

Chapter V

Socio-Cultural Milieu

In previous chapter, I discussed economic life of Dheyana-Rajbanshi. In this chapter, I strive to discuss socio-cultural life of the community, which covers belief, folk and mores and ambiguity about institution of indigenous religion if any. Dheyana-Rajbanshi's religious behaviour, faith, cult and sect, role of Vaishnavism and Sankardev and language issue etc. become part of the chapter.

Social Institution **Nature and Type**

Anthropo-sociological study of institution identified major five social institutions broadly include economy, polity, stratification (power and resource), kinship (family and marriage) and cultural (religion and art). Comte, Spencer, W.G Sumner, Durkheim, Levi-Strauss, Dumont, Cooley, Geertz, Firth and Leach contributions are notable. Even Weber, Parsons, Merton and recently Habermas's work also deal with institution. Each of them individually and collectively conceptualised and contextualised institution in different ways. Outcome of their work is

seminal and far-reaching but nonetheless have immense significance in present-contemporary society.

Likewise institution always carries major value and influences Dheyant-Rajbanshi. In fact past has great bearing upon present life, even though, a micro transition or upheaval and not all-powerful change but more empowered continuity is noticed in their behavioural attributes during recent time of the community. The following table highlights structural attitude of the community towards important social institution as they think their social life becomes nil if they do not cherish and nurture social institutions.

Table V.1
Dheyant-Rajbanshi Social Institution

Name of institution	Follow (in percentage)	Do not follow (in percentage)
Extended Family	99	1
Joint	80	20
Nuclear	80	20
Kinship	20	80
Marriage	100	Nil
Religion	92	8
Economy	95	5
Polity	88	12
	58	42

Table data represent, to Dheyant-Rajbanshi, family means a comprehensive unit and they find difficult to segregate between extended and joint family. Most people of the community have a different kind of household and family life. Only a very selected few Dheyant-Rajbanshi youth that too recently because of literacy and partial out-migration, opted for nuclear family, but in empirical sense they all maintain close ties and association with their forefathers 'land of extended family. Other institutions have stronghold among all of them and politics of affirmation or discontent is of latest induction only among a few Dheyant-Rajbanshi youth. Hence, continuity and proxy contradiction guide the community of people upholding their institutions.

Folkways and Mores Dogma Revisited

Koch-Rajbanshi at its initial primordially to Dheyant-Rajbanshi adaptability at a later aegis never even, smooth and peaceful. Edward Gait's observation regarding origin of the community having animistic-tribal residue speak a lot about Dheyant-Rajbanshi simplicity orientation. During formative age, the community's belief, faith and other instinctive adherents was tagged with powerful nature almost in line of Sumner-Durkheimian thought. Nature produced and got reproduced in their

continuous behavioural patterns. Folk and mores hence got recapitulated often in Dheyant-Rajbanshi belief and practice.

Kshatriyasation, Sanskritisation and further inroad of upheavality within Hindu fold reveal how a micro community at a confined place has travelled a lot of distance in course of its successive life over age. But its processual life never shifted or disdained its earlier value attachment. The community's dogmatisation curtails and discourages women's minimum right and accessibility to work outside four walls and re-marriage. On the contrary male domination or patriarchal society, son preference, dowry etc. are now-a-days on rise. The following table highlights age-wise distribution of respondents on various issues and problems.

Table V.2
Age Profile of Dheyant-Rajbanshi

Sl.no	Age group	No.of Respondents		Total	Percentage
		Male	Female		
1	18 - 25	24	20	44	14.67
2	26 - 33	38	40	78	26.00
3	34 - 41	22	24	46	15.33
4	42 - 49	32	32	64	21.33
5	50 - 57	14	14	28	9.33
6	58 - 65	20	20	40	13.33
7		Grand Total		300	100.00

The table exemplifies 26% respondents are from age group 26-33 years, 21.33% are between 42-49 year and 15.33 respondents belong to age group of 34-41 year, 14.67% in between 18-25 year, 13.33% are within 58-65 year and 9.33% respondents come within age group of 50-57 year, and people belonging to different age strata varied in their opinion on issue relating to folkways and mores, but from highest percentage of people to lowest level opined about strong relevance of continuation of tradition in terms of their belief and practice.

Religion **More Infrastructure than Superstructure**

Now Dheyani-Rajbanshi considers them to be the purest Hindu and most people of the community strictly follow Varna. People of the community worship different Hindu gods and goddess in their house possessing those idol and photograph. They think no possible life without worship of god and goddess. Their early life starts with ritual, worship and observation of sacred performance of god/goddess at home level. The table gives data relating to different kinds of religious performance of the community as they perceive to observe these religious ceremonies in their own way.

Table V.3

Religious Ceremony of Dheyant-Rajbanshi

SL. No.	Name of Puja	No. of Respondent		Total	Percentage
		Male	Female		
1	Kali Puja	56	58	114	22.94
2	Mahakal	82	100	182	36.62
3	Bisohari	-	65	65	13.08
4	Dhan khater puja	12	100	112	22.54
5	Ai-puja	3	21	24	4.83

The table data reveal most Dheyant-Rajbanshi are highly religious as 36.62% perform *Mahakal puja*, 22.94% perform *Kali puja* and 13.08% opt for *Bisohari puja*, 22.54% *Dhan Khater puja* and remaining 4.83 % perform *Ai-puja* in their family.

In addition since they consider themselves Kshatriya (warrior or ruling class) and accordingly regularly try to consolidate their caste status, which they think ritually superior than others. In such process they started increasing to worship many other Hindu gods and goddess at family and household, village, community and public place, but definitely within their locality. Three clans—Kashyap, Basisth and Bhardwaj (named after three sage) are replica of stronghold of Hinduism among them. They follow clan and village exogamy are in practice and

marriage takes place within the total nine Dheyant-Rajbanshi inhabited village. The people being Hindus, some are Mahapurushia and others follow Shakta sect. Mahapurushia is original follower of Srimant Sankardev and stick to strict rules. Shakta sect worships goddess of power like Durga and Kali and believe in blood sacrifice of animal and bird.

Role of Caste Sublimated but Active

Hindu religion's main strength lies in Caste and Dheyant-Rajbanshi has been upholding its Caste status next to the uppermost Brahmin. They consider themselves Kshatriya and ritually superior. Rigidity in caste keep them to perform and manage their affair within themselves only. For example from marriage-alliance to community festival, ceremony and religious institutions are performed within broad spectrum of the community. The table below explains about role and function of caste in the community

Table V. 4
Inter-Caste Marriage

Sl.No	Inter-Caste Marriage	No. of Respondents		Total	Percentage
		Male	Female		
1	Yes	41	7	48	16.00
2	No	109	143	252	84.00
3	Grand Total			300	100

The above data show majority i.e. 84.00% do not support inter-caste marriage and marriage is exclusively done within the community. Only, 16% of people, under constraint situation or owing to certain compulsion, opted for inter-caste marriage and subsequently faced very punitive action by chieftain and community of people. Three caste status – scheduled caste in North-Bengal, MOBC in Goalpara and OBC in other districts of Assam including Barak valley represents prevalence of caste paradox in the community now¹. But none of the people ever challenged or compromised institution of caste in their daily life. Hence, caste in sublimated form is very active among Dheyman-Rajbanshi people in Barak valley of south Assam.

Marriage can be properly understood with marital status of the community carrying following variables shown in the table, next page.

¹ Bimal J. Deb (ed). Ethnic Issues, Secularism and Conflict Resolution in North East India. Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi. 2006, P.156.

Table V. 5
Marital Status

Sl.No	Marital Status	No. of Respondent		Total	Percentage
		Male	Female		
1	Married	98	96	195	65.00
2	Unmarried	49	19	68	22.67
3	Divorce	1	7	8	2.67
4	Widow	14	15	29	9.66
5	Grand Total			300	100

Table indicates majority of Dheyant-Rajbanshi (65%) are married whereas only (22.67%) i.e. less than one-fourth remain unmarried. Very low percentage of Dheyant-Rajbanshi is either divorce (2.67%) or widow (9.66%). Hence the above two tables make it clear to understand that Dheyant-Rajbanshi are highly concerned about their caste and marital status.

Food **Sanctity Uncompromised**

From day of its inception and subsequent development, Dheyant-Rajbanshi has been very particular its food and never compromised at any stage at all. Staple food of the community is rice and almost all people take rice in every major meal. People following Shakta sect are non-vegetarian and consume fish and meat but Mahapurushia are strict

vegetarian. Vegetable is mostly eaten in plain curry without much spices and use of oil. No rice beer is made. Betel nut is chewed by a large chunk of old people and women.

During special occasion like Bihu and other religious festivals, besides traditional food items like *pitha* and *laru* (similar to Assamese preparation), *bora rice* and water put together in hollow of *dol bamboo* and baked in fire and then extracted from *chunga* (hallow) and cut into pieces and consumed by every Dheyman-Rajbanshi. This practice is quite common among them.

Household Type and Item Decay versus Unaffordable

Family and household becomes centre of life of all Dheyman-Rajbanshi people. During tradition and present time, both women and men are keen to decorate and maintain their houses with various items and things. Economic condition of most of the people being not good, they do have simple and ordinary type of houses as normally found in Assam and in other non-Dheyman-Rajbanshi neighbourhood villages. Hence, their houses are made up of the following things mentioned in the table.

Table V.6
House Pattern of Dheyani-Rajbanshi

Sl. No	Type of House	No. Of Respondant		Total	Percentage
		Male	Female		
1	Bamboo or mud wall with tin roof	91	88	179	59.66
2	Bamboo or brick wall with tin roof	23	24	47	15.67
3	Assam type half wall with bamboo plaster	16	14	30	10.00
4	Assam type brick wall	6	8	14	4.67
5	Bamboo or mud wall with grass, bamboo or polythin roof.	11	13	24	8.00
6	RCC	4	2	6	2.00
7	Grand Total			300	100.00

The table reveals 59.66% people live in bamboo or mud wall with tin roof while less than one-sixth viz.15.67% live in bamboo or brick wall with roof. 10% live in Assam type half wall with bamboo plaster, 4.67% have Assam type brick wall, 8% have been living in bamboo or mud wall with grass, bamboo or even polythin roof. Only a little segment i.e. 2% have RCC type house.

As part of their family and household life almost all Dheyani-Rajbanshi use and sometimes prepare different kinds of traditional household items.

Some essential and prominent items like *bokhari*, *duli* and *pali*, *dheki*, *linglang* and *feteng* are discussed hereafter.

Bokhari is the place where grain is stored and located within the house. The community calls it bokhari. It is made of cane and bamboo. Length of a normal bokhari is 55 inch and it is shaped like a huge bucket with upper front side cut to put hand inside to procure grain. Two other items are used side by side with bokhari. These are *duli* for storing and *Pali* for lifting grain. In front of bokhari, an image of Lakshmi (Goddess of wealth) is placed and who is worshipped reverently.

Every household has a Dheki which is a traditional equipment used for grinding grains. It is made of wood and has different parts. Long round pole placed horizontally on a fulcrum and moves up and down like a see-saw to pound grain is normally 76 inch long. Hole in ground where grain is placed for pounding is called *uri* and pounding stick attached to pole vertically is called *kotora mari* having 23 inch height. Dheki thura carrying local name *sebari* has two stands on which dheki rests and height of these are 40 inch each. *Barhoni mari* is stick used to push grain forward into *uri*.

Dheyani-Rajbanshi people use *almirah* and *sandukto* store their household durable. *Amirah* is generally made of *gamari* wood and *sanduk* of *cham* wood available locally. Standard size of a *sanduk* is 49 inch long, 30 inch broad and 28 inch height. However, size varies according to requirement. Villagers take or use service of local carpenter to get such items made.

Kitchen is of mud floor and place of cooking is called *chula* having hole in ground with three raised tips of dried mud where cooking vessel is placed. *Khori* is used as a source of fuel. Utensils include *hari* or *tou* which are large aluminium pots, *luwari* or broad rimmed bowl shaped iron cooking utensils and *heta*.

Families having small babies normally possess *linglang* which is named given for a small swing used to keep a sleeping baby. A piece of cloth is used to hang with its two ends tied to two short poles placed at a distance of about three feet from each other. Baby kept within hanging portion, which acts as a swing. Another item called *feteng* made of bamboo, given to a child to play with.

These items and activities are both traditional and modern and all of them take pride to perform these activities. They regard such religious observation enhance their not only mere social status but also help them to get blessing of god and goddess. Therefore, now most of the Dheyant-Rajbanshi houses opted for electricity connection, whose data is furnished:

Table V.7
Electric Connection

Sl.No	Electric facility	No. of Respondents		Total	Percentage
		Male	Female		
1	Yes	55	58	113	37.67
2	No	97	90	187	62.33
3	Grand Total			300	100.00

The data indicate most of respondents and people that is 62.33% have no electric facility and only 37.67% got electric connectivity in their houses.

Festival **Enduring Participation and Enjoyment**

Family and community festival including religious observation of Dheyant-Rajbanshi are extraordinarily colourful and all-participatory. During such activities and participation most of them get elated to use some of the essential items as mentioned in the table . V.8, next page.

Table V. 8
Traditional Dress and Ornament of Dheyant-Rajbanshi

Sl. No	Use of Traditional Dress and ornaments	No. of Respondent		Total	Percentage
		Female	Male		
1	Occasionally	170	66	236	78.67
2	Rarely	16	21	37	12.33
3	Never	8	19	27	9.00
4	Grand Total			300	100

The above data reveal most of Dheyant-Rajbanshi i.e more than one third of the total respondents (78.67%) using their traditional dress and ornaments, while less than one fifth (12.33%) use dress and ornament very rare, only (9%) never use traditional dress and ornaments. Hence, Dheyant-Rajbanshi has great respect to their traditional culture as they like to wear such dress and ornaments even today.

A few but very important family festivals of Dheyant-Rajbanshi in the valley are *Kanya-damat* (show of bride and bridegroom), holi-kirtan or dolikirtan, rasleela, bihu, rathyatra, Yaosang Niba' festival, *shyama*, *Hudumdeo* or *benger biaoa* and *Shiv Ratri*.

Kanya-damat: Performance of Kanya-damat is prerogative of maiden show, wherein married women children and senior men attend but they have little to do with such performance. Some youth participate but their role is subsidiary. This annual celebration is singular in sense that this sort of function is practised only among members of the community. This performing context is imbued with some elements of folk tale and plays a strong note in formation of local identity since such a show is never heard of by people of the mainland. Religious elements make one day performance sacred even though entire episode continues for several hours is full of fun and merriment. Members believe lord Shiva has power to bestow perfect match. Belief behind is that Dheyana-Rajbanshi in Barak valley has remain confined to nine village only. People chant such a hymn in their language:

*'Koinamati mai – Champa phool futishe
Mayer buku jwalishe'*

(Mother of grown up daughter, flower champa has bloomed, that daughter has become matured to be married, and heart of mother aches as she has to part with her beloved daughter).

Holi-kirtan: The community celebrates this festival in each of nine village and continues for fifteen day. Kirtan (community singing of devotional song) starts from house of village headman and ends in same house. Popularly known as *dolkirtan*, it is celebrated centering Holi festival; a troop of people visits every household and collects like money, rice and vegetable. Finally, the troop gathers in house of the headman to plan the programme. A feast is organised in village prayer hall where all villagers irrespective of young and old, male and female take part. Some money is spent on community feast and rest is used for repairing and buying of new musical instruments.

Dheyman-Rajbanshi also observes **Yaosang Niba** festival like Manipuri of Barak valley during Holi. Literaty ‘Yaosang’ means hut and ‘Niba’ means begging. Begging once a year is in vogue in many communities. On Dol Purnima, Villagers gather in an open space with traditional long flag (*dhwaja*) which Dheyman-Rajabanshi people also carry during door-to-door campaign for collection.

Rasleela: On this occasion, the village prayer hall is decorated in a befitting manner. Cultural shows are organised. *Rakhal Leelais* organised

during day while Radha Krishna Bilap is arranged during night. People from Manipuri community are invited to train participants and ironically, *gopis* are usually taken from Manipuri community. The kirtan performed is in Manipuri language and sari used in the occasion is hired especially.

Rathyatra: Festival of lord *Jagannath* and *Balaram* celebrated by them .

It is a symbol of male deities, *Vaishnavism* and quasi-egalitarian of Hinduism. They believed *Ratha Yatra* is normally associated with *Yadu* dynasty, which got destroyed due to internal clash, whereas their king lord Krishna, described *Avatara* of saviour Vishnu, was killed in jungle by a hunter, and his elder brother *Balaram*, having power of thousand snakes, died off in medication, but body of *Krishna* voyaged in river and then reincarnated in form of wooden *Jagannath*. Such rich folk exemplifies integration of forest dweller, hunter-gatherer, snake-charmer, fishermen, herdsman and artisan of wooden work under huge fold of *Vaishnavism*, which symbolises quasi-egalitarianism in Hinduism. After a gap of 6 day the ratha is again pull back which is called return rath (pherarath) as deities come back after a brief sojourn.

Bihus are the most important and popular festivals of Dheyan-Rajbangshi community. There are three such festivals in Assam: in month of *Bohag* (Baisakh- middle of April), *Maagh* (middle of January) and *Kaati* (middle of October). Each *Bihu* coincides with a distinctive phase in farming calendar. *Bohaag Bihu* marks the New Year at advent of seeding time, *Kaati Bihu* marks completion of sowing and transplantation of paddy and *Maagh Bihu* marks end of harvesting period. *Bohaag Bihu* also called *Rongali Bihu* or festival of merriment. *Maagh Bihu* also called *Bhogaali Bihu* or festival of food, *Kaati Bihu* also called *Kongaali Bihu* or festival of poor. Among the three *Bihus*, *Bohaag Bihu* is the most important as well as popular festival of Dheyan-Rajbangshi. It ushers in period of greatest enjoyment and marks arrival of spring. Folk song associated with *Bohaag Bihu*, called *Bihugeet* or *Bihu* song. *Bohaag Bihu* lasts for several day during which young people seen moving about in groups gaily dress or forming circle in midst of which the prettiest girls dance, singing song of love and romance. Such gathering is call *Muloli Bihu* (open bihu). Songs are very popular among Dheyan-Rajbangshi. In fact, *Bihu* is the most important secular and non-religious festival of the community and it is observing from time immemorial

Today, Bihu occupies a special place in Dheyman-Rajbanshi society. But in past it was simply a festival where special dishes were prepared and some rituals performed. Reason of its present popularity may be attributed to establishment of Assamese medium school in village and participation of Assamese teachers coming from Brahmaputra valley and intermingling of two cultures. Today each village has a Bihu troop who performs during spring bihu and even display in public places.

Dheyman-Rajbanshi also observes annual sports day or prize distribution day in schools located around their habitation to encourage among its children and people. They too observe and commemorate Bir Chilarai Divas, to whom the people consider as the greatest hero and fought for their right and duty in Barak valley. The event is observed on Magha Purnima involving whole community.

Shyama puja (also address as *Thakurain*) one of the important annual festivals of Dheyman-Rajbanshi community jointly conducted by nine village at Thaligram, the *shyama* temple which is situated close to border of Cachar and North Cachar Hill Autonomous District Council (Dima

Hasao). As such, each of nine villages performs puja in respective village, but a collective worship is organised once in a year (in month of February) at Thaligram- the smallest Dheyman-Rajbangshi village. In such process, participation from each village is compulsory in annual festival or *Shyamapuja* is popularly known as '*Noi Gayor Puja*' (worship of nine village). This tradition is believed existing since Chilarai's campaign to Cachar in 16th century and annual gathering as part of that tradition. They believe their happiness and pain, survival and existence depend so long *Shyama* offers a shade for them. The occasion opens up avenues for people to join and spend time merrily with their relatives.

Shiv Ratri is a festival, which is observed towards last month of winter, generally in the month of March. On this festival, they performed *Maghli Shinan* or bathing in the water of sacred rivers at certain places where they flow northwards. People observe fasting to pray Siva and various fertility cults associated with Him; and worshipped through the whole night. All people of village jointly participate and performed *Shiv Ratri*.

Monsoon festival, known as *Hudumdeo or benger biao*, symbolises Rain God. In this festival Dheyani-Rajbangshi performs symbolic marriage of frog. This is done with a hope for good rain and adequate crop yield role of monsoon in an agrarian rural structure. In festival women folk perform dance at night in dry crop field around image of frog. It involves not only dancing but also singing, music and play. On next stage, marriage ceremony of frog is organised at community level.

Moreover Dheyani-Rajbangshi as a community in whole and ostensibly performs dance and music during their festival and religious ceremony in *Mandop* with use of multiple musical instruments like *Bor dhol, Dhol, Bortal, Tal, Manjuri, Khol*. Mostly the instruments are percussion instruments. On occasions like *holi nritya, Rasleela, Nupa pala, Basak nritya*, they use these musical instruments. All religious ceremonies and seasonal festivals of Dheyani-Rajbangshi such as *Dhaner ful ana, Lakhir dak, Dhan katar puja, Noi gaor puja* and *Naya Khoi* are performed in different months of year are linked to agriculture. Dance and various musical instruments related to them determine strong prevalence of folkways of Dheyani-Rajbangshi agrarian rural structure.

Vaishnavism ManipuriArrival

Dheyman-Rajbanshi socio-cultural life indeed attained new turn in early part of 18th century with arrival and influence of Manipuri community, who directly helped to establish a neo-form of religion called Vaishnavism among people of the community. But Vaishnavism has become only popular among the Dheyman-Rajbanshi almost after a century especially in 19th century. Burmese incursion forced Manipuri to evacuate their natal-ancestral land and migrated to adjoining area like Cachar and get established in due course of time. Simultaneously, people from other parts of Assam particularly from Nagaon crossed Borail hill and reached in different location in Barak valley. Such people identified themselves as *Maan Bhagania* (rendered destitute/refugee by Burmese) and popularised Sankardev (neo-vaishnavism). Manipuri living in the valley accepted Vaishnavism professing preaching and ideal of Sri Chaitanya who strengthened kirtan tradition as only way of life. It was a period of Dimasas rule in Cachar but almost seven years from 1819 to 1826, entire Cachar went under possession of Manipuri princes, when three Manipuri princes Chaurjit Singh, Manjit Singh and Gambhir Singh

ousted the then Kachari (Dimasa) king Govinda Chandra, who fled to British territory in Shylet.

The Manipuri settled converted into Hinduism and they considered themselves to follower of Vaishnavism renouncing their traditional religion and faith under royal patronage. Initially it was Ramanandi sect of Hinduism spread in Manipur by Shantidas Goswami during reign of Pamheila from 1709-1748. Later on Bengal school of Gaudiya Vaishnavism dominated since reign of Chingthangkomba (1762-1798), who was popularly known as Bhagyachandra. Such process of official practice of Vaishnavism encouraged new settlers to spread in new environment. Dheyman-Rajbanshi who initially depended on Manipuri on various socio-cultural and religious festivals gradually felt attracted to this kind of religion yet new in Cachar and a considerable number of them came under its fold. Dheyman-Rajbanshi since then visiting these traditional religious shrines at Thaligram and Kachakanti.

Till arrival of Manipuri, Sakta worship formed an indispensable part of religious life of Dheyman-Rajbanshi and gradually the same was replaced by Vaishnavism later. Even Koch were discouraged from visiting those

temples that once formed an inseparable part of their existence at Barak valley. With this entire religious activity, Dheyman-Rajbanshi got changed and accepted a new sect and cult of Hindu religion. They could not go to their traditional temples for worship and detached themselves for long from their traditional ritual. So the most significant and remarkable religious impact on the community came from Manipuri that in due course changed outlook of the community.

So kind of great transformation in socio-cultural life of the community is witnessed. Along religious line, impact is visible in other social aspects inclusive of marriage, funeral and such other rituals conducted by Manipuri priest. Marriage is conducted in Manipuri custom and costume, accompanied by Kirtan that narrates Radha and Krishna. In fact, Dheyman-Rajbanshi's acceptance and embrace of Vaishnavism was indispensable and unavoidable due to unstable situation and a means of survival for them since Manipuri people outnumbered them in several fold.

Sankardev Acceptance and Rejection

Most recent socio-cultural dimension reveals the community's recent past as well as present situation. It achieved a new turn during post-independent period and more particularly from eighties. For example in a single village, people share practice and ritual of different faiths. In village like Japirbond and Larshingpar, influence of new religion is felt. On occasion, Leela Kirtan depicts various facets of Radha and Krishna is replaced by Naam Kirtan initiated by Sankardev. A number of Dheyman-Rajbanshi families already accepted faith of Sankardev and connecting with Mahapurusa's teaching of Sankardev.

On the other hand in all Dheyman-Rajbanshi villages' confluence of many cult and sect keep them as well as other communities, living nearby, united. Because in same village, some continue with Shakta cult accepting Shyama as chief principal deity, while some are Vaishnavite again and continue with Sankardev. Again, worship of Hirimbi, a Dimasa deity finds place in some places. But important thing is that different ideals and methods of worship have not created any internal rift amongst members of different communities. When it comes to term Rajbanshi, they follow their old religious order and this singular characteristic is

driving force of survival of the community amidst all odds. Dheyant-Rajbanshi, in spite of their cultural and religious affiliation attends annual congregation at, where animal sacrifice is part of ritual. Again, they are so influenced with and devoted to vaishnavite cult that they consider it a sin to rear pig and fowl. The same people attend temple to sacrifice animal like duck, pigeon and goat. In this way dynamics in religion and religious tradition is marked a significant aspect in socio-cultural and religious life of the Dheyant-Rajbanshi community.

Some Dheyant-Rajbanshi admits Vaishnavism brought a radical change in their way of life in Barak valley as many of them changed their food habit, dress habit and other allied aspects. But some members though few, do not subscribe to this view. They are of opinion that with coming of Manipuri to Cachar, some new religious practice too arrived in Cachar to popularise Vaishnavism among them. Such perception inspired Dheyant-Rajbanshi accepting the new faith from Manipuri. They think influence of Nityananda Prabhu is vibrant as his wife Jannabi Devi herself visited various location of Cachar and spread message of Vaishnavism and in such process Dheyant-Rajbanshi come under Vaishnavism. From Nityananda Prabhu they inherited a form of Kirtan

(Ras Kirtan) and display it at prayer house on occasions like Raasleela, Rathayatra, Holi Kirtan and other community festivals. Among Manipuri there are many who accepted Nityananda Prabhu as their guru and as such it is very much natural that the two communities have many things in common.

Integration of Community Geographical and Cultural

In Barak valley, history of migration of different communities goes not much in isolation during time antiquity. Erstwhile predominant Koch rule came to an end in 1745 with hegemonic domination of Dimasa vis-a-vis merge of two kingdom–Koch and Dimasa. Gradually Dimasa overpowered other little communities to settle down in an around Khaspur and neighbouring area. But Dimasa ruler encouraged for exchange of its culture with Dheyman-Rajbanshi and most vivid example is Thaligram temple where people of both communities still offer prayer having internal difference.

Location of village has a direct impact on socio-cultural life of both communities in diverse ways. Villages are surrounded by people from

Bengali, Manipuri and Dimasa and in all villages and presence of a handful Assamese working as language teacher paved strong ground for intermixture in culture of different communities. Historical reasons also contribute to such kind of change recently.

Dheyman-Rajbanshi Village and Culture

From location of Dheyman-Rajbanshi village spreading across several assembly constituencies' two things become apparent. First, villages exist in areas that are even today not easily accessible and second, villagers are surrounded by people from different communities, mainly Bengali, Manipuri, Dimasa and tea tribes. Manipuri visibly influences them in almost all walks of life. Living with Manipuri for over a considerable period of time, impact of Manipuri religion (vaishnavism), dress, custom and even song and dance form are clearly visible. Second and comparatively recent impact of few Assamese speaking people, who live in Dheyman-Rajbanshi village, particularly since 1980s.

All these people (communities) migrated to Barak valley in different historical moments under different circumstances but Dheyman-Rajbanshi

are worst sufferers. Location of Dheyant-Rajbanshi villages are unlike village inhabited by Assamese speaking people. Barak valley has nearly fifteen such village spread across in all three districts and remarkable thing is that all villages excluding Tarapur exist in cluster. About eighty percent of population of Assamese villages is Mahapurushia while rest follow teaching of Krishnagura. Acceptance of teaching of Sankardev by some Dheyant-Rajbanshi families renews its relationship. And as some Dheyant-Rajbanshi families accepted Sankardev, a relation has grown between two communities and this provide an interesting discourse on role of religion and religious belief. This further offers a space to those members of the community accepting Mahapurushia, to visit bornamghar at Silchar which is a venue for community exchange. A relation exists between members of two villages and this relation is renewed by periodic visit of religious leaders. In given physical location of village and their surrounding with people from diverse fields, it is important to examine overall position of community in their day-to-day activity, and how they influenced by presence of other communities.

Dheyant to Rajbanshi Narrative versus Empiricism

The community in Barak valley has been better known as Dehan. Whatever literature is available about the community in Barak valley, they have been mostly referred to Dehan. Edward A Gait (1997) mentions, ‘There is a small colony of people in Cachar district known as Dehan’². According to U.C.Guha (1971), it is probably that ‘vanquished local people addressed with respect victorious Koch as Dewan and subsequently Dewan became Dhean’³. Suhas Chatterjee (2000) also writes about socio-religious life of the community and everywhere he designates them as Dheana⁴. J.B.Bhattacharjee (1991), while discussing Koch principality in Cachar mentions the community as Koch, ‘this community is locally known as Dehan or Dheyant after Chilarai, who was Deoyant of Maharaja Naranarayan of Cooch Behar’⁵. Linguist S.S.Tunga (1985), while discussing linguistic aspect of community, uses term Dhean to denote the community. He writes, “Another interesting language in Cachar is Dhean....The people who use it are also known as Dheyants. They are remnants of old Koch people who ruled Cachar in 16th

² Ibid. P. 240.

³ Ibid. P. 30.

⁴ Ibid. Pp. 132-138.

⁵ Ibid. P. 109.

and 17th centuries, but their old glory has gone⁶. D.Nath's (1989) observation is that Chilarai left contingent of Koch soldiers at Brahmapur, later known as Kashpur and these Koch came to be known as Dehan⁷.

All such observations have made one thing clear in Barak valley, Rajbanshi is a very recent term and oral narratives justify this. Many narratives are connected to this journey from Dhean to Rajbanshi. Belief of the community is that they were born out of Lord Shiva's Dheyan (meditation). And hence they are called Dheyan which in course of time became Dehan. The community hence has an interesting narrative about their origin in tradition of myth, folkways and mores.

Once, members established themselves as Dehan, they continue to be designated till independence when another narrative, comparatively recent, tells reason of accepting surname 'Rajbanshi' by all members of the community living in the valley. After independence, a new state of affairs emerged. They were uncertain about their future since large-scale

⁶ Ibid. P. 74.

⁷ Ibid. P. 61

migration took place during that period. And this narrative is an expression of that anxiety. Today each member of the community adheres to surname 'Rajbanshi' and this is in contrast to what one observes in Rajbanshi society outside Barak valley.

In course of field work, it has come to notice that in Rajbanshi villages outside Barak valley like Dhubri, Gossaigaon and Golakganj and it is also a general phenomenon among all communities that different families accept different surnames like Bhakat, Roy, Prodhan , Das, Mondal, and by such surnames it is difficult to say whether one is Rajbanshi or not since many communities have similar surnames. In this respect, Dheyant-Rajbanshi of Barak valley form a distinct group since they all, living in any of the nine villages accept a single surname. In other words, Dheyant-Rajbanshi of Barak valley who are even today better known as Dhean unanimously adopt surname 'Rajbanshi.' This gradual shift from Dhean to Rajbanshi tells effort of the community to remain united in a place of geographical isolation from mainstream since in terms of population, they form a minuscule minority, only around nine thousand spread across in nine village and also to safe guard culture and tradition of community from being grossly influenced by other cultures as is apparent. For example, when they are asked about reason of shift from Dhean to

Rajbanshi, members straightforward said that by ‘Rajbanshi’, it is possible to establish cultural affiliation with mainstream.

Language Own and Other

Socio-cultural apparatus of the community remains incomplete without making a distinction between its own language and other. Surprisingly Dheyman-Rajbanshi, from time immemorial, upholds or affirms to Assamese language and culture after remaining almost cut off from their mainstream counterpart. People of the community intend to transmit everything through Assamese language, which to them embodies national, cultural and sometimes religious identity. Though most people are fluent in local Bengali dialect i.e. Sylheti, they consider latter is their mother tongue. Children are encouraged to study in Assamese medium schools as at least one such school exists in each of the nine Dheyman-Rajbanshi village ⁸. Hence little traditions gets sublimated in great tradition of other place without conflict of interest and other allied matters as of Dheyman-Rajbanshi in Barak valley adhere to Assamese language for more than four hundred year.

⁸. Dipak Kumar Roy, Rajbanshi Samaj Aro Sanskritir Katha, Kolkata, Sopan, 2012, P. 136

Conclusion

The Dheyman-Rajbanshi has been in flux and its entire life and career is undergoing fast upheaval mostly during recent time. From olden family, kinship and marriage to the latest development in issues relating to language, the community and its people are very rigid and show no sign of compromise. People of the community in its present place of life subscribe or adhere to religious syncretism or pluralism even though they are staunch Hindu. Composite vis-à-vis complementary culture prevails between communities especially them and Dimasa, and hence harmonic blend of reciprocity keeps the Dheyman-Rajbanshi of the Barak valley maintaining its socio-cultural distinctiveness from other neighbouring communities. To acquire or develop in depth knowledge about the community and recent nature of transition or transformation, the next and penultimate chapter is going to deliberate upon political profile of the Dheyman-Rajbanshi community.