is kept in an earthen pot and the pot is hung from the tree with a long rope. On the first day of ɔgra:ʃon, the devotee removes the earthen pot from the bamboo tree. The idea of a:ka:ʃh ba:θi is to pray to the deity called A:ka:ʃhka:muri, who is bestowed with the power to cure epilepsy.



Pic 107: Forming the wicks of ma:tir prōḍips

<sup>11</sup> a:ka:ʃh in Rajbanshi language refers to sky, and ba:θi refers to lamp. Thus, a literal translation of a:ka:ʃh ba:θi is sky-lamp. It is hung at a height with the belief that it will be closer to the a:ka:ʃhka:muri deity in the heaven.





Pic 108: Lighting the ma:tir prādips



Pic 109: Placing ma:tir prādips in household θ<sup>h</sup>a:ns





Pic 110: Keeping a ma:tir prōḍip in an earthen pot



Pic 111: Performing prōṇam to the deities in household ṭha:ns



Pic 112: Hanging the prōḍip in earthen pot on a tree



Pic 113: Pulling the rope to hold the pradhip at a height





Pic 114: A:ka:ʃh Ba:θi hung in the evening for praying to A:ka:ʃhka:muri



plantain leaf he prepares the *noibeððo*. He sets the fire with the help of some *pa:tkʰəʈis*, after which he takes a mango leaf and little *noibeððo* in his right hand, keeps a part of the *noibeððo* in a separate piece of plantain leaf in front of him, chants some *mənθrəs* and offers the rest to the fire. This act is repeated thrice and, in the meanwhile, women folk produces the *uluðʰəni*. After this, he sprinkles more flower on the fire and holds his upper garment by both the hands to cover his mouth and chant some *mənθrəs*. Then he bows towards the *θʰa:n* followed by praying to the *ʝəggə* and the sky. Next he rubs his hand with some water and this marks the end of the ritual. The process of offering *noibeððo* and mango leaf is repeated by one or more family members of the household afterwards. The fire of the *ʝəggə* is left to be extinguished on its own. The devotee serves *prəʃa:ɽ* to the guests.

*Bəɔma sa:nθiis* followed by *nōja: kʰəʈja:.* The women in Rajbanshi household cook and offer the first crops of the season to the deities. The crops include *ʃa:k* or green leafy vegetables and *tʰa:ku:r kʰəlai da:l*<sup>12</sup>. Once the food is cooked, the devotee places the food in seven separate *dōṇa:s*, five of which are kept on a *kula* along with a *ma:tir prəðip* and the rest of the two are left on the ground. The devotee sprinkles some holy water and flower on each of the *dōṇa:.* Then she prostrates in front of them. Following this, she takes the *kula* outside the house premises and keeps it in an open space, in this case, near a pond. She places the five *dōṇa:s* separately on the ground, keeping the *prəðip* in the centre. Then she returns to the house and takes the rest two *dōṇa:s* and places them on a *ṭsa:θa:l* and keeps another *prəðip* near them. The first five *dōṇa:s* are offered to *Pəncəḍebθa*, while the other two are offered to *məḥaba:i*<sup>13</sup>. The devotees who have kept fast during the entire

<sup>12</sup>*tʰa:ku:r kʰəlai da:l* is the Rajbanshi name for *ma:f kʰəlai* in Bengali. It is the unpolished version of black grams.

<sup>13</sup> The informants stated that *məḥaba:i* or *məḥaba:ik* is the local name for owl, who is also considered as the carrier of Goddess Lakshmi in Hinduism.



day have their first meal only after this and they feast on the new rice and other vegetables grown in their own farms.



Pic 115: Offering of *noibeððo* in *θ<sup>h</sup>a:n* and preparation ingredients for *ɟoɟɟo*



Pic 116: Offerings made on *joggo* by a devotee



Pic 117: fire of the *joggo* left to be extinguished





Pic 118: Leftovers of ညံ့ဂ္ဂံ kept for animals to feed on



Pic 119: Rice and နှံး offered in Nōja: K<sup>h</sup>ōja: by a devotee





Pic 120: Offering the food to animals



Pic 121: Offering food to Pəncədebθa in five dṣṇa:s



Pic 122: Offering food to mɔ́haba:.i



Pic 123: Rice and ʃa:k on plantain stem or dɔ́ŋa: on tsa:θa:l



Pic 124: Lighting of ma:tir prōḍip near the dōṇa:s on tsa:θa:l

### 2.1.9. Kāli Pu:ja:

Unlike the other rituals that we have already discussed, Kāli pu:ja: is celebrated not only by Rajbanshis but also mainstream Hindu communities in Bengal. However, Rajbanshis do not follow the idol worship in this pu:ja:. Instead, they offer their prayer to the θ<sup>h</sup>a:ns within their household θ<sup>h</sup>a:n. A pair of plantain trees are fixed on clay mounds in the courtyard near the θ<sup>h</sup>a:n. Both are joined in the middle by a small piece of bamboo. Small semi-circular rings made of bamboo sticks are fixed on the trees' stem to hold the prōḍips. These rings are called gussa: in Rajbanshi language. The two trees are symbols of their ancestors and the earthen lamps are lit in order to offer prayer for their souls' rest and peace. An ṁḍhika:ri performs a pu:ja: to the θ<sup>h</sup>a:ns by chanting some mōnθrō and offering flowers to the deities. Nōibeḍḍō is offered to the θ<sup>h</sup>a:ns, and in a separate plantain leaf, guwa pa:n is also offered.





Pic 125: Plantain trees fixed on clay mounds near the  $\theta^{\text{h}}\text{a:n}$



Pic 126: gussa: fixed on plantain stems



Pic 127: ꠘꠞhika:ri performs a pu:ja: to the ꠘa:ns



Pic 128: noibeꠞꠞ to the ꠘa:ns





Pic 129: Lighting of the ma:tir pradiip



Pic 130: Devotee performing pranam to his ancestors' souls





Pic 131: Devotee performing prana:m to his mother



Pic 132: Devotee performing prana:m to the adhika:ri

### 2.1.10 B<sup>h</sup>a:nda:ni Devi:

The θ<sup>h</sup>a:ns of B<sup>h</sup>a:nda:ni ḍebi, as observed by the researcher in the village of Dakkhin Ulludabri, comprise both idol and clay-mound. These two are named as Bṵṛṵ B<sup>h</sup>a:nda:ni and C<sup>h</sup>ṵṛṵ B<sup>h</sup>a:nda:ni respectively. The temple of Bṵṛṵ B<sup>h</sup>a:nda:ni is a well-built concrete construction while the θ<sup>h</sup>a:n of C<sup>h</sup>ṵṛṵ B<sup>h</sup>a:nda:ni is represented by a shady tree.

B<sup>h</sup>a:nda:ni pu:ja: is performed on the day after ḍṵṛṵmi θiθ<sup>h</sup>i of Ḍurḡa pu:ja:, i.e, on ekaḍṵṛṵ. According to the mareja, Bhabendranath Mallik, B<sup>h</sup>a:nda:ni is considered by the local people as an incarnation of Goddess Ḍurḡa. But instead of ten hands that Goddess Ḍurḡa possess, the B<sup>h</sup>a:nda:ni ḍebi is represented by only two hands. The custom of sacrificing animals like goat or pigeon is still prevalent in this ritual. B<sup>h</sup>a:nda:ni pu:ja: is usually performed by a ḡe:vṣi, who fasts the entire day and eats only curd and flaked rice after the pu:ja: gets completed. The devotees pray to B<sup>h</sup>a:nda:ni and conveys their wishes through the priest. This is enacted by devotees offering fruits, sweets etc in a plate to the deity and the priest keeps a part of it in the temple and returns the rest. The devotee promises to pay back to the deity which he/she tells the priest and the priest says it aloud to the Goddess. He presents the devotee with prṵṣa:ḡ, i.e, some flowers, wood-apple leaves, rice grains, sweets etc. as a blessing from the alter which the devotee keeps under his/her bed or pillow for three days and each of those days eats a part of it before having anything else in the morning.

There are different names for this deity, Bṵnbibi or Bṵn Ḍurḡa or Bṵn Ḍebi. According to Ashok Biswas, the rituals on bṵn Ḍurḡa are conceptualized by centering the Gods or Goddesses or pir pimi of the forests. They include sacrificing hens, preparing ṣi:rni, and observing brṵṵṵs.



Pic 133: Idol of Boro Bhaṇḍaṇi in Dakshin Ulladabari



Pic 134: Ṭhaṇ of Boro Bhaṇḍaṇi in Dakshin Ulladabari





Pic 135:  $\theta^{\text{h}}\text{a:n}$  of  $\text{C}^{\text{h}}\text{o}\text{t}\text{o}$   $\text{B}^{\text{h}}\text{a:}\text{n}\text{d}\text{a:}\text{n}\text{i}$  in Dakshin Ulladabari



Pic 136:  $\theta^{\text{h}}\text{a:n}$  of  $\text{C}^{\text{h}}\text{o}\text{t}\text{o}$   $\text{B}^{\text{h}}\text{a:}\text{n}\text{d}\text{a:}\text{n}\text{i}$  does not have any idol

### 2.1.11. ja:θra Pu:ja::

ja:θra pu:ja: is performed on the novami- ḍṇṣṇmi θiθ<sup>hi</sup> of Ḍurga pu:ja:. Each Rajbanshi family cleans their houses and the objects in their house. They offer their prayer to the farming objects like axe, kula, etc. these articles are marked with θel jṇḍu:r to make them sacred. The deities of the kitchen are also offered prayer.

### 2.2.1 Significance of Rajbanshi Rituals: An Analysis

Each of the Rajbanshi rituals described reflect to the production of crops, reproduction of children and security of their community. In the Me:ce:ni ritual, the umbrella is their symbol of deity which they address as θi:sθa Buri or the river θi:sθa. According to Dr. Dipak Kumar Ray, a branch of θi:sθa is named as Mōraθi:sθa or Buriθi:sθa, and the term θi:sθa buri has probably originated from Buriθi:sθa (121). The word mōra in Bengali refers to “dead”, while, the word buri means “old”. The reference to this branch of θi:sθa is probably due to the shortage of water, therefore, signifying it as a dead river. As we read the description of Me:ce:ni ritual, we can see that the predominant symbol of the ritual is water. Dr. Ray also refers that folk songs and dances centering θi:sθa buri in Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar district are known as Meceni K<sup>h</sup>ela: and the same practiced in the planes of Darjeeling district is known as Bhedei kheli. According to Nirmalendu Bhowmick, the word ‘dei’ in Mech-Bodo language means water (Ray 121). A. Campbell in ‘Vocabulary of Mech language’ has mentioned water as ‘dfee’ (Campbell). On the other hand, Charu Chandra Sanyal writes, “The name ‘Bedei Kheli’ is probably on account of the time when Bhadoi (Aus or rain) paddy seeds are broadcast on the tilled land. In all probability the puja is done to have a good crop of Bhadoi (Aus)” (Sanyal, 138). Similarly, the word Meceni also have varying connotations. In Dr. Ray’s opinion, Meceni is combination of ‘Mech+Ni’, implying the folk tradition of Mech community (Ray 122). However, Girija Sankar Roy writes that a few generations ago, people who

lived on the banks of Mechi river, started worshipping it and associated a music festival along with it. In the later stages, the music festival turned into Meceni K<sup>h</sup>ela: and got associated with ̐i:s̐a buri pu:ja: (Roy 150-151). The word ‘k<sup>h</sup>ela:’ also has different meanings. In Bengali, this word implies a game or a sport. However, Nirmalendu Bhowmick writes that in North-Bengal, folk drama is named as ‘k<sup>h</sup>ela:’, ‘k<sup>h</sup>eli’, ‘k<sup>h</sup>ila:ni’ or ‘k<sup>h</sup>eil’ (Bhowmick 165). He has quoted Bimalendu Majumdar who suggests that the word ‘k<sup>h</sup>el’ means dance (Bhowmick 168). Therefore, from the phrase ‘Meceni k<sup>h</sup>ela:’, we can infer that it is a folk dance or folk performance associated with water.

The symbol of umbrella can also be read as a shelter to the people. As observed in the field, it plays the primary role in Meceni K<sup>h</sup>ela:. However, in the description of the same ritual by Sanyal, the primary ritual object is a Ḍālā, which acts as a symbol of ̐i:s̐a Buri. Its structure resembles a flower basket made of bamboo and consists of “sun-dried rice, flowers and a mixture of vermillion and mustard oil in a small earthen cup” (Sanyal 145). The umbrella plays only a secondary role here to cast shade upon the ḍālā when it is taken out for Meceni k<sup>h</sup>ela:. However, in the writings of Dr. Deepak Kumar Ray, we do not find any reference to the ḍālā. Instead, he mentions that the symbol of ̐i:s̐a buri is an umbrella made of bamboo (Ray 122). On the other hand, both ḍālā, as mentioned in Sanyal’s writing, and the cloth tied to the c<sup>h</sup>a:̐i, as observed by the researcher during field work, carry rice in it. Hence, the cloth probably is an improvised version of the ḍālā. Sanyal refers to installation of the ḍālā as ̐i:s̐a buri, and during the Me:ce:ni k<sup>h</sup>ela:, when a procession comes to a house, the ḍālā is placed on the wooden seat, and the chati is used to shade the ḍol (145). On the other hand, Deepak Kumar Ray states that the c<sup>h</sup>a:̐i itself is installed as ̐i:s̐a buri. The same is observed by the researcher as well. When the Me:ce:ni ḍol visits a house during k<sup>h</sup>ela:, they cover the pī:i with the umbrella and there is no sign of the ḍālā. The





possessed with the qualities and strength of *Θi:sθaburi*. If the priest gets possessed himself then he whips himself with cane or jumps around, followed listening to the worshippers' problems and offering them the solutions (Roy 154). The performance of the possessed priest, as observed by the researcher during field work, varies from both the descriptions given above. The possessed priest does not dance or whips himself, but shakes his head rapidly when the drums are being played.

While *Me:ce:ni K<sup>h</sup>ela:* and *Pñncōpu:ja:* are related to the symbol of water; *Bi:fuwa*, *Bōnni pu:ja:*, and *B<sup>h</sup>a:nda:ni* are related to the symbol of sacred plants. In *Bi:fuwa*, the practice of tying *dʒ<sup>h</sup>u:q̄i* consisting of onions and gralics, and hanging the leaves of *pa:nimuθari*, *bi:sti*, and *gōṇjayi* plants on the doors of Rajbanshi houses, indicate that they have the potential of safeguarding their houses from external threats. The above-mentioned leaves are also named by Rajbanshis as *bi:f* leaves, where *bi:f* implies poison. These leaves are not used in the temples. Girija Sankar Roy suggests that this practice is not only an attempt of resistance from Parasurama, but a subtle way of following agricultural customs. The *dʒ<sup>h</sup>u:q̄i* is probably an offering from the first Rabi-crop cultivated made by the farmers to the Gods and Goddesses. The leaves are believed to protect the house from ghosts or devils. Roy also mentions that the Rajbanshis of Goalpara region in Assam believe that these leaves will protect the house from snakes or other wild animals (96). This implies that the Rajbanshi community had a long time of association with forests and therefore, their rituals are also related to the challenges they received from the forests. The symbol of forests is also visible in their tradition of hunting. Hunting reinforces the concern of external threats they might have faced in their past. We can observe this aspect in the ritual description of *Bi:fuwa* given by Charu Chandra Sanyal:

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 male goes 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 Rajbanshi believe that the coming year would be bad for them. This spring hunt is gradually being abandoned due to restrictions imposed by the Forest Department of the Government and also due to the impact of the new civilization.(144)

The ritual of Biḥuwa can be seen as a transition of Rajbanshis from a hunter-gatherer community to an agrarian community. With the intervention of mainstream culture, this ritual is getting modified to conform to the modernized society. Similarly, the process of B<sup>h</sup>a:nda:ni pu:ḡa: also indicates such transition. As mentioned before, the C<sup>h</sup>ōṭō B<sup>h</sup>a:nda:ni does not have any idol and her Ṫ<sup>h</sup>a:n is represented by a tree while the bōṭō B<sup>h</sup>a:nda:ni is embodied as an idol and there is a temple dedicated to her. According to Sanyal, B<sup>h</sup>a:nda:ni is also known as dang dhari mao (ḍāṇ ḍōṭi mǎo), who has fought the demons with a weapon named dang (ḍāṇ) and once the fight was over, transformed herself into a simple daughter or mao (*mǎo*). The deity rode on a tiger to return to her home in Kailash, but over the years, the image of tiger has been replaced by lion, and the images of Lakshmi, Saraswati, Kartik and Ganesh have been added (142). This change is seen only in the practice of idolatry, and it clearly shows the influence of mainstream Hinduism. Sanyal refers to another story of B<sup>h</sup>a:nda:ni being an incarnation of mother earth, bestowed with the power of providing good crops to the farmers (142). On the other hand, Girija Shankar Roy does not agree with the name ḍāṇ ḍōṭi mǎo as another name of B<sup>h</sup>a:nda:ni that has been proposed by Sanyal.



He suggests that the name B<sup>h</sup>a:nda:ni may have some association with the word b<sup>h</sup>a:ndi, meaning bear in Rajbanshi language, and therefore, the deity is worshipped to acquire protection from wild animals (65-67).

Ð<sup>h</sup>orom pu:ja:, like Me:ce:ni pu:ja:, is also practiced only by women in Rajbanshi community. The Rajbanshi women believe that when they take bath, their naked body becomes visible to Sun-god or Ð<sup>h</sup>orom thakur. This may infuriate the deity and the repercussion may lead them to blindness or even infertility. Hence, to please him they perform this pu:ja: and pray for fertility. In this pu:ja:, we can find the usage of eggs, which again signifies the concept of fertility. Both Sanyal and Roy mention that this pu:ja: is celebrated in the month of Baisakh, and it is performed on any Sunday. But the researcher witnessed this pu:ja: in the month of Karθik. Sanyal mentions that goats or ducks are offered to the deity but they are let off without killing (139). Roy also mentions that the animal offered to the deity is not sacrificed in the pu:ja:, but any neighbour or a person who is not a relative of the worshipper can seize the offered animal, kill it and distribute the meat. The researcher has also observed that the offered duck had been released by the worshipper and seized by one of the neighbours. Roy refers to the release of the animal as an old tradition of “dhormer name shaanr chhara”<sup>15</sup> existing in Bengal (Roy 165). Both Sanyal and Roy have referred that Ð<sup>h</sup>orom pu:ja: is also considered as a worship of Σi:b instead of Sun. Roy mentions that the songs of Ð<sup>h</sup>orom puja: largely reflect praising for Σi:b. The influence of Σi:b is probably due to the agricultural profession of the community.

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<sup>15</sup> The literal translation of this phrase is leaving the bull in the name of religion. The Jhāṛ or bull is replaced by goat or duck in the context of Dhorom puja. The animal which is offered to deity, but not sacrificed, becomes a liability.

The ritual of Nōja: k<sup>h</sup>ōja: celebrates the cultivation of ħēvmθi ð<sup>h</sup>ən<sup>16</sup> and other k<sup>h</sup>ari:f crops like thakur kolai daal, different types of shaak. By the description of the ritual itself, it is very evident that it is an agrarian festival. An interesting part of this ritual is offering a part of new crops to the animals and birds in the surroundings. As per the observations of the researcher, the devotee leaves food in five dōṇa:s near a pond next to her household intended for dogs or jackals, even though the village where the informant lived has no trace of jackals nearby. The same trait has been mentioned in the writings of Roy, in which he refers to jackals as ʃi:jal<sup>h</sup>a:kur. According to him, the offering to Shiyalthakur suggests that the Rajbanshis considered jackals as harmful animals, responsible for destroying the crops and also killing the pet animals. The mention of a deity named Mōḥaba:ik is also found in his writing, though he has not explained the identity of mōḥaba:ik (Roy 118-119). The researcher has observed during her field work that the word mōḥaba:ik has become mōḥaba:i when spoken by the informants. They told that mōḥaba:i is the local name given to “owl”. The reference of mōḥaba:i and ʃi:jal suggest that the forests used to be closer to the habitation of Rajbanshis.

### 2.2.2 Analysis of Sacred Space

Creating a sacred space engages the idea of making a new boundary within the regular space that may not be sacred in the previous occasion. This is visible in most of the Rajbanshi rituals which takes place outside the household temples, mostly in courtyards. Particularly, in the case-studies of Me:ce:ni, Ð<sup>h</sup>orəm-pu:ja:, Bə:oma sa:nθi, Nōja: k<sup>h</sup>ōja: and Kāli pu:ja:, this additional sacred space is segregated by wiping the floor.

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<sup>16</sup> As per the informants, Aman ð<sup>h</sup>ən is called ħēvmθi ð<sup>h</sup>ən in Rajbanshi language. Aman ð<sup>h</sup>ən is “a term used in Bangladesh and East India for lowland rice grown in the wet season during June to November”. ([www.rkmp.co.in/research-domain/rice-vocs/aman-paddy](http://www.rkmp.co.in/research-domain/rice-vocs/aman-paddy))

What is interesting to observe in this space is how common objects are transformed into holy entities by marking them with vermillion paste. This transformation separates them from the other items which are present not only outside but also within the boundaries of sacred space but do not correspond to the equal magnitude of purity. This reflects the fact that the concept of sacredness or purity itself is a relative term. The transition or the liminal phase is also multiple as a result. For example, in Bōnni pu:ja:, Nōja: kʰṣja:, Bōṛoma sa:nṯi and Me:ce:ni, we can observe how different sacred spaces are being created by demarcating the space for ritual, space for the objects to be worshipped, and the space to be occupied by the priests.

The observation of the priest is important in each of them because the shift between human and super-natural relations is being created. The priest is separated not only in terms of space but also as a body or an entity which is bestowed with super-natural power, particularly in Pōncōpu:ja:. The devotees, though, try to purify themselves in the time of the ritual, but the difference between the priest and the devotee is established by the factors like assimilation of knowledge and the caste they are born into. The tying of dʒʰu:ḍi on Bifuwa is also an attempt of imparting the ordinary items with additional capability of protecting the household from external perils. The narrative behind tying of dʒʰu:ḍi travels behind the myth of Parashurama, where the converted Rajbanshis believe that their Kshatriya community had encountered the slaughter of Parasurama and as a defence against him, the tying of garlic and jute sticks in entrances will safeguard the house and its people.

It can be noticed that the household temples are always built in the courtyard or an open space surrounded by sacred plants, like Өulfi. They are mostly surrounded by wooden fences, and the deities are also in form of clay mounds or stones. The absence of a human figure for the deities in Rajbanshi culture suggests the primitive form of nature worship. In Bifuwa particularly, we can



observe a revival of relationship between the community and the local flora and fauna. The leaves of bi:sti, gəŋjayi, pa:nimuθari establish a close association between Rajbanshis and the local herbs, while the act of hunting by children reminds how they were dependent on wild animals in their past for survival.

Even though modernization has affected the rituals, but it is interesting to notice that the former and the present practices of rituals take place side by side within this community. While idolatry is rapidly replacing the clay mounds, yet a symbolic implementation of any of the rituals is also performed. For example, Bōnni pu:ja: involves the idol-worship, but the primary ritual is observed in the bank of the river near a Өulfi plant, and even in the venue of idol-worship, a small plant of Өulfi is kept. Similarly, metal plates for offerings are kept side by side with dōŋa:. The offering of first crops on Nōja: khōja: reflects the function of paying back to nature in both primeval and civilized form. The uncooked food offered in the θ<sup>h</sup>a:ns represent the primitive and simultaneously, the offering of cooked food to the birds and animals signify how civilization has not been able to erase their cultural memory. The animal sacrifices in Ө<sup>h</sup>ōrōm pu:ja: or the offering of eggs in Me:ce:ni indicate the plea for fertility to the super-natural power. Even the prayers for good health are also associated with the super-nature by using nature as a medium, as observed in prayers to Aakashkamuri. The forefathers are also venerated by lighting lamps in front of the structure made with plantain trees. Hence the sacred space defined within or outside the household are entitled for serving multiple purposes in day-to-day lives. The idea of household temples made of bamboo fences are rapidly being replaced by cemented temples covered on the top and clay-mounds are being replaced by idols having human figures. The transformation in the sacred space is more structural in terms of their physical appearances. With the inclusion of idolatry, the generalized form of a deity in the shape of clay-θ<sup>h</sup>a:ns are disappearing. Therefore, the worshippers' minds are

imagining the deities in human forms, figures or shapes and simultaneously the forms of clay-mounds, open temples, bamboo-fenced household temples and sacred-trees are slowly getting eliminated.

### **2.3 Myth Ritualization:**

The mythical stories in this project would be discussed from the theoretical point of view of Jane Harrison and S. H. Hooke. The myths here are the continuous events in the rituals. The magical intent and potency of a myth, as observed by Harrison, can be determined by the narrative it offers to us (Segal 72). Further, in this section, Gregory Negy's concept of myth being the "verbal aspect of ritual" and ritual being the "notional aspect of myth" (Segal 72) will be read by observing the data.

The reading of the ritual along with Me:ce:ni songs correspond to Smith's idea of myth being secondary to the ritual. However, the myth doesn't presuppose the ritual but acts as a supplement to the narrative. In Dr. Charu Chandra Sanyal's *The Rajbansis of North Bengal*, it has been mentioned that Śi:b left Kailasa to live with the Mech women. Knowing this, his two wives Ganga and Parvati disguised themselves as Mech women and started living with him in a Mech village in Jalpaiguri. Later on Ganga-Parvati were called as Ōi:sṭha buri and the ritual was termed as Me:ce:ni (137). What connects the ritual and the myth here is the process of imagining a deity returning to people. This story can be connected to the plight of a married woman returning to her father's house. In this light, Me:ce:ni's identity shifts from a divine being to a humane one. The identity of Σṓṭi also does not remain intact in the Me:ce:ni song and shifts to that of both Ḍurga and Parvati. Therefore, the ritual itself acts as a translation to convey the base story in Rajbanshi culture. Ḍurga, Parvati, Σṓṭi, and Me:ce:ni are four different mythic characters carrying a story of their own, but at the same time, the base story of a married woman returning to her house remains intact.

However, while practicing the Me:ce:ni ritual, the identity of Me:ce:ni is getting substituted and this metonymical substitution indicates the assimilation of mainstream cultures.

The ritual of B<sup>h</sup>a:nda:ni has been related to the myth of Ārḡa, who on her way back from her father's house to Kailasa, met the shepherds in the jungle. They requested the deity to spend one night there. Ārḡa and her children, who were riding on a tiger, decided to stay back and take rest for a day. On the following day, the shepherds spent the entire day worshipping Ārḡa, and at the end of the day, she started her journey to Kailasa again. Now this narrative and the ritual can be narrowed down to the base and super-structure form. The protagonist of the story is a woman, married, and she has super-natural powers which enables her to tame a tiger. Her strength to protect herself and her children amidst of a jungle awakens a sense of veneration which instigates the shepherds to celebrate her as the owner of the forest resources and thereby, give her the name of bōnbibi or bōn Ārḡa. The offering of goat or pigeon on B<sup>h</sup>a:nda:ni pu:ḡa:, therefore, is only a sign of acknowledging the power of B<sup>h</sup>a:nda:ni.

#### **2.4 Liminal spaces in Rajbanshi rituals:**

The liminal spaces in rituals are exceptionally significant owing to the transition that occurs in the ritual space as well as in the individuals. The act of crossing the borders or moving into a new phase requires an act of separation from the previous one and incorporation into the new one. The intermediate phase or the liminal phase can be seen as an equivalent of translation process, because in this phase the limitation of the previous stage is delimited and the potential of adding new meaning becomes possible. For example, in the story of B<sup>h</sup>a:nda:ni, the jungle consists of the liminal space and the period of Dashami consists of the liminal time frame. This is perceived as liminality because, the transition takes place from civilized location to the intermediate forest land and the act of incorporation happens on the following day when they worship the deity as one of



their own goddesses. The veneration of a mainstream goddess by the shepherds is not a well-accepted belief, and therefore, she has been initially separated from the mainland. It is only after she enters the jungle, i.e, liminal phase, the possibility of referring her as the goddess of forest becomes possible. The adding of the new identity thus establishes the deity's existence in the memory of the worshippers. The same can be observed in case of Me:ce:ni as well, where Ganga and Parvati decide to disguise themselves as Mech women and for that they have to be separated from their elevated social status. The ritual of Me:ce:ni can be seen as a representation of accepting them as a part of the receiving community and revering them as a benevolent goddess of their own.

There are three types of languages established between man and super-nature in the liminal space. According to Victor Turner, liminal periods not only mark a transition from one zone to another but also witness the changes in individuals' thoughts and experiences (93-94). The transition of the Ɔð<sup>h</sup>ika:ri in Pəncəpu:ja: can be served as a suitable example of this. The pre-liminal phase marked by his entering into the ritual space separates him from rest of the folks. The separation benefits him to have more power than others and establish a connection with the super-nature. In the process of doing so, he undergoes another transition where he remains an ordinary devotee and becomes a representative of God or the supreme-power. The constant shaking of his head becomes a symbol of this transition that happens within his body. The language used by him after becoming a representative of God is different from the usual language as it is more authoritative now and bestowed with the power of mending problems of others. The reference to the change in Ɔð<sup>h</sup>ika:ri's language is also found in Girija Sankar Roy's writings. As he mentions, the Ɔð<sup>h</sup>ika:ri, after listening to the devotees, addresses the devotee as "Ore B<sup>h</sup>əkθə" during their conversation, and uses violent and abusive language in a sharp voice (Roy 154). This sudden language shift can be analysed as a self-translating experience where the priest solely takes up the responsibility of

transferring the words of Super-natural beings to common mass. Therefore, when he addresses the devotees of all age and genders as “bʰəkθɔ” or “ore Bʰəkθɔ”, it implies that the addressee is in a minor position to him. The use of abuses in his speech indicates his liberty of choosing the form which is not visible otherwise. The same can be observed in Bʰa:nda:ni pu:ja: where Ƨe:vʃi is again the intermediary between the devotee and the goddess. The fasting is the separation rite by which he chooses to perform the rite. The devotee’s prayer is said aloud by him because he takes on the authoritative role to transfer people’s voice to the super-nature. The priest here travels from the boundary of common mass and gets closer to the Goddess. However, the priest here also remains as a representative of the people, unlike Põncõpu:ja: where he transfers into a representative of the Goddess.

The liminal space in Bõnni pu:ja: is different from the rituals mentioned above. The priest is separated from rest of the people when he invokes the Goddess by touching the idol’s eyes with a jute-stick. Four women hold a large piece of cloth to create a separate room for him and the idol. The idea of touching the idol’s eyes with jute stick signifies awakening the Goddess and establishing a life in her. This is an attempt to bring the super-nature closer to the people rather than the priest himself becoming an authoritative agent. The devotees do not convey their prayer via a medium but rather present themselves directly. The process of invoking life in the deity during the pu:ja: is similar to what we call *chaksunmilan* in mainstream Hindu rituals. The word *chaksunmilan* means “opening of the eyes”. This act is usually performed during the consecration of an idol (Elgood 32). Chaksunmilan is also known as chakshudaan when the creator of the idol paints the eyes on it. It is different from the process of chokkhudaan or ʃəkkuɖa:n that has been described in Põncõpu:ja:. In Põncõpu:ja:, the process of ʃəkkuɖa:n referred to the offering of hens to the deity and then releasing them.

Interestingly, the chanting of *māṇṭras* or hymns play an important role of pre-liminal rites. In case of both *Kālī puṇḍra* and *Bāṇma saṇṭhi*, the priests cover their mouth with a shawl that they wear as an upper garment. The chant remains invisible and inaudible to rest of the folks pertaining to the idea that it can get polluted if others watch or listen to them. This confidentiality established between priest and God/Goddess suggests a category of separation. This allows them to transcend the boundary of common mass and ascertain a language that connects only him with the super-nature.

In the second and third category, the priest who is acting in the liminal space is highly aware of his position and the responsibility of sacredness he has been associated with. The chants are inaudible even to the devotees, let alone the people not engaged in the ritual. This consciousness comes with an understanding of contagious system of pollution nourished by the thought that observing the evoking of Goddess or listening to the *māṇṭras* will disturb the contact he has established with the Goddess. As Mary Douglas notices, “Contact with a person in the middle state will cause a person with the highest state to become impure, and contact with anyone in an impure state will make either higher categories impure” (Douglas 33). Here, the highest state is an equivalent to the liminal space and the higher categories is the idol or the *ṭhāns* representing the super-nature. The devotees are the people in the middle state. Therefore, a visual and aural contact is carefully avoided.

The liminality in Rajbanshi rituals is not only limited to the behaviour of ritual spaces and individuals, but is also a hint of leading us to where it had probably originated from. Using Anaxagoras philosophy, we can read how the rituals existed in both homogenous and heterogeneous form in the beginning. The existing rituals show a clear anthropomorphism where the deities represented either in form of clay mounds/ stones or in form of idols attributed to human



needs. The spaces which comprised of a boundary are subjected to cater to these needs. The needs of a civilization always had its initiatives from forests, followed by agricultural lands and then to the urban spaces. The areas surveyed by the researcher are semi-urban spaces which have attained a certain degree of civilised society and the primitive rites exist in their minimal form. As the researcher has observed during the field study, a village  $\theta^h a:n$  exists in an isolated space, represented by stones or clay mounds in alters which are mostly roofless. This roofless feature is interesting as it may convey nature being the ultimate shelter. It may even hint at a notion that the  $\theta^h a:n$  existed in a space which needed no roofs, that hints at densely covered forests. The reason of referring to sacred forests is because the rituals that have become extinct or endangered have close associations with the sacred groves as found in the written documents. The entry into these spaces required an act of purification which are similar to the ones we have read in this chapter. The liminality or transcending the boundaries in those spaces can be studied in comparison to these. Hence, a series of changes and resemblances can be figured out by observing how rituals translate themselves along with the needs and demands of changing society.

## Part B

### 2.5 Transformation within the Rituals

This section of the chapter aims to explain how modernism in society directly or implicitly modifies the belief system and thereby, the behavioral approaches towards rituals. This section of the chapter will begin with the very idea of how human entities have replaced the natural bodies in the process of transformation. Firstly, the association of the Rajbanshi community with the forests or groves will be seen.

According to J. G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, the concept of the tree-spirit is an integral part of nature, something that is inherent within the trees, and is slowly separated from them. As a result, the potential power of a tree to control the belief system does not hold as strong as it was before. Here, the reference is made to the tree as only a singular unit of the entire grove. So, this detachment enables the people to locate trees as "merely a lifeless, inert mass" (Frazer 66), and hence, the groves are an assemblage of such mass. The broader and stronger impact of benevolence or malevolence part of nature reduces to occasional rituals to ensure only a fragment of people's past beliefs in their continuum. In the words of Frazer:

As soon as the tree-spirit is thus in a measure disengaged from each particular tree, he begins to change his shape and assume the body of a man, in virtue of a general tendency of early thought to clothe all abstract spiritual beings in concrete human form...But this change of shape does not affect the essential character of the tree-spirit. The powers which he exercised as a tree-soul incorporate in a tree, he still continues to wield as a god of trees. (66)

This exchange of powers operates in a very interesting pattern between people, nature and supernature. For the purpose of this project, the exchange of power can be seen in reference to the people of Rajbanshi community. At first, when the power to control nature or natural entities was limited, they remained in a recessive position compared to the nature, and a fear of being punished by supernature also worked in their cognizance. This realization, with time, receded as technology developed to enable them with more power to control nature. Also, the immigration of modern sciences from other communities assisted them to accept their production system and their dependency on nature decreased. An appropriate example of this can be seen in the case of the umbrella of Me:ce:ni. Earlier it used to be made of bamboo, but nowadays, the modern umbrella of metal and plastic are used. Likewise, the necessity to depend on forests, rain or sun for livelihood has changed and therefore, the ritual practices related to those have shifted towards adopting the practices from the dominant communities on whom they are directly related in value exchange.

Some of the ritual practices of Rajbanshis have become almost extinct pertaining to the shift-away from nature. Thereby, the old beliefs on supernatural elements which used to operate in the community's mind as forceful impacts have switched their position to human influences and altered towards modernity. Simultaneously, the advancement of science and technology and the access to has created a hierarchy between mainstream and others. Hence, the earlier ritual practices of Rajbanshis are gradually turning into myth.

## **2.6. Extinct Rituals of Rajbanshis:**

Some of the rituals which were earlier practiced by Rajbanshis have ceased to exist now. One of them is Saleswari Puja (ʃalesʃori pu:ʃa:) as mentioned in Charuchandra Sanyal's *The Rajbansis of North Bengal* (147). According to him, this particular ritual was performed in the Baikunthapur



forests and it is also known as Dham Seva (ð<sup>h</sup>am seba). In the observation of the researcher, this ritual is similar to the ritual practices of Rajbanshis while worshipping ga:ram θ<sup>h</sup>a:n. What differentiates Σalesʃori pu:ʃa: from the worshipping in ga:ram θ<sup>h</sup>a:n is that there is a clear mark of associating trees in the process. In Sanyal's writing, a big tree has been referred as Duari Thakur (Ðua:ri t<sup>h</sup>a:kur), signifying the 'gatekeeper of the forest'. The forest here is a workplace and a resource for the livelihood. According to Sanyal, "Saleswari saves men from the attack of the denizens of the forest... Duari God and Konthopal being Mechs are offered a pair of cocks, and instead of killing them, they are set free in the forest and it is said, to tell the wild animals to refrain from killing the men who are about to enter the forest to work" (147).

Konthopal (Kɔnʈ<sup>h</sup>ɔpal)<sup>17</sup> here is a folk-God represented by another tree. The narrative of ʃalesʃori and Kɔnʈ<sup>h</sup>ɔpal worshipping hints the existence of a close association between Rajbanshis and sacred groves. Even though it is nowhere mentioned that the range of Baikunthapur forest is a sacred grove, but the idea of venerating a forest before entering it render a concept of sacred space to it and makes it culturally significant. The pattern of sacrificing animals is similar in both observed as well as written rituals. The animals are not killed but rather set free.

The second ritual collected from the secondary sources is of Huðum ðeo. The myths related to Huðum ðeo have variations. According to the version collected by Premananda Roy, Huðum was a child conceived by Bɔsuməθi, or the mother earth, who was impregnated by Indra. But she was refuted by the people and was left with no shelter. Finally, the tree of Ãtija kɔla provided her with the shelter to give birth to her boney child, Huðum. But the earth was confronting a situation of drought which created the anxiety of how to clean the new born baby. So, she again

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<sup>17</sup> Konthopal has been described by Sanyal as "a Mech who lived long ago and is said to have saved men living in the forests" (147).

prayed to Indra, after which the earth was blessed with rainfall. On the contrary, the other mythical story of Huḍum ḍeo refers back to the legend of Rishyasringa in Mahabharata. The base structure of both the myths is dependent on rain.

The first story of Huḍum ḍeo suggests the concept of a sheltering space again provided by the plantain tree. In general, usually a plantain tree, unlike Bōt or pakur, is never big enough to accommodate a family or even a person. But this mythical story hints a transfer of supernatural power to it so that it not only enlarges to provide shelter to a conceiving woman, but also becomes strong enough to protect her from the wild animals of the forest. The liminal space between the two variations of the same tree is significant here because it marks a huge gap between a liveable space and a non-liveable space. The liveable space is the one which is always desired but not always affordable. To make a space liveable, to demarcate a security in an unsecured space, the belief system tends to depend on prayers to super-nature. This is similar to the observances of sacred groves. Even though a single plantain tree cannot be a replacement of a sacred grove, but the sacred space which assures security by the virtue of prayers and faith is common in both.

## **2.7 Gac<sup>h</sup> bija:h – The marriage of trees:**

The marriage between the trees although have not become extinct, but the practice has become very limited. This ritual can help us to understand a very complex relation of production system between the community and nature. Here, trees are seen as metaphors for man and women relationship, and the power of trees to modify the productivity of people is given more importance. The boundary between nature and people has been delimited and the detailed description of these marriages will help us to understand how the intermediate spaces between the two hold a strong root of old beliefs.

The custom of tree-marriages followed by Rajbanshis of North-Bengal have multiple significances. The purpose of such marriage is associated with the social beliefs that again relate to the production dynamics. The friendship between Jiga tree and a barren woman is to eradicate her barrenness and believing that the tree will bless her with a child. On the same account, a child-less widow befriends the trees of Vata (bɔt) and Pakur (pakuɾ) and arranges a wedding between them with the belief that doing so will receive some virtues (Sengupta 77). The Bɔt-pakuɾ marriages are also performed by married couples who have not conceived. The researcher has observed the trees which had been married in Rajbanshi villages and the ritual spaces they overtake once their marriage is confirmed. The trees that Rajbanshi families intend to marry off are protected by a small fence even before the marriage ritual is conducted. They wait till both the plants undergo at least one flowering season, which implies that the plants have attained their puberty. After the marriage, the stems of the two trees are tied with red thread so that they signify one family. The marriage usually takes place in a favourable month which suits the Hindu calendar.

### 2.7.1 Gao-goch (gao goɕh) Marriage

A variation of this marriage is found in Sanyal's book, *The Rajbansis of North Bengal*, where he describes what Gao-goch (gao goɕh) is. The ritual of Gao-goch is performed for widow remarriages when the widow is found to be pregnant and the 'putative father' is forced to marry her. However, in the absence of alleged man, any other man who agrees to marry the pregnant widow in exchange of some money is called a Goch and the ritual is called Goch-khara-howa<sup>18</sup> (goɕh kʰara hɔa:) (Sanyal 98-99). The term goɕh indicates tree in Rajbansi language. goɕh kʰara

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<sup>18</sup> Goch (goɕh) in Rajbansi is equivalent of gach in Bengali. Khara (kʰara) is a term used in some regional variations of Bengali for standing. The term kʰara is also used in Hindi to signify standing.



ḥoa: literally means to stand as a tree, and therefore, the person who agrees to marry the widow takes the responsibility of not only giving her a sheltered married life but also accepts the child as his own:

The child born after the marriage, although of different father, is accepted by the ‘Goch’ as his own and gets his ‘porua’ or Gotra and inherits his property if it is a son. But the other children of the widow born before the second marriage do not inherit the property but get the ‘porua’ or Gotra of the foster father. (Sanyal 99)

In the interviews conducted by the researcher, the informants have given various views about the Bōt-pakur marriages. One of the informants, Dinobala Devi from Moynaguri, had said that tree marriages were organized by barren couples to pray for a child. Another informant, Naresh Ray from Aamguri reported that the intention behind the tree-marriages was not only for the purpose of praying for children but also to boast about the wealth; who all could afford to invest and arrange them.

### **2.7.2 Differences among the tree-marriages**

The tree-marriages can be categorized into three parts:

- a) tree-marriage between two plants: Bōt-pakur,
- b) marriage between a plant and a woman, and
- c) marriage between a man and a woman where the man is conceptualized as a tree.

These three categories not only are different from each other, but they indicate towards an evolving social system. In the base of all the three marriages, there is a concept of ritualizing a marital relationship between a man and a woman. They also hint at sexuality of plants, as found in Bōt-pakur, where Bōt is always considered as the male and Pakur is always considered as

female. These marriages also suggest that ominous threats in a social-marriage can be avoided by transferring the evil to the plants. The plant/husband also stands as a constant shelter for the woman as well as a means of productivity for women. The tree-marriage hence becomes a liminal space which allows the differences of meanings, be it production or protection or nurturing. The social demands from tree-marriages varies in the time-space dimension. The tying of the two trees, Bōt and Pakuṛ, creates a sacred space which resists the process of constructing modern concrete temples, and thereby, conserving the ecology. Though a pair of trees do not form an entire sacred grove, but they definitely mark the outlines of small-scale sacred spaces that continue to carry the traits of sacred groves. In every Rajbansi ritual, beginning from their life-cycle rituals such as birth, naming, marriages etc to their religious performance, the sacred groves are given special attention. This has been observed in the documentation of both *Me:ce:ni* and during the naming of a Rajbanshi child.

Nirmalendu Bhowmick in his collection of folk-songs in the book named *Pranta-Uttar Banger Lok-Sangeet (The Folk-Music of Marginal North Bengal)* had documented one of the songs that is composed on tree-marriages:

| Transliteration           | Transcription               | English                          |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Boto Na Pakhuri garinu re | bɔʈɔ na pa:kʰuɽi ga:ɽinɔ re | I planted the Bōt and Pakuṛ tree |
| Syao Paakhuri Mele Pancho | ʃjɔ pa:kʰuɽi mele pa:ncɔ    | That also has spread its wings   |
| dalo re                   | da:lɔre                     |                                  |
| Toke Paakhuri Bihaay      | ʈɔke pa:kʰuɽi bihai ɽjɔhũ   | I gave you Pakuṛ in wedding      |
| Dyachhun                  |                             |                                  |
| Bɔɽɔy Aasha Kori re       | bɔɽei aʃa: kɔri re          | With lots of hope                |

|                            |                                          |                                                |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Oho Mor Paakhuri Re        | oho mo:r pa:k <sup>h</sup> uɖi re        | Oh my Pakuɪ                                    |
| Naa janu Mui Santar        | nã ja:nõ mui ʃãθa:r                      | Neither I know swimming                        |
| Naa janu mui Pohor re      | nã ja:nõ mui pɔhɔr re                    | Neither I know to guard                        |
| Naa janu Mui Bhura         | nã ja:nõ mui b <sup>h</sup> ura          | Neither I know to feed a lot.                  |
| Khiraibare                 | k <sup>h</sup> ira:iba:re                |                                                |
| Oho mor Paakhuri re        | oho mo:r pa:k <sup>h</sup> uɖi re        | Oh my Pakuɪ                                    |
| Ghatiyarak Dinu Aana Aana  | g <sup>h</sup> a:tija:rɔ ðinu ana: ana:  | To the Ghatiyar I gave a lot of money          |
| Kheuriyak Dinu Ka:nor Sona | k <sup>h</sup> eurija:k ðinu ka:nɔr ʃɔna | To the Kheuriya I gave gold for ears           |
| Oho Mor Paakhuri re.       | oho mo:r pa:k <sup>h</sup> uɖi re        | Oh my Pakuɪ.<br>(Translated by the researcher) |

The trees Bɔt and Pakuɪ in this given song are addressed as if Pakuɪ is the daughter of the addressee. The inclusion of pakuɪ in the household suggests an attempt of building or accepting human-nature relationship which forms the base. On this foundation, the super-natural beliefs such as a marriage between trees will bless the humans with a child or a marriage between tree and widow will eliminate the hazards of second marriage for a woman, are built.

The researcher has observed the trees which have been married in Dakkhin Mouamari village of Moynaguri. Also, she has found that two such Bɔt and Pakuɪ trees have been planted with the intention of getting them married in future. The trees that were yet to be married and those already married have been documented in the following pictures.





Pic 137: Temple premise of Radha-Krishna in Dakshin Mouamari village.

where Bot-paku are planted for marriage



Pic 138: The trees are guarded by a fence





Pic 139: Fully matured Böt-pakur that have been married



In the first picture it can be observed that they are surrounded by a fence which marks their security from herbivores. Also the fence makes these trees exclusive and the sacredness associated prevents them from being cut. In the second picture, both the trees are fully matured and they are surrounded by a red thread around their stem. This red thread symbolizes not only beliefs of people within the community but also notifies people outside the community that the given space is separated from rest of the non-sacred space. The red-thread or the fence in a way provides the liminality that these trees require for sustaining the belief of worshippers. If we read this in light of Van Gennep's *Rite of the Passage*, to cross the threshold of the fence or to cut this red thread, there will be a need of specific ritual. Because of these boundaries they support the ecological system of the villages since the super-natural belief associated prevent cutting such large trees and thereby, preventing small-scale deforestation.

The significance of tree-marriages is not only the ritual performances of the marriage. Since these Böt and pakur together assume a belief-system, they transcend into other rituals starting from the life-cycle rituals to the worshipping of deities like Me:ce:ni. The people who live in the surrounding villages and have not directly witnessed the rituals of tree-marriages, also venerate the married-trees because of the space that has been demarcated for them. The succeeding generations also do not cross the sacred spaces marked by such trees. Even if the tradition of marriage transcends from Koch to that of Hinduism, the fundamental concept of necessity of such marriages and later on protecting such trees continue.

## **2.8 Song-performances in the rituals**

The transformation within the rituals can be directly observed by surveying the songs in the ritual performances of Rajbanshis. The researcher collected varieties of Rajbanshi songs during

the field work which include Me:ce:ni songs, Bõṇṇ Songs, K<sup>h</sup>aṭam songs, and others. The sources of these songs are oral. A gradual change of linguistic features can be observed if these songs are read closely. The first category in themes of the songs discussed here are the Me:ce:ni songs because we can observe maximum variation so far. The Me:ce:ni songs represent a collection of narratives which may range from the myth story of Daksha and Σṇṇi to that of how Me:ce:ni is being venerated, or what the local people are practicing in their daily lives. The first few songs mentioned below are collected from primary data, and they are translated followed by discussions on them.

| Song 1 Transliteration                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Transcription                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Translation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Daikkhyo raja joggo kore<br>shibak baad diya<br>ei khabarata narod dilek<br>kailashate jaya<br>Durga debi uthil kandiya<br>kandi kati shibak jaya kare<br>parbati<br>anumati deo he swami jai<br>baper bari<br>oi ki aparadh karil mor<br>swami<br>ejeto pagala bhola ganjat<br>marilo ṭan | ḍaik <sup>h</sup> ṇ ra:ja ɟoggo kore ʃibək<br>ba:ḍ ḍija:<br>ei k <sup>h</sup> aborta: na:rṇḍ ḍilek<br>kailaʃṇṇe ja:ja<br>ṇi ḍurga: ḍebi vuṭ <sup>h</sup> ilo<br>ka:nḍija:<br>ka:nḍikaṭi ʃibbək ɟaja: kore<br>pa:rṇṇti<br>ṇnumati ḍao he ʃa:mi ja:ji<br>ba:per ba:ri<br>ṇi ki ṇpṇra:ḍ <sup>h</sup> kṇrilo mor ʃa:mi<br>e:jeṇṇ pa:gla: b <sup>h</sup> ola: ga:nja:ṇ<br>ma:rilo ṭā:n | King Daksha performs a ɟoggo<br>without Siva<br>This news Narada goes and gives in<br>Kailash<br>Ḍurga Devi starts crying<br>Crying Parvati goes and asks Σi:b<br>Give me permission husband to go<br>to my father's house<br>What crime has my husband done<br>Now paagla bhola<br>smokes Ganja |

|                              |                                                  |                                       |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| chakkhu chaore k mela        | cakk <sup>h</sup> u ca:ore Σθik mela:            | Widening his eyes he forbids          |
| karachhe badha baron         | kārec <sup>h</sup> e ba:ð <sup>h</sup> a: ba:rən | Σθi a lot                             |
| ai na jais bhaire habo       | ai na ja:if b <sup>h</sup> a:ire hōbbō           | Don't go to your house, you will be   |
| apaman                       | apoma:n                                          | insulted                              |
| badha baron na shuni Durga   | ba:ð <sup>h</sup> a: ba:rən na: jūni ðurga:      | Not listening to his prohibition      |
| chalila baper bari           | colilo ba:per ba:ri                              | Ðurga goes to her father's house      |
| sthale jaya mela             | jaggō sθ <sup>h</sup> ole ja:ja mela             | In the jaggō venue witnesses a fest   |
| dekhechhe chairō di          | ðek <sup>h</sup> ec <sup>h</sup> e ca:irō ði     | all around                            |
| oi shat shat aiche deb debi  | oi jθō jθō a:ice ðeb ðebi                        | There comes hundreds of Gods and      |
|                              |                                                  | Goddesses                             |
| babar mukhe swami ninda      | baba:r muk <sup>h</sup> e fami ninða:            | Parvati listens to her father blaming |
| sulilek parbati              | jūnilek pa:rbōθi                                 | her husband                           |
| thakibar na pari dehar uñhil | θak <sup>h</sup> iba:r na pa:ri ðeha:r uñilo     | Unable to bear her body starts        |
| kapuni                       | ka:puni                                          | trembling                             |
| agune jhap diya Sati tejilek | a:gune j <sup>h</sup> ā:p ðija: jθi θejilek      | Immediately she jumps into fire       |
| jiban                        | ji:bən                                           |                                       |
| hay haay karachhe jata       | ha:i ha:i kōrec <sup>h</sup> e jθō jagger        | All the Gods start regretting         |
| jogger debagan               | ðebōga:n                                         |                                       |
| oi sanga hailo Satir apaman  | oi jōngō hōilo jθir apoma:n                      | Thus ends jθi's insult.               |
|                              |                                                  | (Translated by the Researcher)        |



| Song 2 Transliteration                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Transcription                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Translation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Kailash hote ashiya shiber<br>jate jal diya<br>eita halek ge Tista nadi tin<br>dhare jal diya<br>uyay halek ge shiber beti<br>char juger dukhini nari<br>tin dharate Tista nadi naam<br>hailo Tistaburi<br>uttar banger upajati mecher<br>halek basati<br>mech khelay mecheni baige<br>bandhiya chati<br>uyare khela dakhiya<br>hamerao geli shikhiya<br>baishakh mashe mecheni<br>khelai chhati bandhiya<br><br>je din khela habe sara<br>mechenir bhasham bhura<br>sagay miliya bhakti kari<br>mechenik hamera | kaila:ʃ hət̪e a:ʃija: ʃiber jət̪e<br>ɟəl ðija:<br>eiʈa hək̪e ge θi:sθa: buri θin<br>ððʰa:re ɟəl ðija:<br>ua:i hək̪e ge ʃiber beti tsa:r<br>ɟuger ðukʰini nari<br>θin ðha:rθe θisθa: nɔði na:m<br>hailɔ θisθa: buri<br>uθθɔr bɔŋer uupɔja:θi mecer<br>hək̪e bɔʃɔθi<br>me:c kʰelai mecenɪ baige<br>ba:nðʰija: ca:θi<br>ua:re kela: ðekʰija: hamerao<br>geli ʃikʰija:<br>bɔiʃa:kʰ ma:ʃe Me:ce:ni<br>kʰela:i cʰa:θi banðʰija:<br><br>jeðin kʰela hɔbbe ʃa:ra<br>Me:ce:nir bʰa:ʃa:m bʰura:<br>ʃɔgai milia: bʰkθi kəri<br>Me:ce:ni kʰ hamera | Coming from Kailash pouring<br>water on Siva's clotted hair<br>This is river θi:sθa water pouring<br>water on three sides.<br>That is ʃib's girl, an unhappy<br>woman of all the four eras<br>River θi:sθa is in three courses, and<br>the name is θi:sθa Buri.<br>The tribe of North Bengal, Mech<br>are residing<br>In the game of Mechs, <i>Me:ce:ni</i><br>ties an umbrella.<br>Watching their game, we also learnt<br><br>On the month of Baisakha, we play<br><i>Me:ce:ni</i> Kʰela: by tying an<br>umbrella<br>The day on which the game gets<br>over, <i>Me:ce:ni</i> floats the bhura<br>Everyone gathers to venerate in<br><i>Me:ce:ni</i> 's θʰa:n.<br><br>(Translated by the Researcher) |

| Song 3 Transliteration      | Transcription                 | Translation                         |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Tista burita chhati dhariya | θisθa: buri ʈa ca:θi ðʰərija  | Θi:sθa Buri holds umbrella and      |
| beray baari baari           | berai ba:ri ba:ri             | strolls to houses                   |
| dasher charane hamera       | ðɔʃer cərene hamera           | We pay our homages to public        |
| namaskar kari               | nəmɔʃka:r kəri                | we are the poor women               |
| ai hamra abala nari         | ɔi hamra əbɔla nari           | Gajen Babu is a good person         |
| gajen babuta bhalo manshi   | gɔʃen ba:bu ʈa bʰalo manʃi    | showing some tricks                 |
| dekhache kutani chali       | ðekʰacen kuʈa:ni ɔli          | He is showing some amusement        |
| bina paishay dekhache       | bin paɪʃae ðekʰace θamʃa gɔʃ  | within the house without any        |
| tamsha gach barir bhiti     | barir bʰi:θi                  | payment                             |
| thakur barit bashiya ache   | ʈʰa:ku:r bariθ bɔʃia: a:cʰe   | The priest is sitting in the temple |
| parba Adhikari              | pərbo əðʰika:ri               |                                     |
| Channi kula dhariya beray   | ʈsanni kulla ðʰədiʃa: berai   | The Celli Boirati roams around      |
| cheli bairati               | celli bɔi ra:θi               | holding the channi kula             |
| ge baibhabana benkok biya   | ge ba:ibʰəbɔn beŋkɔk biao     | The acda Brahmin marries off        |
| dey acada baman             | ðejao əcoða: ba:mu:n          | Baibhabana at Bangkok               |
| shimilaro tula jemon bɔtshe | ʃimila:rɔ θula: ʃa:mən baθɔʃe | The way cotton of Kapoc tree flies  |
| uray                        | uɖaje                         | in the wind                         |
| ai matan narir man mor      | ɔi məθɔn na:rir mən mɔr       | like that my female mind is always  |
| saday gul gulay             | ʃəðae gulgulae                | impatient                           |
| ge mayarani dharek chatita  | ge ma:ja:ra:ni ðʰoreke        | Mayarani hold the umbrella while    |
| khelai mecheni              | cʰa:θiʈa kʰelai mece:ni       | playing <i>Me:ce:ni</i> .           |
|                             |                               | (Translated by the Researcher)      |

| Song 4 Transliteration      | Transcription                  | Translation                                 |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| shuno tomara sarbajan       | ʃunɔ θɔmraː ʃɔrbɔʃɔn           | Listen all of you                           |
| mecheni ʃhakure diba dhan   | meceni ʈʰaːkure ðibaː ðʱɔn     | Goddess <i>Me:ce:ni</i> will provide wealth |
| puranate achhe lekha shuno  | puraɳɔθe aːtʃe likʰaː          | Its written in Puranas, listen              |
| diya man                    | ʃunɔː ðijaː mɔn                | carefully.                                  |
| oi mathar upar niye chhati  | ɔi maːθʰaːr upoːr n̄aː cʰaːθi  | Taking an umbrella above the                |
| Gauri gyase nachi nachi     | gouri gæse naːçi naːçi         | head Gauri is dancing while going           |
| kunthe geise bholanath      | kunʈʰe geise bʰolaːnaːθʰ       | Where has gone Bholanath                    |
| upar dekhi                  | upɔr ðæikʰi                    | Let me see                                  |
| oi chatita ghurya sajaya    | ɔi cʰaːθi ʈaː gʰurai ʃaːʃaːjaː | Rotating the decorated umbrella             |
| nastar agen nachiya         | naːsθaːr aːgen naːçijaː        | proceeding in the road                      |
| oi Gauri debi dekhiya bhola | ɔi gouri ðebi ðʰekʰijaː bʰolaː | Looking at goddess gouri, Bhola             |
| halen ...                   | hɔlen                          | became ...                                  |
| oi pagala baba bholanath    | ɔi paːglaː baːbaː bʰolaː naːθʰ | The frenetic father Bholanath               |
| nache gane moja mat         | naːçe gaːne mɔjaː maːθ         | is engrossed in dance, music and fun        |
| Gauri debi nagat bhola      | gouri ðebi naːgɔθ bʰolaː hɔlen | with Goddess gouri, Bhola finally           |
| hailen milan                | milɔn                          | united.                                     |
|                             |                                | (Translated by the Researcher)              |



| Song 5 Transliteration      | Transcription                  | Translation                                             |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| aji kene fuler bas uṭhe re  | a:ʒi kene fʰule:r ba:ʃʰ uṭʰere | Today why the fragrance of<br>flower is rising          |
| na jani ma mecheni          | na:ʒini ma: meçeni kon kʰa:ne  | Don't know where mother                                 |
| konkhane saje re            | ʃa:ʒere                        | Me:ce:ni is adorning                                    |
| sajuk sajuk ma mor          | ʃa:ʒuk ʃa:ʒuk ma: mɔ:r         | Let mother dress up on her own                          |
| apanakar mane               | a:pɔnka:r mɔne                 | aside.                                                  |
| aji kene dhuper bas uṭhe re | a:ʒi kene ðʰu:per ba:ʃʰ uṭʰere | Today why the fragrance of<br>incense sticks are rising |
| na jani ma mecheni          | na:ʒini ma: meçeni kon kʰa:ne  | Don't know where mother                                 |
| konkhane saje re            | ʃa:ʒere                        | Me:ce:ni is adorning                                    |
| sajuk sajuk ma mor          | ʃa:ʒuk ʃa:ʒuk ma: mɔ:r         | Let mother dress up on her own                          |
| apanakar mane               | a:pɔnka:r mɔne                 | aside.                                                  |
| aji kene kolar bas uṭhe re  | a:ʒi kene kɔla:r ba:ʃʰ uṭʰere  | Today why the fragrance of<br>plantains are rising      |
| na jani ma mecheni          | na:ʒini ma: meçeni kon kʰa:ne  | Don't know where mother                                 |
| konkhane saje re            | ʃa:ʒere                        | Me:ce:ni is adorning                                    |
| sajuk sajuk ma mor          | ʃa:ʒuk ʃa:ʒuk ma: mɔ:r         | Let mother dress up on her own                          |
| apanakar mane               | a:pɔnka:r mɔne                 | aside.                                                  |
| aji kene dudher bas uṭhe re | a:ʒi kene ðuðʰer ba:ʃʰ uṭʰere  | Today why the fragrance of milk<br>is rising            |
| na jani ma mecheni          | na:ʒini ma: meçeni kon kʰa:ne  | Don't know where mother                                 |
| konkhane saje re            | ʃa:ʒere                        | Me:ce:ni is adorning                                    |

|                                     |                                          |                                                                            |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| sajuk sajuk ma mor<br>apanakar mane | ʃa:ʃuk ʃa:ʃuk ma: mɔ:r<br>a:pɔnka:r mɔne | Let mother dress up on her own<br>aside.<br>(Translated by the Researcher) |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|

These songs are not composed on the premises of ‘origin myth’, but on the other relevant issues that they have experienced. The first song, for example, narrates the story of Σοθi’s sacrifice in Rajbanshi language. Daksha’s decision to perform a ʃɔggɔ without inviting Σi:b, and Σi:b’s reaction as a result of this has been described in a non-Sanskritic way, using the words like ɔɔikʰɔ instead of Daksha, or pa:gla: bʰɔla: instead of Σi:b. Even the word Σi:b is pronounced Shiba. Σi:b widening his eyes to forbid Σοθi from going to her father’s house resembles a family life. The act of Σi:b smoking weed is also a human act and does not signify the divine identity of a God. Then, Σοθi jumping into the fire further supplements to the relationship between man and woman, and the gratitude of married women towards their husbands. The second song shifts from story of Daksa, and rather concentrates on Θi:sθa being the wife of Σi:b, who pours water on the head of Σi:b from three sides. Along with the reference of Θi:sθa, it also narrates how the Me:ce:ni has been borrowed from the Mech tribe, and Rajbanshis have adapted the Me:ce:ni game from them. The third song completely disassociates from Σi:b or Σοθi, and rather focuses on regular news that happens on a local basis. The second line of the third song refers to the performers, who are poor women, and their observations in the village. It includes the activities of local priest sitting in the temple, or a local magician showing tricks in a village house. The last two lines of the song returns to their feminine features and the relation with the ritual. It is still not obvious from this song how the sexuality is related to the ritual, but in the later part of this chapter, Bḥṇɔ songs will be read. But referring to the impatient nature of feminine mind and

comparing it with flying cotton gives a subtle impression of their sexual desire. Finally, it again refers to holding an umbrella while playing Me:ce:ni. These three different songs of Me:ce:ni offer a variation of meanings based on mythical story, adaptation and daily activities. Basing our reading of this, it can be construed that the oral traditions need not present only in the past nor represent only the past. Accordingly, the extensive potential of oral traditions certainly necessitates their inclusion in literary history. They play an important role here because through them the continuity of reading and their variations can be found. In other words, the entire process of ritualization is based on the variations that these readers perceive and practice.

The reference to Daksha myth is found in the first song, while the second and fourth songs touch on the relationship of Σi:b and Me:ce:ni/ Θi:sθa/ gouri. The third song appears to be a description of Me:ce:ni k<sup>h</sup>ela: and the events happening parallelly in the village while the performers are doing the Me:ce:ni k<sup>h</sup>ela:. In the fifth song, the reference to Me:ce:ni pu:ja: can be seen, as it includes the presence of flowers, incense sticks, plantains and milk. These four ingredients, as referred in the previous chapter, are used during Me:ce:ni pu:ja:. A transition can be observed in these songs beginning from the mythic stories involved in Me:ce:ni ritual, to the Me:ce:ni k<sup>h</sup>ela: and finally to the Me:ce:ni pu:ja:.

## **2.9. Bõṅṇ songs and Discourses on Nudity**

The second category of songs that have been collected from primary resources are the Bõṅṇ songs or Bi:ḥ songs. These songs also form a part of Me:ce:ni K<sup>h</sup>ela:, and as told by Budheswari Debi, they are performed by women in an isolated place in the month of Me:ce:ni K<sup>h</sup>ela:. These songs create a discourse of nudity within the ritual spaces and facilitates the Rajbanshi community's knowledge on sexual interactions. The discourse of nudity here is not to promote obscenity. Rather it is a form of their aesthetics as well as beliefs. Girija Sankar Roy strongly



objects to the concept of sexual desire associated with the Huđum đeo songs which contain similar references to sexual organs. According to him, such songs are only meant to portray a spiritual relationship between natural entities like earth and rain (141). The women indulge into a profound relationship with the super-nature while performing these songs which disengage them from the feel of shame or embarrassment. Below are the three Bđņđ songs that the researcher has collected while having informal interactions with the informants in Nirendrapur village during the field work.

| Song 1 Transliteration                                                                                                             | Transcription                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Translation                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Santara baři jachi gu<br>panthate mur deri ache<br>bara dada mur baroy buddhi<br><br>Duyare mur ase dighi<br>akea moi na jaya nadi | ſɔnθɔra: ba:ri ja:çi gu:<br>pɔnθ <sup>h</sup> ɔ θe mu:r đeri a:ç <sup>h</sup> e<br>bɔrɔ đa:đa: mu:r bɔdei<br>buđđ <sup>h</sup> i<br>đuja:re mu:r a:ç <sup>h</sup> e đig <sup>h</sup> i<br>ja:kela: mđi na: ja:ja: nɔđi | Santara is going home,<br>I shall be late on the way.<br>My elder brother is very clever<br><br>So there is a pond near our door<br>I don't have to go to the river<br>alone.<br>(Translated by the Researcher) |

| Song 2 Transliteration                                                              | Transcription                                                                                                                    | Translation                                                                         |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Bhor buro bhola re<br>baddo mamua đhela re<br>manger paleya<br>manger sandar sareya | b <sup>h</sup> or buro b <sup>h</sup> ola: re<br>bɔdɔɔ ma:mun d <sup>h</sup> ela: re<br>mãŋ er pa:leja:<br>mãŋ er ſɔnđər ſɔreja: | Bhola is an old bhor<br>who is very lazy<br>If he gets vagina<br>opening the vagina |

|                  |                                  |                                |
|------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| mui genu dekhibr | mũi genu ðek <sup>h</sup> iba:r  | I went to see                  |
| lok ase sudibar  | lok a:ç <sup>h</sup> e çu ðiba:r | there are people to conjugate  |
|                  |                                  | (Translated by the Researcher) |

| Song 3                      | Transcription                                            | Translation                        |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Mang mang kariya            | mã:ŋ mã:ŋ kərija:                                        | The Dhala Bura ( $\Sigma i:b$ ) is |
| Ḍhala buṛaṭa ninduka parise | ð <sup>h</sup> ɔla: bura:ṭa ninðuk pa:riç <sup>h</sup> e | calling out for vagina.            |
| saparati jeter pani gamsa   | çəpəra:θi jeθer pa:ni                                    | While going towards saparāti       |
| bhijise                     | gāmç <sup>h</sup> a: b <sup>h</sup> iç <sup>h</sup> e    | (not translated in English), the   |
|                             |                                                          | towel got soaked.                  |
|                             |                                                          | (Translated by the Researcher)     |

In the first song, there is no explicit reference to sexual organs, but the lyrics of the song refers to availability of a pond nearby the house so that the speaker does not have to go to the river to take bath. The second and the third song have direct mention of the word mã:ŋ which means female genital organ (vagina). In the second song, the speaker in fact goes into minute details of opening a vagina and observing if there is anyone to perform the conjugal act. In the third song, the reference is made for Ḍ<sup>h</sup>ɔla bura:, which is a local name for  $\Sigma i:b$ . As mentioned by Dr. Deepak Kumar Ray, the word Ḍ<sup>h</sup>ɔla can be traced as another name for Ḍ<sup>h</sup>ɔrɔla or Ḍ<sup>h</sup>ɔlja: who is the husband of Me:ci. According to him, in the folktales of  $\Theta i:s\theta a$  River, the other name of  $\Theta i:s\theta a$  is Me:ci who has a husband named Ḍ<sup>h</sup>ɔrɔla, a son, Kɔrɔla, and a daughter, Ḍulali. The song, therefore, attempts to associate the sexual acts of human with deities.





| Song 1 Transliteration     | Transcription                  | Translation                                   |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Hu aise hudum deo          | hu: aise Huðum ðeo             | There comes Hudum Deo                         |
| ghar duyar chariya deo     | gʰər ðua:r çʰa:rija: ðeo       | leave the household                           |
| pathe ghate manshi dunshi  | poθʰe gʰa:ʈʰe ma:nʃi ðunʃi     | human and other beings on the                 |
| sagay palaore              | ʃɔga:i palaore                 | road everyone flee                            |
| hariya de pani dhaliya     | hariʎa: ðe pa:ni dʱa:lija:     | Hariya pour the water                         |
| hariyar ghar tin bhai      | hariʎa:r gʰər θi:n bʱa:i       | there are three brothers in<br>Hariya's house |
| karo chetat pani nai       | ka:ro çeʈa:θ pa:ni nâi         | no one has water                              |
| hariyar maor mangkhan      | hariʎa:r ma:or mǎŋkʰan         | the vagina of Hariya's mother                 |
| dhan pachhura kulakhan     | ðʱa:n pa:çʰura kula:kʰa:n      | the winnowing tray of paddy                   |
| ore hariya de pani dhaliya | ore hariʎa: ðe pa:ni dʱa:lija: | Hey Hariya, pour the water                    |
| jauk mang sagare bhashiya  | ja:uk mǎ:ŋ ʃa:gore bʱa:ʃiʎa:   | let the vagina get floated in sea.            |
| (Roy 265)                  |                                | (Translated by the Researcher)                |

| Song 2 Transliteration | Transcription             | Translation                            |
|------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| aye re deoa gijji      | a:ire ðæoja: giʝji        | Come oh God with a roar                |
| dhan chal jauk bhiji   | ðʱa:n çal jauk bʱiʝji     | let the paddy and rice get wet         |
| aye re deoa shosheya   | a:ire ðæoja: ʃoʃeja:      | Come oh God with the sound of<br>storm |
| mang niya thak         | mǎŋ nīja: θʱa:k bʱæʃreja: | the womb is widened for you            |
| bhyashreya             |                           |                                        |
| aye re deoa çakiya     | a:ire ðæoja: da:kija:     | Come God with a roar                   |

|                                                                                            |                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| dhan chal jauk bhashiya<br>aye re deoa dakiya<br>doi chira deng makhiya<br>(Barma 371-372) | ð̌a:n ɕa:ul ja:uk b <sup>h</sup> a:ʃi ja:<br>a:ire ð̌æo ja: da:kija:<br>ð̌oi ci:ra: ð̌eŋ ma:k <sup>h</sup> i ja: | let the paddy and rice float away<br>Come God with a call<br>will mix curd and rice for you.<br>(Translated by the Researcher) |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

| Song 3 Transliteration                                                                                                  | Transcription                                                                                                                | Translation                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Hudum dyaore hudum dyao<br>hagi acchi pani dyao<br><br>hamar dyasot nai pani<br>haga tikay bara bani<br><br>(Barma 371) | Huðum ð̌æore Huðum ð̌æo<br>ha:gi a:ɕçi pa:ni ð̌æo<br><br>hama:r ð̌æfɔθ na:i pa:ni<br>haga ʈika:je ba:ra: b <sup>h</sup> a:ni | Lord Hudum O lord Hudum<br>I have defecated, please give<br>water<br>In our country there is no water.<br>So we farm without cleaning after<br>defecation<br>(Translated by the Researcher) |

Apart from these songs which overtly articulates sexuality, there are other songs of Huðum ð̌eo which have more similarity with the non-carnal aspects of the ritual. The following song has been found in the collection of songs by Ratan Biswas from the Haldibari district. A closer look into this song will help the readers to realize its similarity with the fifth *Me:ce:ni* song that have been gathered during the field work.

| Song 1 Transliteration       | Transcription                                            | Translation                                            |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| aji kene dhuper baaj uṭhe re | a:ʃi kene ð̌ <sup>h</sup> u:per ba:ʃ uṭ <sup>h</sup> ere | Today why the fragrance of<br>incense sticks is rising |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| na janiya huduma thakurak<br>pujere<br>pujak pujak ma mor hari se<br>monere<br>aji kene kolar baaj mor uṭhe<br>re<br>na janiya huduma thakurak<br>pujere<br>pujak pujak ma mor hari se<br>monere<br>aji kene dudher bhog mor<br>uthe re<br>na janiya huduma thakurak<br>pujere<br>pujak pujak ma mor hari se<br>monere<br>(Biswas 117) | na: ja:nija: Huḍuma:<br>ṭʰa:kurək pujere<br>puṛək puṛək ma: mor həri ʃe<br>mone re<br>a:ʃi kene kōla:r ba:ʃ mor<br>uṭʰere<br>na: ja:nija: Huḍuma:<br>ṭʰa:kurək pujere<br>puṛək puṛək ma: mor həri ʃe<br>mone re<br>a:ʃi kene ḍuḍʰer bʰog mor<br>uṭʰere<br>na: ja:nija: Huḍuma:<br>ṭʰa:kurək pujere<br>puṛək puṛək ma: mor həri ʃe<br>mone re | Don't know Hudum is being<br>worshipped<br>Let mother worship Hari from<br>her heart.<br>Today why the fragrance of<br>plantains are rising<br>Don't know Hudum is being<br>worshipped<br>Let mother worship Hari from<br>her heart<br>Today why the offering of milk<br>is rising<br>Don't know Hudum is being<br>worshipped<br>Let mother worship Hari from<br>her heart<br>(Translated by the Researcher) |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

The above song does not contain the explicit descriptions of sexual activities or sexual organs even though the ritual space is similar. The impact can be termed as an influence of migration and mainstream Hinduism in the intersecting spaces. According to Girija Sankar Roy, the references to sexual organs of both men and women are not only found in Rajabanshi rituals, but it is a common factor in folk *mānṭrās* (142). Therefore, the absence of the reference to sexual



organs can imply the absence of folk significance of the ritual. As the community's performance of the ritual has changed, the gaps created due to the changed performance has been filled by the ritual symbols used by mainstream communities.

## **2.10. Objectification of Body**

If body can be considered as a space, then it does accumulate the concepts of society, religion and politics at the same time. This would attempt to throw some light on why the body of a performer is important in any ritual. As discussed in the previous chapter, the transformations in a ritual lead to the allocation of resources. Bodies are important resources in ritual performances as they signify the concept of production, purification, cultural amalgamation as well as modernization.

Let us begin with the purification of the body. The priests or the devotees before any of the rituals, apart from taking bath, wash their palms, mouth and sprinkle water on their head. The purification process is a method of creating a transcendental phase where the priest prepares himself to disengage himself from rest of the people participating in the ritual, and at the same time unite with the divine power. The rapid shaking of his head in *Pōncōpu:ja:* by the priest is not only a part of the ritual but it is also an attempt to convince the audience that there is a supernatural intervention in the process.

In the ritual of *Huḍum ḍeo*, women bending on the ground and pulling a plough around brings an imagery of being transformed into animals. In this case, human body stands as a metaphor of cattle which allows us to look into the transaction between man and nature. The anthropocentric nature of the ritual throws light on a broader perspective of Rajbanshi culture adhering to the social responsibility of women to produce. If we consider this performance as a mimicry, then

the ritual space is an already established stage which is based on beliefs. The worshipping deities for the fulfilment of basic human necessities is nothing but an act of reverence towards nature. In this particular case, acting like cattle represents the idea of features external to the body being transferred inside so as to please the deity.

Lastly, speaking about bodies in their literature, the sexual organs are repeatedly mentioned in the *bõhõ* songs or *Huðum ðeo* songs. The purpose of such references in ritual spaces is to encourage the sexual interaction for the purpose of production. According one of the informants, earlier in the day of Holi, such songs were sung by people while playing a *Sangi Dhaak* across the village.

In each of these cases mentioned above, body is an existing example of binary between the dominant and the recessive. In other words, power assumes the role a body has to play, which may vary from assuming a supernatural power to that of ritual songs or performances supposing a power of delivering to the human needs. However, the same human needs when are addressed due to the advancement of technology, the significance of body is changing in the rituals. For example, the necessity of worshipping to *Huðum* for crop production has decreased due to the advancement in technology, and therefore, the necessity of gathering in naked bodies in a secluded place has also become discretionary. Along with that, the mainstream tabooing of covering the bodies in any gathering has also made this ritual non-functional.

### **2.11. Refuting the mainstream rituals:**

The mainstream Hindus in Bengal claim *Rajbanshi* to be a variation of the Hindu community. According to the documents of *Devaprasad Bandopadhyay*, both Bengalis and Assamese claim *Rajbanshi* to be a part of their larger community. However, the differences in the lifestyle and knowledge structure of *Rajbanshis* can posit a resistance towards these mainstream cultures.

As observed during data collection, some of the Rajbanshi rituals like B<sup>h</sup>a:nda:ni or ja:θra pu:ja: are observed in the time frame that coincides with that of mainstream Bengali rituals like Đurğa pu:ja:. However, the practices of these rituals refute the mainstream ones in many ways. For example, the absence of idol worships. This can be considered as an important sign of creating a counter hegemony because the ritual objects as such remain more related to nature than human. Secondly, the ritual space required also constitutes a space that doesn't need concretization. This can be explained by the structure of village temples or θ<sup>h</sup>a:ns observed. Most of the θ<sup>h</sup>a:ns are constructed in an open space like a field or a farm land. The deities in the θ<sup>h</sup>a:n are made of clay or stone and their shelter is demarcated by four bamboo sticks in four corners. Though cemented θ<sup>h</sup>a:ns are replacing the old ones gradually, even then the presence of the primitive θ<sup>h</sup>a:ns represent a close bond between the community and nature.

Another practice of refuting mainstream ritual is the acceptance of egg in the ritual space. This particular practice not only presents their culture as a different one from the mainstream but also questions the concept of purity and pollution imposed on them by Hinduism. Here, it is worthwhile to see how a major Rajbanshi population adopted Hinduism. According to Sanyal<sup>19</sup>, who takes his idea from Hunter's document, Visva-Sinha who was the grandson of fifteenth century Koch King Hajo, had adopted Hinduism along with his officers and his people (5). However, as Sanyal observes:

Their religious practices are in common, in a great measure, with those of the Upper-Caste Hindus in East and North Bengal, the Kacharis, the Mechs, and the Anams. The more and

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<sup>19</sup> Hunter made his observations in Statistical Account of Bengal Vol-X which later on became one of the fundamental source for S.K Chatterjee and Sanyal.

backward illiterate members of the Rajbanshi caste still maintain practices inconsistent with orthodox Hindu beliefs. (Sanyal 134).

The above-mentioned inconsistency which has been associated with social backwardness or illiteracy in other words can be called a product of oral history of this community. The influence of oral history or oral narratives will be discussed in details in the next chapter. However, the question that arises here is that when these kind of interactions in the rituals take place, does it mean that the sacred space is getting polluted? What is the purpose of such discourses? Egg is not only an animal product here, but also a symbol of procreation. Prayers for fertility transcend from nature and are perceived through human needs or vice versa. Nature gets embodied in human figures and therefore, the requirements of earth and those of women are viewed from the same spectacle. Production is an important factor that has been addressed while analysing these rituals.

In the mainstream Hindu communities of Bengal, the boundaries of purity are strict compared to the Rajbanshis. The concept of non-vegetarian items is considered impure in the mainstream. The influence of Vaishnavism contributes largely to this practice. Though animal sacrifices are followed, but they are limited to the Shaktas or the worshippers of Shakti or Kālī. The animals sacrificed mostly include goats or buffaloes. Sacrificing birds or bird products are not popularly observed in such cases. Hence, the ritual practices of Rajbanshis signify that their rituals are not same with the mainstream Hindu rituals.

The ritual texts, in a sense, construct an identity for the Rajbanshi community. Their rituals on the one hand projects their belief systems and cultural values which are different from the mainstream communities. On the other hand, these rituals act as a store-house of their language, literature and ethnicity.



This chapter has identified the experienced performances of the Rajbanshi community and traced their belief systems in order to identify their relationships with the natural entities like forests, rivers and rain. This chapter explored the relationship between rituals and their corresponding myths, the changes occurring in the enactments of those rituals due to cultural transformations, and therefore, the inclusion of other mythical stories in the process of forming narratives.

## Chapter III

### Oral Narratives and Historiography

The objective of this chapter is the necessity of writing history of a community. This chapter will address the questions like how narratives and meta-narratives help in making history, what is the role of oral narratives and how the two parts of oral narratives, aural and memory, function in performances.

Etymologically, the word ‘narrative’ has its root in late Latin *narrativus* which means "suited to narration"<sup>20</sup>, and the word narration is derived from Latin ‘*Gnarus*’ which means ‘knowing’<sup>21</sup>. Therefore, the need of narratives comes from the basic need of learning a form of knowledge or it can also be the necessity of transference of this knowledge. As Heidelberg observes, the word narrative may also have its origin in ‘*narro*’ meaning ‘to relate’ or ‘to tell’, originating from the Sanskrit root word *gñā*, meaning ‘know’ (White 215). According to Roland Barthes, narrative is present everywhere and it is ‘international, trans-historical, transcultural’ (White 1). This reflects on the story-telling capacity of narratives which hints that narratives have an essential base which remains same across time and space. This base structure in terms of Hayden White is ‘a meta-code’ which has a universal property of conveying messages about a common reality (1).

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<sup>20</sup> The origin of ‘Narrative’ can be found in “mid-15c., *narratif*, “biographical, historical,” from Late Latin *narrativus* “suited to narration,” from Latin *narrat-*, stem of *narrare* “to tell, relate, recount, explain”. Meaning “of or pertaining to narration” is from c. 1600.” (“Narrative | Search Online Etymology Dictionary”) ([www.etymonline.com/word/narrative#etymonline\\_v\\_2291](http://www.etymonline.com/word/narrative#etymonline_v_2291))

<sup>21</sup> The origin of ‘Narration’ can be traced to “early 15c., *narracioun*, “act of telling a story or recounting in order the particulars of some action, occurrence, or affair,” also “that which is narrated or recounted, a story, an account of events,” from Old French *narracion* “account, statement, a relating, recounting, narrating, narrative tale,” and directly from Latin *narrationem* (nominative *narratio*) “a relating, narrative,” noun of action from past-participle stem of *narrare* “to tell, relate, recount, explain,” literally “to make acquainted with,” from *gnarus* “knowing,” from PIE *\*gne-ro-*, suffixed form of root *\*gno-* “to know.” (“Narration | Origin and Meaning of Narration by Online Etymology Dictionary”) ([www.etymonline.com/word/narration#etymonline\\_v\\_2290](http://www.etymonline.com/word/narration#etymonline_v_2290))

The universality of the code is man-made because the expression of knowledge or experiences needs a language.

In structuralism and formalism, narrative assumes a definite form of representing events, where usually the first-person narrator tells the story. On the contrary when we shift from a narrative to a discourse, the story is told by the events themselves and the necessity of a narrator is shrunk (White 2). While objectivism lessens the authoritative effect of a single narrator, where it lacks is that the events chosen to represent themselves need to be real. This implies that the imaginary events do not find a space to narrate themselves. By imaginary events, the researcher does not imply them to be un-real. They are not the binaries or equal opposites. The imaginary events are products of memories which are equally significant for study of oral narratives. In the words of White, “mythic narrative is under no obligation to keep the two orders of events, real and imaginary, distinct from one another” (3-4).

The intention here is to highlight the relationship between narrative and knowledge. In the previous chapter, it has already been mentioned how knowledge structure creates a worldview, and why Rajbanshis have followed a particular knowledge structure through their ritual practices. Taking the clue from there, in this chapter first we shall see why orality is vital in constructing knowledge. According to G. N. Devy, “Sensation accumulates in human experiences, finds a place in human memory and becomes what is known as knowledge. Sometimes imagination excites the intellect, unites with it, and becomes knowledge” (46).

The primary ingredient in the formation of knowledge therefore is experience. What experience consists of are events and practices, and repetition of these practices which result in finding the place in human memory which later unites with imagination to form various knowledges. If the example of Huđum đeo is taken, then the event might have been a lack of rain or drought

experienced by the Rajbanshi community for which they imagined supernatural forces acting upon it. As a remedy, their devotion towards Huðum ðeo was an accumulation of beliefs that resulted in the beginning a ritual to please the rain-God. The repetition of similar events of drought or shortage of rainfall resulted in continuation of the same belief. Hence a concrete idea of Huðum ðeo ritual fostered its knowledge among the members of the community to continue the belief system. Once the knowledge is formed, each time its practice brought about differences due to different locations or space, and consequently different knowledges generated different narratives. Later on, whether the event itself repeated or not, the knowledge and the narratives remained to be a part of the oral history. Thus, White's argument of not separating real and imaginary in a mythic narrative is sufficed by Devy's idea of knowledge broadening its space to accommodate reality and imagination together.

Reality and imagination form an intricate system of dialectics which derives from the tendency of ascribing an abstraction to the unknown. The forces of nature which human minds are often unable to comprehend are conveniently assigned to external agents, and according to Frazer, a savage mind believed that these forces can be regulated by "prayers, promises or threats" (10). In this project, the researcher is looking at the word savage not in the light of being uncivilized, but focussing on the idea of a community that lacks a modern scientific knowledge to understand the laws of nature stands. The concept of imagination, therefore, does not act as a polar opposite to 'real', but becomes a mere thought of filling up the gaps of reality which are incomprehensible. In other words, the birth of magical forces of nature is a conflict between 'what is known' versus 'what is unknown'. Thereby, body and soul are separated, where former takes the role of 'real' because its presence can be seen and felt, and the latter takes the role of 'imaginary'. Since the mythic narratives that we are discussing here come from the people, from their oral sources, the



inner tension between the two is also non-linear. Whether it is animism or modern religions, a physical form can be ascribed to the super-natural powers, and as Ludwig Feuerbach validates it by writing, “Religion is a dream, in which our conception and emotion appears to us as separate existences, beings out of ourselves” (Feuerbach 204-205). However, these images are created to fulfil the material needs of folks. That is, whatever the folks lack in their own capacity to achieve in terms of fulfilling their basic necessities, or whenever they are faced with a challenge posited by nature which they are not able to overcome, the birth of a magico-religiousness takes place. In the second chapter we have already seen that the ritual narratives mostly mediate around the production and reproduction, where the former is in terms of food supply and the latter in terms of population. As long as a community is capable of growing sufficient food supply and do not suffer from unrestrained fatality, the need of depending on any super-natural power do not take a predominant form.

However, a belief system on the folk deities are developed from this need of protecting the community from any disaster. This belief system, again, does not have a concrete form pertaining to the limited benefits that they receive from it. Hence, it becomes susceptible to the dominant belief system which can provide more outcomes, and therefore, they accept the form which allow them to upgrade themselves to a better lifestyle. The influence is seen not only in terms of their religious practices but the culture as a whole. It rightly substantiates to what Devy terms as the ‘political context’ of any knowledge system: “In a given society those who are in position of power or domination always like to make what they alone know, as knowledge. What the others not in a position of power know ceases to be knowledge” (46).

Therefore, the narratives, too, acquire the knowledge provided by the dominant or the superior. Now that the idea of what initiates a magico-religious belief system, the advent of reverence

towards super-natural power, and thereby, associating it with a particular knowledge system has been comprehended, it is the time to see why the changes appear in them. Since ritual practices cannot be devoid of religious thoughts, the oral narratives concerning them in a community are directly proportional to the changes that occur in religious practices. In Walter J. Ong's words:

Religious practices, and with them cosmologies and deepseated beliefs, also change in oral cultures. Disappointed with the practical results of the cult at a given shrine when cures there are infrequent, vigorous leaders—the 'intellectuals' in oral society, Goody styles them (1977, p. 30)—invent new shrines and with these new conceptual universes. Yet these new universes and the other changes that show a certain originality come into being in an essentially formulaic and thematic noetic economy. They are seldom if ever explicitly touted for their novelty but are presented as fitting the traditions of the ancestors. (Ong 41-42)

Ong's assertion on the failure of desired results from ritual practices and therefore switching into more befitting traditions is reasoned out well. Simultaneously, it scores deep down to the concepts of exchange in production systems. The "new conceptual universes" that Ong mentions are facilitated by the extension of knowledge repository that a community preserve. The intersection of cultures let the communities indulge in the exchange of products which can be artifacts, mentifacts as well as sociofacts.

In the course of discussing contribution of oral history in formation of narratives, we need to look at how history itself needs to be considered while formation of an oral text. The concept of text in an oral culture is not restricted, unlike the ones that we find in case of writing. As Ong mentions, "an oral culture has no texts" (33). Therefore, the absence of prescribed or definite

texts facilitates the inclusion of everything that gets stored in memory to suffice that absence.

Ong furthers his idea by mentioning that:

In a primary oral culture, to solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought, you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence. Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses, in alliterations and assonances, in epithetic and other formulary expressions, in standard thematic settings (the assembly, the meal, the duel, the hero's 'helper', and so on), in proverbs which are constantly heard by everyone so that they come to mind readily and which themselves are patterned for retention and ready recall, or in other mnemonic form. (34)

Ong's idea of a text is thus formed if a person is able to reproduce his/her thoughts in a repetitive pattern in an oral culture. It is a structure in which the minds are organized which help in the recognition of the text. On the other hand, Michel Foucault in his introduction to the *Archaeology of Knowledge* alludes to the work of history being not merely to learn and remember what has happened in the past, "monuments of the past", but to convert the documents into monuments (7). Foucault's idea of 'monument' in this particular framework is equivalent to what we call "text" which he has tried to free from the burden of being fastened with past. Hence, his idea of the work of history surpasses the phase where relics of the past were only restituted in a historical discourse and it has attained the phase where history itself seeks to be the essential requirement or clause of building a text. In this thesis, a text comprises of the thoughts that are recalled or remembered as well as the events that take place in contemporary time period.

### 3.1 Oral Memory, Narratives and Translation:

Rituals need a closer study of oral memorization because they ensure a content, style and formulaic structure.

Oral memorization is subject to variation from direct social pressure. Narrators narrate what audiences call for or will tolerate. When the market for a printed book declines, the presses stop rolling but thousands of copies may remain. When the market for an oral genealogy disappears, so does the genealogy itself, utterly. (Ong 65)

In the first chapter, it has already been discussed how readership is important for translated works. However, the above lines of Ong also show us the difference between the written and the memorized texts. While written texts leave the possibility of revisiting the relics of unsold copies if they are archived, in case of oral texts, an audience of huge numbers may choose to forget the entire genealogy itself. If the audience are grounded in their beliefs that the rituals will fulfill a certain expectation, then they will try to remember and repeat. A typical example of this can be the ritual of Huđum đeo which has been chosen to be forgotten because the entire ritual, including its performances, its songs etc, does not fit to be heard by the modern audience within the community unless the listeners want to engage in the academic work. The Rajbanshis of Jalpaiguri and Moynaguri have informed the researcher that the Huđum đeo ritual is no more practiced because of the nudity involved in it. The modern Rajbanshi women are hesitant about unveiling their body in front of other women. Also, they consider such practices to be primitive and hence, the relevance of the ritual has also reduced as the community has adopted professions other than agriculture. The Rajbanshi informants of the Dhuburi district of Assam have disclosed to the researcher that the practices of Huđum đeo songs or dances are still found only in the form



of stage performances, and not ritual practices. The Rajbanshi researchers, in academia, are the only people who discuss on this ritual without hesitation, as observed by the researcher.

Before going into oral memory, it is necessary to understand how memory itself assists in the process of forming a narrative. White puts together Lacan, Barthes and Nietzsche to explain this phenomenon:

In the acquisition of language, Lacan had suggested, the child also acquires the very paradigm of orderly, rule-governed behavior. Barthes adds that in the development of the capacity to assimilate “stories” and to tell them, however, the child also learns what it is to be that creature that, in Nietzsche’s phrase, is capable of making promises, of “remembering forward” as well as backwards, and of linking his end to his beginning in such a way as to possess if he is to become a “subject” of (any) system of law, morality or propriety. What is “imaginary” about any narrative representation is the illusion of a centered consciousness capable of looking out on the world, apprehending its structure and processes, and representing them to itself as having all of the formal coherence of narrativity itself. (White 36)

The concepts of real and imaginary which we discussed in beginning of this chapter can therefore be illuminated under the study of memory itself. Taking this instance of Nietzsche’s remembering of the two ends actually helps in delimiting the study of a text from either side. In other words, to study a narrative which is based on memory, we need not look back only in the past but also to be receptive about how the memory works in the present and how it will anticipate the future. Remembering forward, therefore, means thinking beyond or hypothesizing the imaginary.

Remembering or memorizing is always evaluated in terms of how much data can be regenerated and this regeneration of data is nothing but an act of translation. In this thesis, the idea of regeneration means the ability to restore the lost data as similar as possible to the original. In the process of restoring the data, the existing gaps are filled with translator's own imagination or creativity. The concept of regeneration can be defined as Robinson refers to a network of procedural and representational memories which later on aids in translation activities (51). However, it needs to be explored how these memories are related and why precisely we need to study them. The subconscious memory of the translator stores that knowledge which she has learnt without being strictly aware of it. The procedural memory accumulates such kind of experiences of the translator. On the other hand, representational memory emphasizes on the compulsory learning process of translators and conscious demonstration of them.

In this thesis, oral memory in ritual practices assimilates both because, as the researcher has referred earlier, rituals try to abide by a definite form or pattern. Considering the ritual practitioners as translators, we can divide their practices into two parts. First part is initiated by representational memory where all patterned behaviour can come into existence. For example, the cleansing before beginning a pu:ja:, collecting the ingredients for the pu:ja:, chanting of *mṇṭrās* etc. This memory is aided by forceful reminder of other acquainted members of the community, if any part of the ritual is forgotten. In Me:ce:ni ritual, Rajbanshi women gather from the commencement of the ritual, i.e, leaving the house for Me:ce:ni K<sup>h</sup>ela: and continue till they return in evening. On the last day of Me:ce:ni, they collectively go to the temple premise where Bhura emersion takes place. In this entire practice, the elderly women take a lead role to remind whenever an act is forgotten. In Me:ce:ni K<sup>h</sup>ela:, per se, when they visit the houses of

villagers to collect alms, if the woman residing in any of those houses forgets to bring a stool, she will be promptly be reminded by the others in the group.

The priest plays one of the most important roles in terms of representational memory. There are two categories of priests: Pa:ṭḍai and Ka:nṭulṣi. The Ka:nṭulṣi priests, who learn priesthood from their forefathers, serve typical examples of representational memory. The knowledge learnt by them need conscious effort and they tend to be very precise with their works in households and temples, both. They would prescribe the exact number of dṅa:s to be made for every ritual. In Kāli pu:ja:, when Rajbanshis offer earthen lamps to their late ancestors, the priest would direct every individual the exact order in which they should behave, like to place the lamps correctly on gussa:, to prostrate on the ground for veneration, or to touch the feet of elders and so on. In case of procedural memory, the appropriate example would be those Rajbanshi women who actively participate in folk dances or folk songs in the rituals without consciously learning them. Their way of looking at Me:ce:ni songs, for example, is a habitual learning which continues for a period of time. From childhood onwards, the girls assist their mothers or neighbourhood ladies for Me:ce:ni k<sup>h</sup>ela: and try to imitate their steps while dancing and singing. Even uluḍ<sup>h</sup>oni or ululation is learnt by copying them. This is one of the reasons why most of the women were not able to answer why any ritual is practiced or what is the mythical stories behind any ritual.

Their understanding of the ritual remains limited to a binary of benevolence and malevolence of spirits who become pleased when an annual offering is made to them after production of crops and become enraged if they fail to do so, respectively. However, in the process of learning ritual practices, they acquaint themselves with certain symbols that need to be maintained, like Me:ce:ni's umbrella that a Me:ce:ni team carries, or grains of paddy that needs to be given when a Me:ce:ni ḍḍol comes to a house for collecting alms. Here comes their negotiation when

replacement of objects take place and they try to substitute with most suitable items to retain the symbols. In case of replacing a bamboo umbrella, they select a modern steel and plastic umbrella for the ritual. If a family does not have whole paddy in their house, they offer the polished rice grains in return. These kinds of negotiations can be seen as instances of their presence of mind or in other words their representational memory. Even the representational memory, through practices, do become a part of procedural memory at times. Hence, a complex network of these two memories constructs a working memory that needs to be historicised.

Working memory aids in formation of a message which has a discursive function, either communicative or performative. While the purpose of communicating is just “conveying a message about an extrinsic referent”, in this project, the performative model is more appropriate because it concentrates on “complex multilayeredness of discourse and its consequent capacity to bear a wide variety of interpretations of its meanings” (White 39). When we look into history for a communicative function, the data is considered as a message of information and explanation. This method is more of a cause and effect relation where we tend to look at coherence of the discourse. Where content takes a primary position. The crisis of such discourse is that it does not offer a space to multiple kinds of narratives that a culture can provide. On the other hand, the performance model is capable of bestowing various levels of interpretations because of their artistic or poetic attributes. Form of narrative becomes prominent here instead of content and the data is looked at not in terms of cause and effect, but in terms of meaning making. According to Gadamer and Ricoeur, “the ‘method’ of historicogenetic sciences is hermeneutics, conceived less as decipherment than as ‘interpretation’, literally ‘translation’ a ‘carrying over’ of meanings from one discursive community to another” (White 49).



Here, the “carrying over” of meanings essentially allows the oral text from being obscured in either objective or subjective ways of studying. Consequently, these texts coming from the past is an outcome of individuality and communality both. Originality of an individual added to the texts on a temporal dimension produces what we refer as historical knowledge. Each generation adds their own ideas to the oral text and that becomes a marker for the next generation to refer when the latter is learning these oral texts. The former generation’s originality or creativity, hence, becomes a history for the next. Me:ce:ni songs and dances are suitable examples where we can see how individuality blends with communality. In the previous chapter, song 3 in section 3.3 is one of the cases where the poet’s originality comes into play. Even though this individuality is a product of other cultural influences, we cannot ignore the fact that it has been adopted integrally by the community to promote their own rituals. Similarly, inclusion of Sarees instead of gɔɔji or fʰəθa during ritual performances is also a part of their artistic individuality.

In the folk narratives, the texts include both artifacts and mentifacts. Therefore, every action is equivalent to a text. This means that actions are structural and hence, they can be deconstructed into fragments and those fragments can be studied in the framework of socio-political contexts. For instance, the adoption of holy threads by Ɔðʰika:ris allocates the idea of priest class in Rajbanshi community and imitates Hindu Brahmins in order to be parallel with them. The action of rotating their hands around holy thread or poite itself shows how Rajbanshis have adopted mainstream Hindu texts. Even the ritual of Bɔnni pu:ɔa: contains two parts: first part comprises on ritual near a river, and the second part is of idol worship. Therefore, it becomes a union of two different texts at the same time.

Next, when we say that there is a possibility of multiple interpretations and hence plurality of meanings, the intention is not to see these meanings in opposition of a scientific or logical

discourse that can be created by cause and effect relations. Rather it is paving a path for extension which allows imagination and reality to progress together. In White's opinion, a specific past of a community can be examined by both historical and non-historical (like anthropological, ethnological etc.) methods but narrative is a shared mode of discourse in both of them. Since narrative allows imagination to cultivate along with real events, the discourse is inclusive of "linguistic, grammatical and rhetorical features" (White 57). The progress of imagination and reality while re-producing a text are not independent, but complementary to each other. The relation between these two can be read from the viewpoints of Victoria Welby's "translative thinking", where she suggests that "everything suggests or reminds us of something else" (Petrilli 233). Susan Petrilli furthers this idea and writes that in translative thinking there is a relation between different sign systems and "one sign is more fully developed, enriched, criticized, put at a distance, placed between inverted commas, parodied or simply imitated, and in any case, interpreted in terms of another sign" (233). The second sign here is the imagination which is possible only if there is an availability of the previous sign. Hence, a re-produced text is conceivable provided that a previous text is remaining in the memory of the translator or the performer.

### **3.2 Reading Oral Texts:**

Since the attempt is to establish reading as an act of translation in this project, therefore, it needs to be supervised that how oral texts are woven across time and how we read time as well in the course of it. The cognition of time in reading these texts cannot be linear unlike other written texts since we do not have a point of initiation. Hence, if we look into ritual narratives, the ready availability is of the one which is present at the moment. To reduce this process in Ricoeur's words, what we find is, "By reading the end into the beginning and the beginning into the end,

we learn to read time backward, as the recapitulation of the initial condition of a course of action in its terminal consequences. In this way, the plot does not merely establish human action “in” time, it also establishes in memory” (183).

To substantiate this argument, the narrative of tree-marriages in Rajbanshi community can be studied in this regard. The consequences of tree marriages are establishment of a belief to sway the supernatural menaces that are probable in a marital or sexual relationship. Marriage between trees is also extending the anticipation of fertility of women. Formation of such beliefs is our immediate availability, or in other terms, the end product. Hypothesizing an introduction to this form is a viewpoint of the community’s own engagement with nature or natural resources. It is an endeavour of simultaneous production of both natural and human resources to keep a balance between the two. In an agrarian community, like that of Rajbanshis, a tendency of dependence on nature is inevitable and consequently onsets of such beliefs are also feasible. A change in these beliefs occur only when other alternatives are reachable to them, which comes with modernization. Until then, the practices prevail and memory reproduces the plot in prerequisite environments. Similarly, in the case of Me:ce:ni ritual, its contemporary procedure, including pu:ja:, songs and dances, allows us to read only its end. This is one of the reasons why even those women who are practicing the ritual are unable to ascertain any kind of reason for its origin. A Me:ce:ni team only recapitulates what they have received only as an ending and the entire ritual recreates itself when these women serve it from their memory. Consequently, our reading can only postulate a relation between human needs and their relationship with rivers. As mentioned in Chapter 2, this ritual addresses the anxieties of fertility, diseases, crop-production and natural calamities like flood.

What emanates from reading back in time is that repetition itself is nowhere different from translation as memory reproduces the plot in a language which is mutual with time. Ricoeur's idea of the three phases of time, "having-been, coming-forth and making present" (189), needs to be understood while analyzing Rajbanshi ritual practices. The first phase "having-been" is more of an acknowledgement of the existences of these rituals while the second phase is the act itself. The third phase, i.e. making present is a shared responsive phase which associates the rituals with public time. In other words, the agents of repetition, i.e., those who are repeating the ritual narratives, choose a language which they are more familiar with. The familiarization of a language and its speakers do not differ from the socio-cultural space and time they are living in. So, as they repeat, they translate the same content differently.

As soon as a story is well known —and such is the case with most traditional and popular narratives as well as with the national chronicles of the founding events of a given community—retelling takes the place of telling. Then following a story is less important than apprehending the well-known end is implied in the beginning and the well-known episodes as leading to this end. (Ricoeur 179)

In order to create an alternative history telling, what needs to be addressed is how 'others' represent their varieties versus the mainstream. The emphasis here should be on the versions rather than authenticity of the tale, and hence, true to Ricoeur's words, ensuing the story assumes only a secondary role. Re-telling or repetition therefore can occur in two different ways. Firstly, to an uninformed audience for whom following the story is important to accumulate the foundational knowledge. This category comprises of those who are outside the community or ignorant about their practices, including the researcher. Besides them, the people inside the community, for example children, who are recently getting acquainted will also fall into this



category. The second group of audience would include those who are culturally informed and able to continue the narrative re-telling. Here the story becomes well known and only decisive factor is its language and its context of articulation. To substantiate it, we can analyze the ritual narratives of Bəɹɔma Sa:nθi, Nōja: K<sup>h</sup>ǝja: and gac<sup>h</sup> Bija:ḥ. For the first two rituals, the researcher has been able to document the narrative as an unacquainted spectator whose primary aim was to accrue the knowledge and represent it in the project as accurately as possible. The third ritual, i.e., gac<sup>h</sup> bija:ḥ or marriage of a widow to a tree was retold from already documented information. Since the ritual and its episodes are already written with an apprehended “well-known end” and at the same time, there is no scope of validating it, all we are left with is re-telling it. When re-telling takes the place of telling, the audience is wider in terms of language as well as culture, time is also broadened and the medium is not fixed as oral or written.

Conversely, in the former cases, audience who intended to know, had to be present at the moment when the rituals were taking place, and they had to depend only on oral information. Attributing these features with regards to translation, we can construe that the scope of reaching a wider audience is more feasible in cases of meta-narratives than just narratives. While the intention of ritual narratives used in ritual spaces is to impart a cultural knowledge to the members of the community so that a broader room for further practices remains open, it is not the same in the case of the meta-narratives when they are re-told or re-written. Especially, when the meta-narratives are only in written form, the implication that its possibility of re-living has already come to an end. So is the case with most of those folk-narratives which have been mentioned in the third chapter. However, that does not close their chances of being communicated to their audiences or readers.

In the beginning of this chapter, it was mentioned the universal feature of a narrative is the meta-code. This meta-code brings together the two faces of time, which Ricoeur distinguishes as individual and public. It is the individual time in which a reader perceives and a public time in which s/he pursues or repeats. Ricoeur associates narratives with an essence of community and its function as repetition which is “on the plane of being with others” (188). This plane in Ricoeur’s outlook is also “the time of interaction”. As we study ritual narratives, the task of interaction juxtaposes itself with the performances which not only invites a group of people to ascertain a sense of identity, but also differentiate themselves from others. His analysis also questions the concept of heritage which is “transmitted from another to self”, and discards the perception of individual fate. In his own words:

It is this communal act of repetition, which is at the same time a new founding act and a recommendation of what has already been inaugurated, that “makes history” and that finally makes it possible to write history. Historiography, in this sense, is nothing more than the passage into writing and then to critical rewriting of this primordial constituting of tradition.(189)

The researcher intends to assert the analysis of documenting ritual narratives of Rajbanshis as an integral part of cultural historiography of West Bengal. The very notion of overlooking oral traditions comprehending to their inauthenticity does not stand valid here. At the same time, it also reckons the idea of the continuation of a tradition on the basis of a community’s activities, and not individual undertakings. Alongside, Ricoeur’s statement establishes the reason for death of a tradition as an outcome of a community’s unwillingness to repeat. A suitable example of this would be Huđum đeo ritual which has slowly perished because there was a lack of repetition and hence, its space has been assigned to only written texts which we have revisited in earlier

chapters. A community's willingness to repeat a text depends on the availability of its previous text in the memory of community's members as well as on their beliefs and their worldviews. As Petrilli writes:

Language shapes our worldview and, at the same time, is the product of relations among human beings, and among human beings and the "natural" environment. Language not only determines social praxis but is determined by it. However, semantic correspondences between verbal signs and objectual reality, that is, worldviews, are never direct or immediate. (253)

Ricouer's concept of public time for repetition of a text, thus, correlates to the semantic correspondence between verbal signs and objective reality endorsed by Petrilli. The objective reality in a given social structure may not be able to accept and reproduce the verbal signs given in a text instantly. The example of Huđum đeo ritual in contemporary period in the northern parts of West Bengal hence brings out the conflict of worldviews in terms of accepting the signs of other cultures.

Repetition needs to be looked at not only from the dimension of time but also from the linguistic angle. As Bakhtin mentions: "the reproduction of a text by the subject (a return to it, a repeated reading, a new execution quotation) is a new, unrepeatable event in the life of the text, a new link in the historical chain of speech communication" (106). In Bakhtin's view, unrepeatability of a text is inevitable because it does not confer to the sign systems which are transferable and therefore, "the text (as distinct from the language as a system of means) can never be completely translated, for there is no potential single text of texts" (106). Repetition of a text, thus, promotes what Susan Petrilli refers as "alterity of a text". According to her, there is a space or a "margin of alterity" which is always maintained by the languages, even in the cases of "internal

plurilingualism” (Petrilli 244). Even though the texts can never be completely translated because of dissimilar linguistic universes, yet they can get transferred because of the metalinguistic features which operate within both inter-lingual and intra-lingual sign systems. The metalinguistic transfer is possible because the alterity that languages reciprocate towards each other (Petrilli 244-245).

If we see this unrepeatability of texts in the light of reader response, a text conveys different meanings to the author and the reader; in this project’s case, we can call them the speaker and the listener. The author, in cases of oral texts, do not have a single identity because the nature of the oral texts is also not permanent. The identity of author, thus, gets converted to a person who is carrying the text. Orality is a fluid form which moves along with the people and their language and why Walter J Ong recognizes as “the basic orality of a language is permanent” (7).

Therefore, every individual, who carries the text in his or her memory and repeats it, becomes an author, a speaker and a translator at the same time. Because in doing so he or she is not only repeating the signs innate to the text but also altering it by adding or deleting of certain signs depending on the context. According to Maria Tymoczko, inference of an author or a translator being never completely predictive about reader’s responses, as the text, interlinked with context and intertext may generate entirely different meanings (284). As Bakhtin says, “language and speech communication (as a dialogic exchange of utterances) can never be identical” (108).

Then, the question arises how meanings can be extracted from a text? Tymoczko’s argument places the meaning of a text in both the planes of semantics and semiotics. According to her, even “form, genre, poetics (including sound, rhythm, rhyme, timing, duration, pace, and other literary conventions), and style carry meanings” (287). Therefore, in oral literature, our study does not get enclosed in looking at the semantic structure itself. For instance, the Me:ce:ni songs,



while performance, follow certain definite rhythms which is repeated. Even the fact that they are localized around a particular ritual bring them on a semiotic horizon. Thus, Bakhtin's Dialogism finds its ground on presenting non-identical prototypes in Me:ce:ni songs. When two Me:ce:ni ḍol or teams confront each other on their routes of collecting alms, they ritually greet each other with Me:ce:ni songs and dances. This particular act immediately bring them to a dialogic relationship, with a definite intention and actual realization of the same plan.

On the other hand, we cannot undermine the semantic contributions of the texts as well.

"Dialogic relations are relations (semantic) among any utterances in speech communication. Any two utterances, if juxtaposed on a semantic plane (not as things and not as linguistic examples), end up in a dialogic relationship (Bakhtin 117).

### **3.3 Shifts in Narratives**

First of all, a narrative entails two segments, knowledge and meaning, which constantly supplement each other. Tymoczko quotes Dasgupta and says that concept of "power-knowledge nexus" which "involves meaning as much as knowledge" to aptly confirm the fact that meaning in a text is as important as knowledge, and that the both are complementary to each other. In her opinion, "meaning is both dislocated and constantly contested" (Tymoczko 306). In White's words, "Narration is both the way in which a historical interpretation is achieved and the mode of discourse in which a successful understanding of matters historical is represented" (60). The first clause of White's statement implicates the necessity of meaning, while the second part emphasizes on how to accumulate the knowledge. Regarding the changes that take place in establishing the meaning of a text, Maria Tymoczko explains the limitations of over determination and under determination. According to her, a text is capable of holding multiple meanings pertaining to the factors of "language, content, culture, context, personal associations

and perspectives of translators” (298) etc., and hence it is not possible for a translator to perceive all those meanings at a time. Also, at a temporal level, we cannot enclose the text in definite boundaries. At the same time, under determination of meaning, which is a result of ambiguity of utterances, nature of languages and communication, lead readers to supplement a text with their own interpretations. Both of these indeterminacies are ample in the context of Rajbanshi folk narratives. In the case of over determination, the fact that these narratives are orally constructed and transmitted, the temporal framework has itself opened up a chance for expansion and renunciation. Simultaneously, the narratives are undated, un-authored, and therefore, largely decontextualized. In Tymoczko’s own words:

Meanings can be lost over time, as is seen in the case of the anonymous texts that have come down from the past, whose origin in time and space is mysterious. Many sacred texts fall into this category, and scholars try to determine their historical evolution in part so as to better interpret (and translate) them”. (301)

When meaning is shifted from one social space to another by narrative means, the realities also make a shift. Therefore, the former reality tends to come to a closure and a new reality evolves in its place. To elaborate on this, we need to consider what Bakhtin calls as “given” and “created”. Bakhtin brings up these terms in reference to speech utterance and according to his view, an utterance is more than a ‘reflection’ of any extrinsic object. It is never an absolute and therefore, it always opens possibility for “something absolutely new and unrepeatable” (119). At the same time, he is aware of the dialectic nature of this newness and reminds us that the creation takes birth from something that always has been given. Me:ce:ni songs mentioned in Chapter 2 would be a pertinent example to deduce Bakhtin’s idea. Each of those songs are created on same given content, i.e, the ritual practice. However, their forms have varied from lyrical composition to

musical configuration. In fact, the songs themselves have become “given” factor to produce further differently “created” Me:ce:ni songs. This entire system of knowledge formation can be represented as:

**Given 1 → Created 1/Given 2 → Created 2/Given 3 → Created 3/Given 4...**

As Bakhtin writes, “Words and forms as abbreviations or representatives of the utterance, world view, point of view, and so forth, actual or possible. The possibilities and perspectives embedded in the word; they are essentially infinite” (120).

So, in Rajbanshi community, the word Me:ce:ni does not solely represent a ritual, but embodies an entire world view in itself; the magical power, belief in supernatural, agrarian mode of survival, dependence on river and so on. Each of these possibilities are loaded with infinite new narrative creations that can again be used to revisit the past. Whatever is composed and listened to enter into a dialogic relation, and as Bakhtin says, once a sign enters into a dialogue it does not have a semantic end. However, he also postulates that a physical discontinuity can emerge if the “referential intention” and the “intention to be heard and understood” are separated (126). A study of Huđum đeo ritual will serve an appropriate example of this separation between referential intention and intention of being heard and understood. The intention of not being heard and understood is nothing but a lack of reception and in case of Huđum đeo this moderation is an outcome of cultural differences, along with superior power structure and modernized sciences. When a particular knowledge system does not get its acknowledgement among people, every sign related to that system becomes false and hence the semantic infinity also comes to an end.

### **3.4 Knowledge to Re-telling:**

To convert knowledge into narrative, what essentially requires is to assign meanings that would

determine movement of the text. Tymoczko's concept of two indeterminacies (Tymoczko 301) actually comes into play here since these indeterminacies influence the translators' choice for constructing their own meanings of the text. In fact, in her opinion, translators engage in both ways of outlining meaning of source text and constructing meaning of target text. Similarly, performers of oral narratives also engage in this dual activity of defining and making meanings through their interpretations. But, we need to recognize the fact that if there is an interpretation, then it must have an underline politics which reflects the subjectivity of the interpreter. The concept of "pure" interpretation is never ideal because it represses the factor of political authority in exploration of the object (White 59). Interpretations or understanding the layers of meanings itself has a dialogic nature. According to Bakhtin, a word or a sign does not belong to any particular individual. Both the speaker and the listener are capable of exercising their own authorities on the word (123). Apart from speaker and listener, the word also belongs to a third voice which refers to the one from whom the speaker himself/herself had heard. It is an infinite trio that responds to each other in a form of chain.

**Speaker 1 → Listener 1/ Speaker 2 → Listener 2/ Speaker 3 → Listener 3/ Speaker 4...**

This chain is similar to in the one provided within the previous section of this chapter. The only difference is while the previous chain was a representation of product, the latter one is a demonstration of the process. Both product and process are not only similar in their functional approach but at the same time, the process also becomes a part of the product. As Bakhtin writes, "... the person who participates in understanding constitutes part of the understood utterance, the text (more precisely, utterance and their dialogue enter the text as a new participant)" (123).

An illustration of Kḥaṭam puṇḍra: which has been mentioned in the third chapter serves as a relevant ritual in this aspect. A direct transformation of the speakers/listeners as mime objects of



study can be seen in the pictures. Though this is a minor example of a participant changing into a text, it does represent the idea of how a person can himself/herself carry a text in his/her body.

Apart from this, the performance of priests while they chant the hymns or *mōnθrōs* in whispering voice, also enters into a dialogic relationship of three voices. Firstly, between the priest and his disciple, whom he teaches the hymns or *mōnθrōs*. Secondly, the ‘being’ to whom the *mōnθrō* is addressed. For Rajbanshi folk minds, this third voice is a divine supernatural power.

Nevertheless, the mute spectators can also be considered as a part of this third persona, since they do not know what is being told, they are free to imagine them. A researcher or an observer is no exception to this phenomenon, because once one starts understanding a particular text, the experience of understanding marks him/her as a potential storehouse of knowledge. As Ong writes, “ In an oral culture, experience is intellectualized mnemonically” (Ong 35). This sufficiently explains that every act of memorizing is interlinked with some kind of event. A person who is undergoing the experience needs to imagine the event in order to connect with it. If it is a ritual, then s/he must connect to the pattern of the ritual in order to respond to it.

However, when what has been understood is transformed to what is being told, the subject’s context plays a very crucial role in the course, as these communication of knowledge can be useful in formation of a historical discourse.

In the process of writing on Rajbanshi folk-rituals, my understanding of cultural politics of Rajbanshi has been a very passive one. The ritual practitioners are habitual to perform and even accommodate alterations which come from the mainstream cultures. According to Tymoczko:

The role of translators in making meaning is frequently effaced, in some cases systematically so. There are strong cultural determinants in how meaning is constituted in translation and it is always in the interest of those in power to deny and disavow the

constructivist nature of meaning. This institutionalized disavowal impinges on how translation is viewed and how translators are trained and supervised. Those in power have an investment in attempting to limit, define, and regulate meaning, in large part because power rests on the way meaning is controlled and constructed as much as it does on physical coercion. (305)

The subordination of Rajbanshi rituals have been a very systematic one so far. Starting from allocating the resources, like idol worship, to visual representations, like wearing white sarees with red border, they have slowly merged in Bengali mainstream culture. Their language has also offered minimum resistance on dominating nature of mainstream pertaining to the mode of production that they depend on. The impact of modernization was not only in their politics as proposed by leaders like Panchanan Berma, but also their ready acceptance for denial of Koch identity origin. At the same time, rural Rajbanshi population had not built this awareness to readily resist or present themselves differently. Even though they practiced the rituals, their performance was not to assert themselves but to continue the same world-view of super-natural influences and complying with them. Again, Tymoczko's observation on translation becomes important here as she writes:

Only by being aware of their own ability to construct (and deconstruct) meaning – as well as ways that societies attempt to control meaning – can translators fully exercise their agency as meaning makers. Decentering power is not just a matter of politics, ideological struggles, ethics, and values: it is also an epistemological matter related to meaning and knowledge. (308)

Therefore, the gap between assigning meanings and perceiving knowledge still finds a strong root in Rajabanshi folk minds. Their memories are only a repository of old world-view and they

have not addressed the necessity of representing themselves against the mainstream through their ritual performances. As a translation studies researcher, the attempt was to only bring out the potential of their cultural resources, but a collective strength of these resources to contradict is yet to be achieved.

## Chapter IV

### Translation as Act and Art of Reading

Reading is an indispensable part of translation. Unless a text is being read, it cannot be translated. On the other hand, for comprehensive reading of a text, it is necessary that the reader understands the meaning underneath the text and adds it to her knowledge. Therefore, when a reader reads a text, she decodes the meaning embedded in the language of the text and finally recodes the essence of the text in her memory for future references. Similarly, in case of oral texts, the process of listening to the texts, observing the behavioural approaches related to the text and restoring the meaning of the text in memory together contribute towards the comprehensive reading of the text.

This chapter will address the three significant areas of what are being read, how they are being read and why they are being read. Firstly, the Rajbanshi folk narratives discussed in the previous chapters can be briefly categorized as oral texts, ritual performances and their corresponding indigenous narratives. Secondly, this chapter emphasizes on how a world-view is created through metonymy or substitution, as language plays the principal role. For this, Derrida's idea of logocentrism, (Johnson, ix) in which idea precedes the language, can be used. If idea here is the ritual act, then the expression is the changing language of the performances. The changing language is derived from the community's acts by direct observation. This change can be viewed in the light of Victor Turner's idea of position<sup>22</sup>. While Turner distinguishes between the ways

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<sup>22</sup> Victor Turner gives an account of three types of methods for the study of ritual. Exegetical position explains meanings and significance of a ritual by the insiders who participate in it. The operation dimension is given by the anthropologist who records it as an outsider. Lastly, the positional dimension is given by an anthropologist who is outsider but relates the signs and symbols to other societal cultures. (50)



anthropologists record the data (50-51), for this project, so far, the researcher has been able to work only on the operational dimension which involves as an outsider recording the rituals and observing how the participants behave and feel. Secondly, the act of reading is a subsumed practice of translation. Therefore, as a translator researcher, reading is not only an act of objective study of the text, but also interpreting the texts in cultural contexts, finding out the multiplicity of meanings that can be ascribed to the cultural signs and analyzing the transference of the texts.

The reasons for reading the Rajbanshi narratives can be condensed to three main factors. Firstly, reading the narratives will help in observing how experiences and their repetitions reinstate their cultural episteme, and hence, also discern the cultural differences that have got acquired. Secondly, this will help in understanding and bringing forward the narratives of the ‘othered’ in confrontation with the narratives of the ‘mainstream’ While modernization has largely contributed in assimilation of ‘othered’ communities in the larger realm of the mainstream, reading these narratives can provide an alternate space for the survival of their practices. Lastly, through reading the boundaries of existing cultural knowledge can be expanded and thereby, empowering translation as it plays the key role of transferring the knowledge, from one generation to another, from oral narratives to written texts, from othered language and culture to mainstream language and culture.

In this project, the concept of translation is identified in the following patterns:

- i) Translation of Rajbanshi narratives to English documentation
- ii) Translation as an act of reading Rajbanshi narratives from secondary sources and comprehending them

- iii) Translation as an act of listening and observing Rajabanshi folk narratives and interpreting the meaning of every object and action involved in doing so.
- iv) Translation as an act of re-telling, re-enacting and re-producing Rajbanshi folk narratives by the Rajbanshi performers.

The four steps mentioned above are, however, not ordered in the same sequence. The research question began with reading their narratives from secondary sources and understanding the knowledge structure these narratives carry with them. As the researcher's identity is not placed within the ethnic boundaries of the researched community, there is a need of translating the narratives in English, which enables the researcher to represent the documents, collected and interpreted. At the same time, it enables the researcher to communicate with a larger readership, across the cultures. The third step involved in this research is to listen and observe the folk-performances and folk-objects of the Rajbanshis located in northern parts of West Bengal and document them. The performances include the rituals, songs, dances, folk-stories as well as their behaviours. Lastly, the researcher has tried to read through the observations, interpret, return to secondary sources and understand their perspectives of performances, and comprehending the process and products of the Rajbanshi folk-narratives.

In the views of Christian J. Churchill, there are three levels of ethnographic translation. In the first level, the researcher and the primary informant communicate with each other. The second level involves the researcher connecting with the entire community through the primary informant. Finally, in the third level the researcher connects with the reader through translation of the data (14-16). This method helps the researcher to get acquainted with the larger population of the ethnic community and thereby, create a bridge between the community people and her readers. In this project, the researcher has followed the same method of connecting with the

Rajbanshi community by interviewing the Rajbanshi researchers, who had introduced her to the villagers for collecting the ritual narratives.

#### **4.1 Translation as a Process**

The process of translation is not only interlingual in this project but also explores the relationship between text and reader, narratives and narrator, objects and their associated meanings, body and performances, and experiences and the knowledge. Munoz Martin's third level of 'translation process', i.e. situatedness<sup>23</sup> has been used to define the process of translation (Saldanha and O'Brien 110). Since the data collected are associated with rituals, the myths related to the rituals and processes involved in the rituals, close observation of these data can elicit the changes taking place in every objects and agents involved in the ritual activities. The subject of ritual processing involves no prescribed commissioner because observing ritual process is an act of performance in itself. The word performance, here, foregrounds the action of practicing a ritual and the people performing the ritual are considered as performers. Lisa Gabbert quotes Bauman and writes that a folk-performer also "assumes a degree of responsibility to an audience" and therefore, any folk-performance becomes a space where it is possible to engage a performer and an audience into a certain mode of communication (122). A performance text, therefore, constitutes a space where the audience and the performers are meeting. It is an interface which allows an engagement between the two, and at the same time this engagement can be a conflict. In case of Rajbanshi rituals, it can be observed that every act in the ritual engages a communication between a performer and an audience. For the purpose of this project, the

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<sup>23</sup> "Munoz Martin (2010) argues that the notion of 'translation process should be understood on three levels. The first level is fundamental and pertains to mental states and operations at play during the act of translation. The second, related, level encompasses the sub-tasks that are executed during the mental act of translating (e.g. reading, typing and research). The third level refers to the situatedness of the translation process and includes everything and every agent engaged in the period of time from contact by the addressee." (Saldanha and O'brien 110)

researcher has attempted to see the social behaviours and symbolism/s connected to the rituals as well as document the entire ritual which contain the transformations within itself. With particular reference to Rajbanshi rituals, the performances related to it include activities starting from worshipping the nature and deities, singing, dancing, collecting alms, reading hymns, sacrificing and feasting. The transformations vary on the basis of language differences or the involvement of cultural impositions. The transformations also indicate the larger scope of incorporation which is feasible only if the ritual matrix is not restrictive in nature. If a ritual is flexible enough to merge ensuing changes due to increase in population, migration, changes in the natural environment, the possibility of transformation also increases.

We can relate this concept of ‘situatedness’ to George Steiner’s third step in hermeneutic motion where the variations occur in an already existing expanded semantic field<sup>24</sup>. In his own words:

The third movement is incorporative, in the strong sense of the word. The import, of meaning and of form, the embodiment, is not made in or into a vacuum. The native semantic field is already extant and crowded. There are innumerable shadings of assimilation and placement of the newly-acquired, ranging from a complete domestication, an at-homeness at the core of the kind which cultural history ascribes to, say Luther’s bible or North’s Plutarch, all the way to the permanent strangeness and marginality of an artifact such as Nabokov’s ‘English language’ *Onegin*. But whatever the degree of ‘naturalization’, the act of importation can potentially dislocate or relocate the whole of the native structure. (314-315)

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<sup>24</sup> According to Steiner, the hermeneutic motion, or the process of production and transferring of meanings has four stages: trust, penetration, embodiment and restitution. (301)



In terms of Me:ce:ni ritual, the time and space of the ritual is the semantic field which has the potential of incorporating changes. Owing to the unfixed nature of orality that this ritual is embedded in, the possibility of acquiring changes is high and there is an absence of a singular native structure. This allows the ritual practitioners to allow changes, in terms of objects and actions. Since the ritual practitioners have a pre-knowledge about the process of the ritual, they allocate their resources during the task. This brings together the idea of metacognition because the participants in the ritual are already aware of the process and they can identify and solve the problems involved during the process and at the same time they are also equipped with the strategies to manage the uncertainties. For example, drawing an understanding from the experiences of observing Me:ce:ni ritual for the purpose of this project, it may be said that the devotees have made necessary social and cultural adjustments<sup>25</sup> like involving a modern umbrella in the ritual which originally is supposed to be made of bamboo. Also, the emersion of Me:ce:ni was done in a pond instead of a river<sup>26</sup> which shows flexibility in their adjustments. The emphasis is largely on the working memory<sup>27</sup> because the act of ritual processing is depended more on repetitions rather than having a clear-cut idea of knowing the origin or source of the ritual. To refer back to Steiner, the researcher reads<sup>28</sup> the repetition as a submitting act of translation where the devotees/translators already exist in the corpus of a belief that there is something to be practiced and translated (27). While the term practice reflects to the experiences and experienced learning of the performer, the term translation hints at the knowledge that the

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<sup>25</sup> The phrase ‘cultural adjustments’ has been used in this context to indicate replacements that take place in a culture due to time and space. The signifier changes due to unavailability of resources but the idea/content remains the same.

<sup>26</sup> Refer to Chapter 2, pg. 31.

<sup>27</sup> The working memory is the procedural memory which has been discussed in the previous chapter, i.e, Chapter 3.

<sup>28</sup> Here, reading does not imply comprehending the meaning of written or printed texts, but multiple acts of observation, interpretation, translation and performance. Interpretation as a sub-category of reading refers to the process of meaning making in this context.

performers have accumulated through those learnings, which can be further transferred. This suggests an intrinsic nature of coerciveness within the rituals or the knowledge associated with the rituals. The assumption here is that social beliefs manifested for every ritual, for example not observing Me:ce:ni may affect the crops of the farmers, builds the ritual-enactment (translation) consciousness among the devotees. But once the trust or belief has already been conceived, what we need to look at is if there is any repetition of such beliefs. The repetitions would establish a similar pattern and would contribute to the formation of the history of the rituals. Theories on myths and rituals will further help in understanding how myths are subsumed by the rituals, and how knowledge is transferred through experiences.

W.R Smith, in his *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* mentions that the obligatory nature of rituals is not same in the case of myths (Segal 62). Myths are optional to rituals and we can see the same in case of Me:ce:ni since the ritual observance has a very limited narration on Me:ce:ni's origin. This contradicts Tylor's standard conception of myth which says that it is an explanation of the physical world and not of ritual, and operates independently. In the context of this research, myth is partially dependent on the rituals for its own existence because the mythical narrative of Σi:b and Me:ce:ni's relationship forms the alternative rationale of adapting the ritual in Koch Rajbanshi as well as Hinduised Rajbanshi culture. While the myth in Rajbanshi literature says that Σi:b fell in love with a Me:c (Mech) woman and therefore, left Kailasa to live in the valley with her, the Me:ce:ni songs on the other hand narrates the stories of Σi:b and Σoθi's relationship. The songs that the researcher has observed being performed in the Me:ce:ni ritual also carries this dissimilarity. As mentioned in chapter 2, in Me:ce:ni pu:ja: and Me:ce:ni K<sup>h</sup>ela:, Θi:sθaburi or river Θi:sθa is being worshipped. But in the Me:ce:ni songs, Σi:b-Σoθi's story is being re-told.

From James Frazer's 'Magical Law of Similarity'<sup>29</sup>, it is known that effects resemble the cause of an act (Hall 108). The entire process of ritualization is actually the effects of imitation that the ritual practitioners undergo. However, explaining the entire act of ritualization through this law has some limitations. Going by Frazer's first version that myth is the description of the act and ritual is the enactment of the myth, then the myth of Me:ce:ni is not a sufficient description of the ritual and neither is it only an enactment of the myth. Rather Jane Harrison and S. H. Hooke's concept of myth not being explanation of rites but rather considering the contemporary events in the ritual fits more appropriately in this case. As a result, myth turns out to be a story of magical intent and potency. In other words, ritual enactment is a type of imitations and the belief behind these enactments is a story which hints at the potential of magic or validation of desired results. In translation studies research, the story of Me:ce:ni can be seen as one which is capable of a discursive formation and leads to the constitution of a knowledge structure. This knowledge structure comprises of not only narratives but also commentary on the narratives. Thus, what is formed, is a pattern in the 'metafiction' where the story about a story reflects back to itself and upon the process of story-telling, too.

#### **4.2 Translation as Art of Reading**

For translation of a text there are two factors which are necessary, namely its readability and its translatability. In both the cases of reading and translation, the objective is to engage in an act of comprehending the meanings of a particular text. Deborah Cook has tried to assemble the ideas of Derrida, Jorge Luis Borges, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Wolfgang Iser and Jean Paul Sartre to derive a comprehensive relationship between reading and translation. While Derrida considers

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<sup>29</sup> Frazer's Law of Similarity states that like things produce like things, or that an effect resembles its cause (Frazer 1994). From these principles, the magician makes inferences. From the Law of Similarity, the magician infers that he or she can produce any effect that he or she desires just by imitating it. (Hall 108)

reading as transformational and translation can be substituted by transformation, Borges subsumes the idea of reading within a larger realm of translation. Writers like Sartre, Gadamer, Iser and Derrida have contributed towards the notion of reading as a production of any text. In Gadamer's opinion, translation comprises of interpretation in the process of which reading is considered as understanding of the text. Translation is considered as a means of survival of the text through language (Cook 143-145).

Cook furthers the discussion of the relation between translation and reading of a text and boils down to the fact that a text's translatability depends on the reader's understanding on possible meanings of the text. What comes into play is the reader's ability to comprehend its language. Therefore, the act of translation of a text becomes reader dependent. For translation, reading needs to be interpretative and the interpretation must reflect on the imagistic and affective sides of the text. Iser and Sartre also consider that reading is a blend of semantic elements and the silent or non-verbal imagistic elements (Cook 145).

Reading is an insertion of creativity because while reading, the reader attempts to engage his or her own creativity by reforming the text. However, it does not imply that a text can be read without a context or a situation. In Derrida's views, reading cannot be made outside the text unless there is an alienation already existing in the text in case of citing other authors. This alienation here refers to rejection of subjectivity of the reader. Even Walter Benjamin writes, "No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener" (253). However, for the act of translation or reading, the existence of audience is indispensable. Reading is the intermediate phase between translation and the original text. That is, a translated text is possible to exist only if the translator reads through it. But when a translator reads a text,



she becomes a co-creator of the text, and that is how we can make a distinction between a reader and a reader-translator.

The act of reading incorporates the idea of meaning making. To understand why the role of meaning-making is being given such importance, we have to return to Sartre's concept of existentialism which says "Existence precedes essence" (McGill 329). If meaning is not pre-determined, then the choice of conferring to a given/ established meaning or refraining from it, becomes a choice of the translator who primarily is a reader. In the present context, if we ascribe to structuralism, the data collected contains various ritual symbols each of which can be interpreted in terms of signifiers and signified. As Levi-Strauss applies these structural thoughts to analyse cultural changes, the relationship between humans experience a definite rule-governed status. In his studies, these rules are mostly centered on binary oppositions. This chapter will, however, not stay with such binaries.

The approach of looking into translation as mentioned above, categorically falls under the branch of product-oriented research. "The analysis of texts in their context of production and reception offers evidence of translator's decision making, which allows some insight into the translation process" (Saldanha 50). The decision-making act of the translator is significant here in order to understand how the information or data is being conceived. The idea of documentation is essentially a process in which the translator's subjective politics of choosing a piece of information, interpreting it and keeping a record of it comes into visibility.

Reading does not conform to a unified practice. It implies observation, translation, interpretation, performance and so on. Reading a text first of all compels us to ponder what a text essentially entails. According to Haydon White, a text is "an entity that once had an assuring solidity and

concreteness, indeed a kind of identity that allowed it to serve as a model of whatever was comprehensible in both culture and nature” (186).

Therefore, a text has some innate qualities that makes itself comprehensible or understandable.

That is, a text has some semantic features which is transferrable or translatable. If the text is moved from one linguistic and cultural context, it would retain some of its previous meanings.

‘Previous’ is not an equivalence of original but reference to a different situation or context. For example, the Me:ce:ni songs, as texts, transfer the myth of Σι:b and Me:ce:ni. The relationship between Σι:b and Me:ce:ni is a representation of phallus and water, both representing the concept of reproduction. But, as observed in Chapter 3, the Me:ce:ni songs do not only narrate the myths of Σι:b and Me:ce:ni but has also adopted the myths of Daksha, Σοθi, and Parvati in them. The name Me:ce:ni is used interchangeably with Θi:sθaburi, Σοθi, gouri in the songs.

A text essentially has ingredients in the form of words which have different meanings. This is what Derrida calls as the ‘play of textuality’, thereby, making a text fertile or productive (Powell 63). The productivity here intends as the capacity of producing different meanings. The different meanings may arise out of the cultural contexts in which the words are being used, or even from the linguistic usages as well. The word text has its root in Latin ‘*teks*’, a verb meaning “to weave, to fabricate, to make; make wicker or wattle framework”. Since a text is woven, it implies that the text is in a motion, and hence, it has no fixedness. Therefore, the meanings of the same text are also in flux, escaping the aspect of being singularly defined. The feature of weaving, which thereby leads us to the different meaning making, confers a text as a process rather than being just a product.

The artistic and aesthetic values of a text, as distinguished vividly by Wolfgang Iser in his essay ‘The Reading Process’ (Iser 279), respectively refer to the two poles created by the author and

realised by the readers. Readers, in this context, are the receptors of the text. In case of *Me:ce:ni* ritual, the women performers while learning the ritual act as these receptors or readers.

Therefore, as long as the readers do not recognise the text, the creative value or existence of the text remains incomplete. The readers' imagination in reading or interpreting of a community's oral narratives bring forward their understanding of their historical representation, their position with respect to the community and their politics of reading. In other words, the realisation conceived by the readers, in a way, create an alternate reality which is different from the reality conceptualized by the author. The performers of *Me:ce:ni* ritual do not merely replicate what they have been taught by their ancestors, but also add their own words, expressions, dance steps etc while performing it. In case of oral narratives, there is an absence of a single author which implies that there is a possibility of creating and imagining multiple realities. On this note, we also have to reinforce the interaction between reader's imagination and the text which is a process in continuum.

According to Wolfgang Iser, the reader's memory accumulates the knowledge that she gathers after reading a text and when it evokes later, its original does not reassume (Iser 283). The multiple meanings of each text reveal only when the reader is able to create a correlation between past, present and future. Reading ritual practices, therefore, allows the performers to associate the knowledge of their past with the adjustments of their present. The previously formed knowledge and the knowledge formation in continuum faces a blockage, and here Iser takes the idea of Ingarden, when there is apparently a breakage in the connection between the two (Iser 284). The break or the blockage allows to build a space which thereby allocates the reader's imagination to play. This decides the dynamicity of the text and meaning-formation takes a turn at this point.

What must not be undermined is that there is a space between the reader and the text. This space is often determined by how the reader is reading the text and its repetitiveness. In case of oral texts, the act of listening becomes equivalent to that of reading. As Iser writes, absorbing a text requires more than one reading (285). The similarity applies with oral texts too, and the repeating tradition of oral texts necessitate the listeners (who are also readers and performers) to learn and repeat them. The repetitions also reflect the absorbing competence as well as the experience of the reader who is repeating. In the words of Iser:

The manner in which the reader experiences the text will reflect his own disposition, and in this respect the literary text acts as a kind of mirror; but at the same time, the reality which this process helps to create is one that will be different from his own (since, normally, we tend to be bored with the texts that present us with things we already know perfectly well ourselves). (286)

The author or rather composer's influence on the text never reflects on the reader completely, this, precisely is the space where, the reader's imagination finds scope to realise the text or the event of the text in its own competence. The expectation that a reader builds about a text, therefore, may or may not be fulfilled after reading the entire text or even after comparing the event with the one as described by the texts. The folk songs or folk tales collected during the field work of this research often had no direct resemblances with the rituals on which they were performed.

Reading indigenous literature often comes from the understanding of selecting a smaller section of the large society and seeing them in the light of mainstream thoughts and philosophies. But the culture-specific readings necessitate to engage with the varied and multifaceted cultural contexts of many communities. Therefore, reading the literature of any indigenous community



requires to read not only the diverse settings in which that particular community has produced its literature but also the surrounding communities which have contributed their significant stimuli. Therefore, the reading instead of being limited to locations transcends to be of the people. The idea of peoplehood involves four elements namely land, sacred history, religion and language (Holm et al. 11). Here, the land is not seen as a holistic space but a space that has a sacred history of its own and it is often reflected through the religious practices and linguistic usages of people.

### **4.3 Performance and Translation**

In this thesis, Rajbanshi rituals have been observed extensively. Every action in the ritual including cleaning, worshipping, hunting, eating, immersing a ritual object, singing, dancing, dressing up, uttering *māṇṭras*, speaking etc. are parts of the ritual process. Each ritual process is observed by the ritual practitioners who listen/observe/take part/repeat these actions along with other members in the community. They decode the behavioural languages of other members who are pro in practicing these rituals. Thus, following the performances of others and applying them henceforth becomes a part of their own way of reading and translation. Secondly, the researcher as an outsider also observes the Rajbanshi rituals and do not take part in them. As an external observer, the researcher documents the ritual processes and tries to understand every action in a comparative study with other rituals within and outside Rajbanshi community. The idea of observing a ritual, understanding the beliefs within it of an ‘othered’ community and comparing it to mainstream community helps to make a cultural analysis of the two communities. On the third level, the readers who have not observed the rituals, either as a practitioner, or as an observer, understand the ritual process through reading of the ritual texts from secondary resources and gather a knowledge provided by the authors. For example, in the context of Me:ce:ni ritual, the Ma:rejani in Nirendrapur village has learnt the ritual by observing her

previous generation and now she is transferring the ritual acts to her younger generation. She acts as an active translator, who has read the oral text and translates it for the younger generation by extensive repetition. On the other hand, the researcher who has documented the Me:ce:ni ritual, observes it when the Me:ce:ni performs, compares the observation with secondary sources provided by Girija Sankar Ray and Charu Chandra Sanyal and also compares them with the rituals that are observed in mainstream Bengali communities.

Ritual objects used for practicing the rituals can be seen as translation products. Through these objects, the variations occurring in ritual process can be identified and the interpretation of the changes can be made. Through the observation of ritual objects, the influence of mainstream community can also be understood. For example, the replacement of clay mounds with idols mark a transition from the othered Rajbanshi community to mainstream Bengali Hindu community. While clay-mound is a product of Rajbanshi culture, idolatry is a product of mainstream Bengali Hindu culture. As Michaela Wolf writes, "... translation is a concept that opposes the view of culture as an agency preserving static views of tradition, instead highlights the dynamic transformations resulting from cultural confrontations of cultural formations" (3). The cultural confrontation of Rajbanshi and mainstream Bengalis are inevitable due to the interface of their locations and also the powerful domination by Bengalis.

Rather than thinking in terms of what is literature and what is not literature, the reading of folk narratives broadens the scope of looking at people/folks from a cultural view-point and the historiography thereby created is not only limited to the past but involves the ongoing translational process. At the same time the intended question of this project is to how to recognize the existence of alternative modernity in our readings.

Kristina Fagan writes about three ways of achieving an appropriate level of interpreting aboriginal literature in our process of looking at folk-texts, where the first one, i.e., “author-centric approach” (Deb 50) is of very little significance, though not negligible. The second one, i.e., “culture-specific study of native traditions and movements” plays the most important role since the motif is to apprehend the shift in the narratives. The third one, “study of the languages of the writers and how they affect those texts” (Deb 51), acts as an incentive to read the time-space variations in the narratives.

In a synchronic study of oral-narratives, the language can be studied without looking into the history of it. However, the approach here is also to look at it diachronically since that helps us to find a variety of meanings “The historical accounts of various indigenous communities, their languages and cultures point to the fact that in the history of colonialism the indigenous communities desisted from becoming ‘compradors’ at the risk of becoming the perennially marginalized.” (Devy xiv)

The inclusive and exclusive policies of reading is not new in post-colonial studies of literature. Firstly, there is a gap in our knowledge of cultural history of West Bengal. The linguistic and cultural diversities of North-Bengal has not been explored as extensively as Kolkata and other parts of southern Bengal. There are several communities like Toto, Mech, Rabha, Gurkha, Koch, Garo, Bodo etc in northern parts of West-Bengal and each of them have their distinct linguistic, ethnic and cultural practices. If their language and literature are included in the academia as well as non-literary spaces, it would increase the space for multiple discourses of knowledge. This takes us to the relation of power and knowledge proposed by Foucault which affirms that if there is no absolute truth, then knowledge is merely a collective decision made by the people in power. According to Foucault, “...the exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects

of knowledge and accumulates new bodies of information... The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power” (52).

The binary between mainstream and ‘others’ is thus created by people who hold the power, compared to the vast population and varieties, who decide on a reality which is imposed on the rest.

#### **4.4 Documentation**

In this part of the chapter, the researcher will explain why and how documentation itself can be an act of translation. From the ethnographic point of view, the data collected falls in the regiment of anthropology or the study of human sciences. However, the analytical mode the researcher has borrowed from Translation Studies and moreover, the transfer of knowledge within human beings categorically falls under the practices of translation rather than anthropology. Christian Churchill, in the essay ‘Ethnography as Translation’, claims that “For ethnographers, the human actions they observe represent to them very much the same thing that the text in its original language represents to the narrator” (4). The human actions mentioned here may vary from faith to fear, from individual to community, from regular routines to particular occasions etc. The ethnographer always have to choose what should be reported and for this project, the researcher has chosen to work on the ritual spaces which reflect the folk narratives.

Documentation, in a way, can be seen similar to that of Turner’s operational dimension (51), where researcher views the community from an outsider’s position and records every aspects of the rituals and tries to interpret the behaviour and approaches of the participants. In such position, the researcher/outsider is not only challenged with an objective of minutely observing the activities but also to enter the psyche of participants for interpretation. Also, as a translator and researcher, the data collected and the data represented have gone through what Churchill



calls ‘reshaping’. According to him, “the unavoidable reshaping of that data in the subjective territory of the ethnographer’s mind must be examined as either a weakness for its skewing of data or a strength for the interpretive light it sheds on the data” (4).

The main thrust of the researcher’s field work was ritual documentation and the reason being that rituals encompass a large range of indigenous knowledge in the forms of folk-music, folk-narratives, and folk-religious-practices. Even the language of the community gets documented in one or other way while we observe the rituals. For instance, the term *ᱛᱟᱹᱨᱩᱵᱤ* used for priests among Rajbanshis can convey an entire narrative of migration, division within the communities, the differences between Koch Rajbanshis and Hindu Rajbanshis etc. The two kinds of *ᱛᱟᱹᱨᱩᱵᱤ*: *ᱯᱟᱨᱢᱟᱝ*<sup>30</sup> and *ᱫᱷᱟᱵᱤ*, perform the similar rituals but their categorization has been made because the former migrated from Nadiya district to North Bengal in search of livelihood and thereby, took the profession of priesthood. The latter, that is, *ᱫᱷᱟᱵᱤ* are the local *ᱛᱟᱹᱨᱩᱵᱤ*: *ᱯᱟᱨᱢᱟᱝ* who have adopted the profession of priesthood by the virtue of taking Diksha from a former *ᱛᱟᱹᱨᱩᱵᱤ*. The *ᱯᱟᱨᱢᱟᱝ ᱛᱟᱹᱨᱩᱵᱤ*: *ᱯᱟᱨᱢᱟᱝ*, therefore, stand as a representative of the history that even Nadiya had its own power-influence in terms of religion on the state of Kochs. Nadiya being one of the major centers of Vaishnaism in Bengal, had its cultural influences in various ways. One of them is the mark of sandalwood on the foreheads of devotees among the settlers of Dakshin Mohuamari.

The work of documentation has been carried out in three major ways

i) Interviews with researchers within the community

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<sup>30</sup> *ᱛᱟᱹᱨᱩᱵᱤ* in Bengali means holding, carrying, bearing, wearing, assuming.

- ii) Interviews of villagers
- iii) Recording the rituals and ritual spaces

The first category of documentation are done on focusing on the possible research areas that they have already worked upon. Even though their methodologies differed depending on the disciplines of their research, each of their observation is important because being a part of Rajbanshi community their subjective position on the identity and culture have an intrinsic adherence. The example given above on ᱵᱟᱨᱵᱟᱫᱽᱯᱩᱨ was for example transferred from one such researcher, Mr. Dinesh Ray, who is a retired school teacher of Moynaguri high school.

However, cross-examining the data given by them is also necessary and therefore, in most of the rituals the priest's identity of being a Pa:tᱣᱟᱨᱢᱟ or a Ka:nᱟᱣᱛᱟᱲ was enquired. At the same time, for more reference reading Sanyal's *The Rajbanshis of North-Bengal* gave a different idea about these two categories of ᱵᱟᱨᱵᱟᱫᱽᱯᱩᱨ. According to him, pa:tᱣᱟᱨᱢᱟ assume a higher position than the Ka:nᱟᱣᱛᱟᱲ (134). Though Sanyal has not mentioned about the migration of pa:tᱣᱟᱨᱢᱟ ᱵᱟᱨᱵᱟᱫᱽᱯᱩᱨ from Nadiya, he has distinguished them. He defines a pa:tᱣᱟᱨᱢᱟ as "the priest of the first order. He conducts marriage, sradh, seva and pu:ᱣᱟᱨᱢᱟ. He can initiate disciples. His credential is that he possesses a copper Cokro or is authorized to prepare a Cokro" (134).

The possession of Cokro can be associated with the myth of Lord Vishnu holding a Cokro in his hand to destroy the evils. The Cokro therefore stands as a shift from Shaivism which Rajbanshis claim that they are associated with by their devotion to Lord Jalpesh. Sanyal describes a Ka:nᱟᱣᱛᱟᱲ as "He works as an assistant to a Pad-dhari for some years. When the Pad-dhari is satisfied that he has acquired some proficiency his teacher puts a sacred basil leaf on his ear. Then he is allowed to work independently and may perform rituals in the shrine in the absence of a Pad-dhari" (134).

The differences between the two types of Oḍhika:ris, as mentioned by Sanyal, brings about a hierarchy among the priests which shows a dominance of Bengali Vaishnavs over the native Rajbanshis who aspired to perform the rituals. However, one of the remarkable features of following this procedure is that the priesthood is not adopted by the virtue of heredity but by a process of teaching and learning. At the same time, all the Oḍhika:ris have agriculture as their major profession and working as a priest only at the time of rituals.

In the process of documentation, the memory of respondents plays an important role because while interviewing the second category respondents the most common response to many of the questions regarding rituals came as “I don’t know” and “I don’t remember”. While the first response was common among the young generation, the aged women told that they don’t remember. In most of the cases, the un-remembered narratives were half-told, i.e, while narrating the informants lost the sequence. While studying oral narratives, it needs to be remembered that history may be diachronic but memory is synchronic. This implies that the informants may not remember the events in a chronological sequence but they can remember the base part. The two components of oral-narratives are similarity and continuity. Whereas similarity is often disrupted because a story told for the second time is never as it was told for the first because language adopts variety every time we speak, continuity is a process that holds the narrative to its base. Continuity, therefore, assumes the role of translation since it survives the change of language differences, differences of meanings and conveys the narratives to the listeners or readers. If we take the above example of Oḍhika:ris, the Ka:nṭul̥is represent a logo of continuity. Here, the idea of adopting the position of priest precedes the language needed for the transfer of priesthood.

The challenge of documentation was mostly faced while the researcher tried to document the behaviors of the participants. For instance, the toning down of volume while speaking about BiꞤ songs, or the subtle embarrassment on their gestures while speaking about Huðum ðeo render a variety of interpretations. Firstly, they are conscious of their traditional practices which do not fit into the contemporary society, where clothing itself constitute a significance of being cultured or un-savage. At such circumstances, speaking about a custom which involves only nude women is a matter of shame and therefore, it is always tried to keep covert. The songs that speak of nudity are also not accepted because their language of prayers have found a tone of using only civil or mainstream words.

Another problem of documentation is a result of purity and pollution maintained by members of the community. The ritual spaces are always purified because sacredness abhors any entry of external pollutants. Among the external pollutants, body enacts a crucial role because every part of a body that is not ready to enter the sacred space is a pollutant. Therefore, the ears of non-participants are also considered polluted and hence the sacred words are uttered by the priest in such a way that listeners cannot hear them. The sacred mənθrəs, as told by Mr. Dinesh Ray, are kept secret by the performers holding on to the belief that each mənθrə possesses a potential power which is lost if shared. He told this as a personal experience of himself when he was trying to document the mənθrəs while recording Kathapora. He further went on to tell that his informant told him that once a mənθrə is told, it cannot be used anymore and next year a new mənθrə has to be chanted for the same purpose. The researcher's experience of documentation does not differ much from this because it has been observed that the priests hold a small piece of cloth near their mouth while reciting any mənθrə and at the same time, not making any audible sound.



#### 4.5 Modernity and Homogenization:

The word modernization here is used in the context of advancement of society in terms of science, technology, lifestyle, social changes and culture. It is the change a society observes in opposition to the older norms and beliefs, and shifts to new methods of survival. As technical advancements occur in a society, the necessity of depending on older tools or objects become minimum. Similarly, the belief systems also undergo a change due to such factors. For example, the necessity of depending on rain for cultivation is not required when water can be stored or underground water can be used. Hence, the belief system which was associated with rain earlier also do not posit similar importance as it was in the past. Hence, the ritual associated to invocation of rain-God, or Huđum đeo, remains only in the form of ritual which slowly gets forgotten.

The effect of modernity in the social strata of Rajbansis has been mentioned in the introduction. Apart from caste-tribe upliftment, modernization has also inflicted the community in their existing phenomena. In other words, in the process modernizing themselves, the Rajbanshi community has lost and are in the process of losing a variation of their cultural markers. The need of modernization has changed their lifestyle not only within the household but also in the ritual spaces.

Rajbanshi women have their traditional dress as fʰɔθa (in Bengal) and ɣɔʝi (in Assam). The advent of sarees has taken place of fʰɔθa prominently now and an informant, Mr. Naresh Ray, claimed that the last time he saw any woman wearing fʰɔθa was more than twenty years ago. The younger generation do not prefer to wear fʰɔθa which also resulted in the gradual closedown of the weavers who made them. The use of Sarees has also introduced the awareness of wearing blouses which was not practiced earlier. Debendra Nath Barma mentions that fʰɔθa is a colourful

thick garment made of cotton which Rajbanshi women tie around their breasts and it hangs till their knees (85). Even though in the process of documentation, the researcher has seen the older women not wearing any blouse during their household work, keeping bare their upper body during summer, the practice is not very common in urban spaces. The ritual performances which demand traditional costumes are no longer followed during the rituals. However, in the cultural programs or the stage-functions a modern adaptation of these dresses are seen. A couple of Rajbanshi on-stage performances have given a variety of dress-codes. Related to this research, the stage performance of Me:ce:ni song internalized the idea of white saree with red border along with a red blouse as the dress code for ritual performances.

Another instance of modernization of ritual spaces is the advent of idol worship. The sacred  $\theta^h a:ns$  of Rajbanshis earlier consisted of the mud/soil heaps or stones. Each deity had their own  $\theta^h a:ns$  which included even the local version of Islamic Gods like Pirbaba. The inclusion of idol gave a human figure to all the deities and this in turn resulted in their dilution with mainstream culture. The originality of soil/mud heaps is in the fact that they are of breast shape referring to mother-nature as their creator and supplier. But idolatry gave not only a human shape to the deities, it also affirmed the genders of those being worshipped. In rituals like  $ja:\theta ra pu:ja:$ , traditional equipment is given a holy vermillion mark on them but those are never used because modern machines have already taken their place.

Modernization, therefore, has its own impact on ethnic documentation. The rituals that contained fundamentally Rajbanshi culture have either almost come to a verge of extinction or adapted themselves with the mainstream culture to survive. The mainstream communities, in order to expand their hegemony and power, always attempts to spread their own traditions to the smaller communities. This benefits the mainstream community because they remain the authentic source

of exercising the norms of their traditions. Secondly, it also undermines the traditions of the smaller ethnic groups. Thus, these smaller ethnic groups remain as ‘othered’ section within the larger mainstream community. In case of Rajbanshis, their identity has been now constructed as Bengali Rajbanshis or Assamese Rajbanshis.

The Rajbanshi folk-narratives, in this research, have represented their thought-process, their worldviews, and the mechanisms of transferring their worldviews to other members. Reading these narratives enables the readers to observe their knowledge structure and understand the meanings encoded in their acts and performances. This case study shows that Rajbanshi oral narratives and performances are related to the contexts in which they are being produced. The changes occurring in these narratives, due to social, economic, cultural differences, are realised through the gaps between their thoughts and practices. As Foucault writes, in every society, their major narratives are repeated with the assumption that these narratives contain some “hidden secret or wealth” (220). But, with temporal and spatial differences, the practices which had led to the formation of major narratives of the community may change. Therefore, the gaps are formed which are “neither stable, nor constant, nor absolute”. (Foucault 220). These gaps become the potential ground for the translators to allocate their imaginations, and at the same time, the gaps become the storehouse of different meanings. Therefore, the readability and translatability of the Rajbanshi oral and performative texts are realised through their contemporary narratives. The case study of Rajbanshi folk-narratives helps the readers to understand “the complex mechanisms through which social, political, cultural and ideological forces shape translations and are shaped by them”. (Saldanha, O’ Brien 233). The act of translation is to allocate the resources in order to continue a narrative, as observed in the case of Mecheni ritual performed by Rajbanshi women. The mainstream social, political, cultural and ideological forces are shaping

the Rajbanshi folk-narratives. But at the same time, the existing narratives are also shaping these forces, as seen in Mecheni songs and dances. The art of translation is found in such subtle activities.



## Chapter V

### Conclusion

In a nutshell, this project, ‘Translation as Act and Art of Reading: A Case Study of Rajbanshi Rituals’, presents the idea of studying translation as a process and metaphor by observing the ethnographic practices of Rajbanshi community. The researcher has tried to observe the translatability and readability of Rajbanshi folk narratives and how they can eventually assist in delimiting the position of mainstream narratives.

#### 5.1 Summary of Observations and Arguments

The researcher has tried to explain the experienced performances of the Rajbanshis and trace their belief systems in order to identify their relationships with the natural entities like forests, rivers and rain. The thesis explores the relationship between rituals and their corresponding myths, the changes occurring in the enactments of those rituals due to cultural transformations, and therefore, the inclusion of other mythical stories in the process of forming narratives.

The thesis also tries to examine the necessity of writing the narratives of Rajbanshi community. This addresses the questions like how narratives and meta-narratives help in making history, what is the role of oral narratives and how the two parts of oral narratives, aural and memory, function in performances.

Finally, the role of reading the ritual texts and the narratives within the larger realm of translation has been looked upon. The meanings encoded in ritual texts and performances form a part of the collective knowledge of the community which are stored in their memory, and are revealed through their narratives. The changes in these narratives and the comparative analysis of those narratives with the mainstream Bengali narratives helps the readers to construct an identity of the

community. Therefore, translation plays a fundamental role in constructing an identity of the community by observing and reading the ritual practices and narratives.

## **5.2 Limitations of the research**

Translation has operated on various levels in this project. To gather the data from primary and secondary resources, the researcher had to acquaint with English, Bengali, Assamese and Rajbanshi. To communicate with the primary informants, the knowledge of Bengali was not sufficient and therefore, depending on local interpreters was necessary. The local interpreters are the people who belonged to the community and lived in the same family or village from where primary data has been collected. Therefore, their version of interpretation needed verifying with other informants from different village or from the secondary data. The ethnic knowledge of the community thus gets transferred from older generations to new generations in Rajbanshi, interpreted through local people in Bengali, translated from Bengali to English and finally, written in English. Therefore, it has not been possible to translate every word or every sentence in the process of writing, but the essence of their thoughts and beliefs have been conveyed in the research.

In this thesis, the Rajbanshi ritual practices have been extensively observed and the language used in the rituals have been read. The oral language and the behavioural language undergo a change in the ritual spaces. As observed in *Pōncōpu:ja:*, the *ᱠᱟᱨᱫᱷᱟᱱ* separates from the normative patterns of social behaviour and language when he rapidly shakes his head. He addresses everyone, irrespective of gender or age, as ‘tui’ or uses the ‘slangs’. His tone also changes when he gives solution to people’s problems in the ritual. These changes are visible only in the specific genre of the ritual, and does not apply to spaces or time outside the ritual practice. This is not a change in communicative pattern of Rajbanshi language but a change only in the

function of the language. It can be termed as the art of the language rather than act of the language.

The folk-songs, folk-music, mythical stories related to the rituals comprise of a language which are oral and transferrable through speech or writing. Therefore, the audience or the readers can understand those texts without being a part of the community or without visiting those ritual spaces. However, the rituals also consist of some silent texts which can be comprehended only by those who have prior knowledge about the texts and they do not have any direct medium of transferring into another language or culture. For example, the rapid shaking of the head by the  $\text{O}^{\text{hika:ri}}$  in  $\text{P}^{\text{ancapu:ja}}$  can be understood only by the insiders of the community. They term it as ‘bhor howa’ or ‘deher bhor’. Unless they choose to share the knowledge of this act, the signifier remains untranslated for the audience or the readers. Similarly, during  $\text{Me:ce:ni k}^{\text{hela:}}$ , the stool on which  $\text{Me:ce:ni}$ ’s umbrella is kept becomes a sacred seat which is believed to possess magical power of curing a disease. The stool becomes a silent text where any ailed member of the household sits to get the blessing of  $\text{Me:ce:ni}$  and get cured. Unless, it is explained by the disciples, this particular act remains a silent observance and therefore, do not get translated. The art of reading is to understand these silent texts and interpreting the beliefs hidden in their deep structure.

The oral and the performative texts together form the narratives of the Rajbanshi community. These texts are re-produced through repetition. Each repetition generates different versions of the texts since the time varies. The semiotic changes in the performances are executed by the performers and interpreted by the audience or the readers in the specific contexts. For instance, when an old Rajbanshi woman dances in the tune of a  $\text{Me:ce:ni}$  song, she associates with the idea of devotion to the deity who is an epitome of fertility. But when Rajbanshi children learn the

dancing steps on the same song, it is a form of amusement, or learning how to be a part of their community's tradition. The Me:ce:ni songs and dances are performed also as stage performances in festivals or function, where they are outside the context of the rituals. Here, the signification of the performances does not carry the previous idea of veneration but a form of portraying their cultural traits in comparison to other communities' cultural display. Similarly, a reader/audience who observes the Me:ce:ni performance in the context of a ritual comprehends the semiotics of the text in a different way from the reader/audience who observes it outside the context of the ritual. It is the readers' experience which becomes a decisive factor of how the text is being read and translated.

The semantics of the oral texts also vary since the translators cannot construe the same meanings as they are dependent on time, space, location, subjectivity, and creativity. Since it is not possible to ascribe to all these factors at a time, it is possible to lose previous meanings of a particular text and gain new meanings for the same. For example, the tree marriages of Bot-Pankur can get disassociated from the meaning of fertility and associate with the new meaning of displaying wealth.

### **5.3 Scope of future research**

Experiences are variants of time. What Rajbanshis are experiencing today will be a document of knowledge in future. This research is a contribution in that larger realm of knowledge about the community, their linguistic, social and cultural practices. This research can be continued to locate the community's variation in a larger scale of time and space. The community's identity has changed in the last four hundred years from being Koch to Koch-Rajbanshi and it is rapidly getting assimilated in the mainstream Bengali or Assamese community. As a result, their linguistic and cultural practices which are manifested through various rituals are either wiping



out or being re-formed. Therefore, the knowledge that formed their world-view is also being absorbed. The change of both artifacts and mentifacts of the community are documented through translation. The village  $\theta^h a:ns$  or temples, the clay mounda or stones as deities, the umbrella of Me:ce:ni, the places of worship within the households are some the examples of artifacts.

Documenting these artifacts and describing them contribute to the act of reading and translation in this thesis. On the other hand, the beliefs or values associated with these artifacts, the cultural practices performed related to them form the mentifacts of the community. The art of reading these mentifacts, through observation and repetition, further adds to the study of translation in ethnographic practices.

The contemporary experiences, practices, worldviews, changes in the community thus forms the knowledge structure which can be revisited in future to trace the trajectory of their identity from past. This research is another contribution in that same trajectory. The folk-narratives will constantly find new forms of existence. Further research can be done on the changing patterns of these forms and new meanings being formed within the realm of the narratives.

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## Appendix

Following are the list of people with whom the researcher had met during the field work and had conversations. The interviews were mostly informal and unstructured. The remarks of each interviewee has been given in the table.

| Sl No. | Name                   | Occupation                                           | Place and Time        | Remark                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|--------|------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1      | Dr. Dipak Kumar Ray    | Assistant Professor                                  | May 2014              | Dr. Roy explained the social positions of Rajbanshis in different states and districts. He gave an insight on Rajbanshi language being more close to Bengali and Assamese, rather than the languages of other Koch tribes.                                                                                                                                     |
| 2      | Girija Shankar Ray     | Retired Principal of Vivekananda College, Alipurduar | May 2014              | He informed on the secondary sources that needs to be read, namely, Charuchandra Sanyal's <i>The Rajbanshis of North Bengal</i> and Girija Shankar Ray's <i>Uttarbanger Rajbanshi Kshatriya Jaatir Pujaparbon [The Religious Festivals of Rajbanshi Kshatriya Community in North Bengal]</i> .                                                                 |
| 3      | Debendra Nath Barma    |                                                      | June 2014             | He informed the researcher about the practice of Jatra puja in Rajbanshis which is celebrated on the day of Vijaya Dashami. He also informed that the Mech and Rabha communities used to worship the trees, river, forests and animals. The Rajbanshi community had descended from them and hence, such practices are still followed in their various rituals. |
| 4      | Durga Ray              | Folk singer of Bhawaiya and Rajbanshi songs          | June 2014, March 2015 | She informed about the different musical instruments like Sarinda, Dotara, Dhol, Khol etc which are used in Bhawaiya and Rajbanshi songs. She had also informed the researcher regarding Bishua ritual on which children go for hunting, as a symbolic gesture of being free from Parasurama.                                                                  |
| 5      | Dr. Bimalendu Majumdar | Independent Researcher                               | May 2014              | He had intimated the researcher regarding the internal conflicts on identity within the Rajbanshi community. The researcher has not probed deep into such conflicts in her field work.                                                                                                                                                                         |
| 6      | Dilip Berman           | Independent Researcher,                              | June 214              | He informed that the Rajbanshis in Jalpaiguri are mostly a mixed                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |

|   |                           |                                                                  |                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|---|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|   |                           | Manager of Kshetriya Gramin Bank                                 |                                                           | population. The influence of mainstream Bengali Hindu culture is higher in the Rajbanshis of Jalpaiguri and Coochbehar.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| 7 | Dinesh Ray                | Independent Researcher, Retired teacher of Moynaguri High School | March 2015, April 2015, May 2015, June 2015, October 2015 | He informed the researcher that around 70-80 years ago, the Rajbanshis used to sing obscene songs on the day of Holi, celebrated in spring season, to excite men and women for intercourse. But education has destroyed this tradition. The influence of people from 'Bhati' have changed the culture of Rajbanshis. Bhati refers to the areas outside North Bengal. He also informed that the priests who came from Nadiya were called Pa:ṭḍari and the Ka:nṭuljī priests were trained by the former. He mentioned many rituals like Katham, Gamira, Kata Ghorano etc. He informed that the priests would keep mṁnṭrṁs of many rituals secret, and if someone gets to learn the secret mṁnṭrṁs, then they will change them.              |
| 8 | Naresh Ray                | Independent Researcher, Retired School teacher                   | March 2015 April 2015                                     | He had some former association with communist parties, which made him travel into many interior places in North Bengal, and had an objective outlook towards the Rajbanshi rituals. He informed that tree- marriages in contemporary period are mostly organised by affluent people to show off their wealth. He had witnessed rituals like 'Sokha patano' and 'Jurabondha' but mentioned that these rituals are no longer practiced. He also refereed that the practice of dowry system in Rajbanshi communities started around 1940s. He had also witnessed that the tradition of wearing 'Fota' by Rajbanshi women have become obsolete now. It has been more than twenty years that he had observed any Rajbanshi woman wearing Fota. |
| 9 | Dr. Dwijendra Nath Bhakat | Assistant Professor in Chilarai College, Dhuburi                 | June 2014, March 2015                                     | He informed the researcher regarding the folklores and ritual practices Rajbanshis of Assam. He mentioned that in some remote areas of Assam the ritual of Hudum Deo are still in                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |



|    |                                        |                                          |                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|----|----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|    |                                        |                                          |                                                               | practice. He also told that the influence of mainstream Assamese culture is visible in the Rajbangshi ritual practices of Assam.                                                                                                                                                                       |
| 10 | Dr. Kishore Bhattacharjee              | Professor, Guwahati University           | June 2014                                                     | He informed the researcher regarding narrations in the songs when trees are worshipped. He particularly mentioned about the worshipping of <i>Fani-Manasa</i> or a type of cactus being prayed in every household.                                                                                     |
| 11 | Sushil Ray, Kesab Ray and their family | School Teacher, Dudhnoi, Goalpara, Assam | June 2014                                                     | They mentioned about the <i>Sankardev</i> movement in Assam and the Rajbangshis being converted to Hindus along with that movement. Even after that they hold some Rajbangshi rituals which are mostly related to farming and harvesting. They gave a detailed view of traditional Rajbangshi dresses. |
| 12 | Suresh Barman                          | Farmer, Haldibari                        | April 2015                                                    | Gave information on different types of Kathams                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| 13 | Khirod Ray                             | Farmer, Haldibari                        | April 2015                                                    | He has taken out Katham for 7- 8 years                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| 14 | Mohan Mali                             | Deosi/Priest, Haldibari                  | April 2015                                                    | Vegetarian meal is taken on the day of Katham Puja. Siva-Kali-Parvati are worshipped before the procession of Katham starts.                                                                                                                                                                           |
| 15 | Montu Ray                              | Farmer, Mareya, Haldibari                | April 2015                                                    | He had kept a vow or Manas for the birth of his child. That's why he conducted the Puja. Not all Kathams are practiced for the sake of a vow, but some of them are done on that purpose.                                                                                                               |
| 16 | Rupeswari Debi                         | Farmer, Dakshin Mouyamari, Moynaguri     | March 2015, April 2015, May 2015, October 2015, November 2015 | She introduced the researcher to the Rajbangshi community of Dakshin Mouyamari. She informed the researcher regarding the Banni Puja, Bishua, Jatra Puja, and Gaach-Vyah in their village. She also showed the household thaam in her house and Garam-thaan in their village.                          |
| 17 | Dinobala Debi                          | Farmer, Dakshin Mouyamari, Moynaguri     | March to May 2015, October to November                        | She was the Mareya of Mecheni Puja in Dakshin Mouyamari village. She and her dol had conducted the Mecheni Khela as well as Mecheni Puja. She also organised the rituals like Bishua, Kali Puja in her house.                                                                                          |

|    |                        |                                                                                  |                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|----|------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|    |                        |                                                                                  | ber<br>2015                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| 18 | Manik                  | Farmer,<br>Dakshin<br>Mouyamari,<br>Moynaguri                                    | March<br>to May<br>2015,<br>October<br>to<br>Novem<br>ber<br>2015    | He is Dinobala Debi's son. He informed the researcher that these days the profession of Rajbanshis have changed to a lot extent. Apart from agriculture, they also work in factories. They also practice the mainstream Bengali Hindu rituals like Durga Puja, Holi etc.           |
| 19 | Bishnupada<br>Adhikari | Priest,<br>Dakshin<br>Mouyamari,<br>Moynaguri                                    | April<br>2015                                                        | He conducted the puja in household thaana on the day of Bishua. He informed the researcher on the tradition of Jhura being tied on jute sticks on this particular ritual.                                                                                                          |
| 20 | Devanand<br>Adhikari   | Priest,<br>Dakshin<br>Mouyamari,<br>Moynaguri                                    | April<br>2015                                                        | He is Bishnupada Adhikari's father and he had started practicing priesthood at the age of 18. He told that he has conducted rituals like Haalkhata, Gochipona, Ashari Puja, Janmashami, Bishohori Puja etc.                                                                        |
| 21 | Sumitra<br>Adhikari    | Dakshin<br>Mouyamari,<br>Moynaguri                                               | April<br>2015                                                        | She informed the researcher about practice of eating bhajabuja on the day of Bishua. She also gave information of different types of leafy vegetables that are eaten by Rajbanshis.                                                                                                |
| 22 | Phukun Ray             | Farmer, Folk<br>performer<br>Dakshin<br>Mouyamari,<br>Moynaguri                  | June<br>2015,<br>October<br>2015                                     | She was assisting Dinobala Debi in the performance of Mecheni ritual. She had sung most of the Mecheni songs during the ritual. Also, she had informed the researcher that she has her own Mecheni dol.                                                                            |
| 23 | Demkishwari<br>Ray     | Farmer,<br>Housewife,<br>Moynaguri                                               | June<br>2015                                                         | She is Mother-in-law of Phukun Ray. She informed the researcher about practice of Dharam Puja celebrated in Karthika month where they offer a pair of eggs to Dharam Thakur or the Sun God.                                                                                        |
| 24 | Tulomala Ray           | Folk<br>performer,<br>Moynaguri                                                  | March<br>2015                                                        | The researcher has watched the informant and her team perform Mecheni dance for a cultural programme in Paanbari, Moynaguri.                                                                                                                                                       |
| 25 | Budheswari<br>Debi     | Farmer, Folk<br>performer of<br>Rajbanshi<br>songs,<br>Nirendrapur,<br>Moynaguri | March<br>2015,<br>April<br>2015,<br>May<br>2015,<br>October<br>2015, | She introduced the researcher to Rajbanshis of Nirendrapur village. She was the Mareya of Mecheni Puja in Nirendrapur village. She and her dol had conducted the Mecheni khela, Mecheni Puja and Panchapuja. She has also practiced the ritual of Akashbati, Noya Khoya and Baroma |

|    |                       |                                        |                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|----|-----------------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|    |                       |                                        | November 2015               | Shanti. She has also told the researcher about Bhong-gaan or Bhong songs.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| 26 | Bhoichalu Ray         | Nirendrapur, Moynaguri                 | May 2015                    | He told the researcher about the deities in Garam than of Nirendrapur village. He also explained the ritual objects like Cangat which are used during Panchapuja.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| 27 | Sushila Ray           | Farmer, Nirendrapur, Moynaguri         | October 2015, November 2015 | She conducted the ritual of Dharam Puja. She informed the researcher that the ritual can be conducted either at dawn or after the sunset.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| 28 | Bhupesh Ray           | Folk performer, Nirendrapur, Moynaguri | November 2015               | He told the researcher that he and his team organize performances like Gomira Khela, Chor-churni on stage. But the rituals associated with the cultural performances are very rare.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 29 | Bhabendranath Mallick | Priest, Dakshin Ulladabari, Moynaguri  | November 2015               | He informed the researcher about Bhandani Puja. His family had been worshipping the deity Bhandani for generations. He referred that Bhandani is a folk goddess and therefore the idol has two hands, instead of ten hands which are visible for the idol of Durga. He also told that that mantras which are used for worshipping Bhandani debi are the tantric mantras. He explained the process of worshipping Bhandani Debi to the researcher. |
| 30 | Kamal Ray             | Gunjabari, Cooch Behar                 | December 2015               | He opined that the Rajbanshis are actually Hindu Kshatriyas who had fled from Parasurama. He pointed out that the language of Rajbanshis in Cooch Behar differs from those in Jalpaiguri. The people prefer to identify themselves as Kamtapuri.                                                                                                                                                                                                  |

## Reading Rain, Reading River: An Interpretative Discussion on Rajbanshi Folk Ritual

*Pragya Sen Gupta  
Sriparna Das*

### Abstract

*This paper aims at reading the folk rituals concerning rain and river among the Rajbanshi community of North Bengal. The different meanings associated with the ingredients of the rituals and the ritual symbols changed with the passage of time and space structure. However, case studies show that man-nature and super-nature are closely connected and this connection can be observed by reading and interpreting the ritual symbols. The extinction and presence of rituals also hint at how the people practicing them have changed according to their demands and necessities.*

**Keywords:** Hudum Deo, Mecheni Khela, Rajbanshi

### **Discussion:**

This paper is focussed on reading two specific folk rituals of Rajbanshis of North Bengal: Hudum Deo and Mecheni. In terms of discussing folk rituals, it will examine the folk tale, ritual practices and the songs associated with each of them. The attempt here is to identify the symbolic specificities as well as the multiple meanings associated with each narrative.

On this pretext, we expand our readings to Turner's *Forest of Symbols* and though Turner distinguishes the meanings of a symbol



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**Re: ATT8: CERTIFICATE OF ATTENDANCE**

To whom it may concern:

Pragya Sen Gupta (University of Hyderabad) attended the **8th Asian Translation Traditions Conference** at SOAS, University of London, on 5-7 July 2017.

Pragya Sen Gupta's presentation took place on Wednesday 5 July 2017 from 14:00 – 14:30  
Presentation title: Myths, Variation and Ritualization: A Study of Mecheni Ritual in North Bengal

Should you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me at the above given address/email.

Regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nana Sato-Rossberg".

Nana Sato-Rossberg  
7 July 2017





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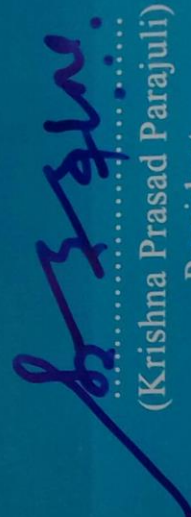
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# Translation as Act and Art of Reading: A Case Study of Rajbanshi Rituals

*by* Pragya Sengupta

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