Chapter 8

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

This chapter reveals the traditional religious beliefs and practices of the rural Barmans and attempts to analyse continuity and change of the Barman religion in the urban setting.

Religious Beliefs

The Dimasa-Kacharis are worshippers of their legendary ancestral God, Bangkaraja, his consort Arikhidima and their inheritors. Previously, the whole Dimasa society was divided into 12 divisions, each one was known as Daikho, having a pair of the God and Goddess and a priest called Janthaima. All the 12 priests (Janthaimas) worked under a head priest, Giriya, who was their adviser and instructor (Apadar 1996 : 37).

From the time immemorial the Dimasas have been the followers of Saktism, who worshipped the Goddess like Ranachandi alongwith their ancestral deities; viz.,

Waraja, Dilaoju, Alaoraja and Landiraja in traditional way. Moreover, at the same time, they worshiped various evil spirits and natural objects to gain physical strength, mental peace and agricultural prosperity. They sacrificed animals on all religious occasions (Apadar 1996 : 37).

Though the process of Hinduization started among the Dimasa-Kacharis in the early decade of the 19th century, after shifting of their capital from Dimapur to Maibong, yet, they took to the Hindu way of life only when the king and his courtiers settled in the Cachar plains. The Dimasa-Kachari kings of Maibong worshipped Ranachandi who represents a terrifying form of the deities like Chamunda, Durga or other ones of the names ending with Kali, Ratri, Chandi, Bhairabi, etc. The Goddess was also worshipped in her benign form almost like Mahalakshmi or Durga. From that time the kings started to follow the Hindu life-style and to worship different forms of the Hindu goddesses. The settlement of the Bengali Brahmins, their appointment as royal priests and granting lands to the Brahmins helped in propagation of Hindu brahmanical faith in the Dimasa-Kachari kingdom. The first deity worshipped by the Dimasa-Kacharis in the idol form was Kachakanti, one of the forms of the Hindu goddess Durga. The Mother Goddess can easily be identified with different forms of Sakti (power). Lord Siva is the consort of all Sakti forms of the Hindu Mother Goddess of the Hindus. Hence, not only Saktism but also Saivism became a popular faith in the Kachari kingdom. The most popular temple of Lord Siva in the Kachari kingdom was the temple of Bhubaneswara, 40 k.m. from the Silchar town. It profoundly impacted the concept of Saivism among the members of the Kachari royal house. A stone inscription indicates that the King Govindachandra who succeeded Krishnachandra is said to have built a temple of

Mahakalbhairab in the neighbourhood of Khaspur. Bhairab is one of the forms of Lord Siva (Sen 2003 : 69-74).

The Dimasa Kachari royal house equally respected Vaisnavism at the time of the King Krishnachandra because he married a Manipuri princes Induprabha (1809 A.D.), which certainly gave an impetus to the royal house to patronize the cult of Vaisnavism in the Kachari kingdom. Yet, the process of the cult started much earlier. In fact, the Kachari kings' inclination to Vaisnava saints was first noticed when a royal messenger was sent to invite Sankardeva, the founder of neo-Vaisnavism in Assam, to visit the Kachari kingdom (Sen 2003 : 74).

Thus, the Dimasa - Kachari kingdom had Hinduized to it's utmost, barring a few customs and rituals, in the plains of Cachar. Notably, the lower stratum of the society retained some of the tribal forms of the Kachari gods and goddesses. But they changed their rituals to make them semi-Brahmanical and semi-tribal. They equated their gods and goddesses with those of the Hindus such as Sibrai and Gamadhi with Lord Siva and his consort Durga respectively. This indicates how the Brahmanical faith influenced the tribal system of worship. Yet, their faith in the natural gods and goddesses was not altogether lost (Sen 2003 : 68, 74,75).

The Barmans of the plains of Cachar started to believe in the existence of three supreme gods; viz., Brahma (the Creator), Vishnu (the Sustainer) and Siva (the Destroyer) called 'Trinity', a pan-Indian concept. But the Barmans gave importance to the Lord Siva and his wife, the Goddess Durga, rather than the other two ones. They called them Bri Sivrai and Bri Gamadhi respectively. As the Barmans are the descendents of the Kachari kings, they worship the three goddesses; viz., Ranachandi,

Kachakanti and Kamakhya, the three forms of the Goddess Durga and give them more importance in their religious activities. The other Hindu deities are Lakshmi, Saraswati, Kali, Ganesh, Shani, Vishnu, Krishna and Bipodnashini, to whom they worshipped with great devotion (Paul 2001 : 218).

Religious Festivals

According to the Bengali calendar the Barmans perform a number of Hindu religious festivals in a year. These are shown in the following chart.

Religious Festival	Deity of the festival	Level of Activity		Month of organizing the festival (as per Bengali Calendar)
		Family	Altogether	
Ganga Puja	Ganga	✓	—	Last week of the Jaistha (May-June)
Jhulan Jatra	Radha Krishna	—	✓	In the monthly of Shrabon (July-August)
Janmastami	Krishna	✓	—	Last week of Shraban (July-August)
Durga Puja	Durga	—	✓	Last week of Aswin (September-October)
Laxmi Puja	Laxmi	✓	—	Last week of Aswin (September-October)
Kali Puja	Kali	—	✓	Last week of Kartik (October-November)
Bipodnashini Puja	Bipodnashani	✓	—	In the month of Kartik (October-November)
Saraswati Puja	Saraswati	✓	—	In the second week of Magh (January-February)
Sivratri	Siva	✓	—	Second week of Falgun (February-March)

Source : Paul, N., 2001, **Social Change among the Barmans of Barak Valley**, An Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, Submitted to the Assam University, Silchar p. 222

But the Barmans of the Silchar town do not observe all these religious festivals. The two main religious festivals of this region, i.e., Durga Puja and Kalipuja are observed by all the members of the Barman community as do the caste people of the town. But they hold a separate Kalipuja in the last week of February which is the main religious festival of the urban Barman community. Their community organize it in a common place with their own finance. Besides, Laxmipuja, Bipodnashini Puja, Saraswati Puja and Sivratri are observed by the urban Barmans at the family level only. The rest of rituals; viz., Ganga Puja, Jhulan Jatra, Jnmastami are not observed at all.

Religious Paths

Like the Bengali Hindus the Barmans in the town are the followers of various paths to achieve ultimate goal, i.e., the god, shown by the dharmagurus (religious masters) like Sri Sri Anukul Chandra, Sri Sri Ramkrishna Paramhansadev, Swami Sarupananda, Brahmakumarij and Vaishnav gurus.

The following table shows the distribution of the Barman households according to the dharmagurus in the town.

Table 8.1: Distribution of the Barman Household according to Dharmagurus in Silchar Town.

Name of the Dharmaguru	Number of Households (%)
Sri Sri Anukul Thakur	21 (18.92)
Sri Sri Ramkriskna Thakur	29 (26.13)
Swami Sarupananda	7 (6.31)
Vaishnavism	5 (4.50)
Brahmakumarij	3 (2.70)
Sai Baba	1 (0.90)
None	45 (40.54)
Total	**111(100)**

Source : Field Survey, March 01 - November 30, 2006

The data reveal that three fifths of the Barman households are the disciples of some dharmagurus. Among them most of the households are the followers of Sri Sri Ramkrishna Thakur (26.13%) followed by Sri Sri Anukul Thakur (18.92%). A few households are the followers of Swami Sarupananda (6.31%) and Vaishnavism (4.5%) and very negligible number of households are the followers of Brahmakumarij (2.70%) and Sai Baba (0.90%).

These also indicate the level of their Hinduization while living in the town in contact with the majority population of the Bengali Hindus who have various dharmagurus in their religion.

Religious Practices

The Barmans of Cachar district still perform a number of tribal rites and rituals alongwith the Hindu rituals which constitute the basis of their socio-religious life. The main tribal rituals observed by the traditional Barmans in their life cycle are as follows :

1. *Hego Chujaba* (Birth rite)

It consists of some rituals performed at the time of the birth of a child. The rituals which start at least a month before a baby is born are performed in the following stages:

(i) Just few days before the expected date of delivery, the husband of the pregnant woman has to perform a rite called *Naisod-Naisodi Puja*, i.e., a worship to the goddess of child welfare (*Naisod-Naisod*) by sacrificing a chicken (Paul 2001 : 199).

(ii) Another ritual *Kharaoba*, is performed by the family members of the pregnant woman for her life, good health and welfare (Paul 2001 ; 200).

(iii) A rite is compulsorily performed by a midwife (*Hojaijik*) before doing her job. She worship the Lord Siva by sacrificing a pair of pigeons for welfare of the newborn baby and the mother (Paul 2001 :200).

Among the Barmans there is no difference in rites and rituals for a male baby and a female baby. The baby just after birth and the mother are regarded *Gushu,* i.e., impure and hence performed a ceremony called *Ha-tharba,* i.e., purification of soil/ earth. This is performed after the umbilical cord of the baby has fallen off. The baby's hairs, *gushu* (impure) are shaved off. This is followed by *Laosha-rathaiba* (sacrifice of a pair of small chickens) and *Nandihamba,* i.e., the occasion of taking the baby out-side the houses. While taking the baby out of the house, a female baby is wrapped in a cloth *rithousha* (a traditional cloth) and a male baby in a cloth *remshou* (a traditional male cloth). Notably, these ceremonies are performed exclusively by the womenfolk. The lead is taken by the *Hojaijik* (midwife), *Barowajik* (assistant midwife) and the *Annuajik* (wait nurse). Special honour and respect is bestowed upon these three ladies by way of giving food and drink exclusively prepared for them and by giving them ovations (Nunisa 2006 : 8-9).

(v) After normal delivery, the *Hojaijik* performs a ritual *Gamadhi Puja* to propitiate the household deities for well-being of the new born. The deity, *Gamadhi*, equivalent to the Goddess Durga of the Hindus, is worshipped in the tribal way by sacrificing a chicken. The *Hojaijik* holds a plantain leaf on which a chicken is sacrificed. The Barmans be-lieve that the head of the chicken must be removed in one stroke at the time of sacrifice; else, it will not be fruitful. In this occasion the males are not allowed to participate at any cost (Paul 2001 : 200).

(v) On the same day, alongwith *Nanadihanba* another ritual *Nanabeching Jiriba* is performed by the *Hojaijik.* The *Hojaijik* sits down in front of the door of the main house and puts some essential items like flowers, basil leaves, etc. on a plantain leaf. The baby's mother comes out from the out-house and gives her baby to the *Hojaijik.* She then carries the baby inside the main house. On the occasion, all the relatives, friends

and neighbours are invited on a feast and they give blessings and gifts to the newborn baby (Paul 2001 : 201-02).

All these rituals are observed by the rural Barmans in detail, but with regards to the urban Barmans, some changes have taken place now-a-days.

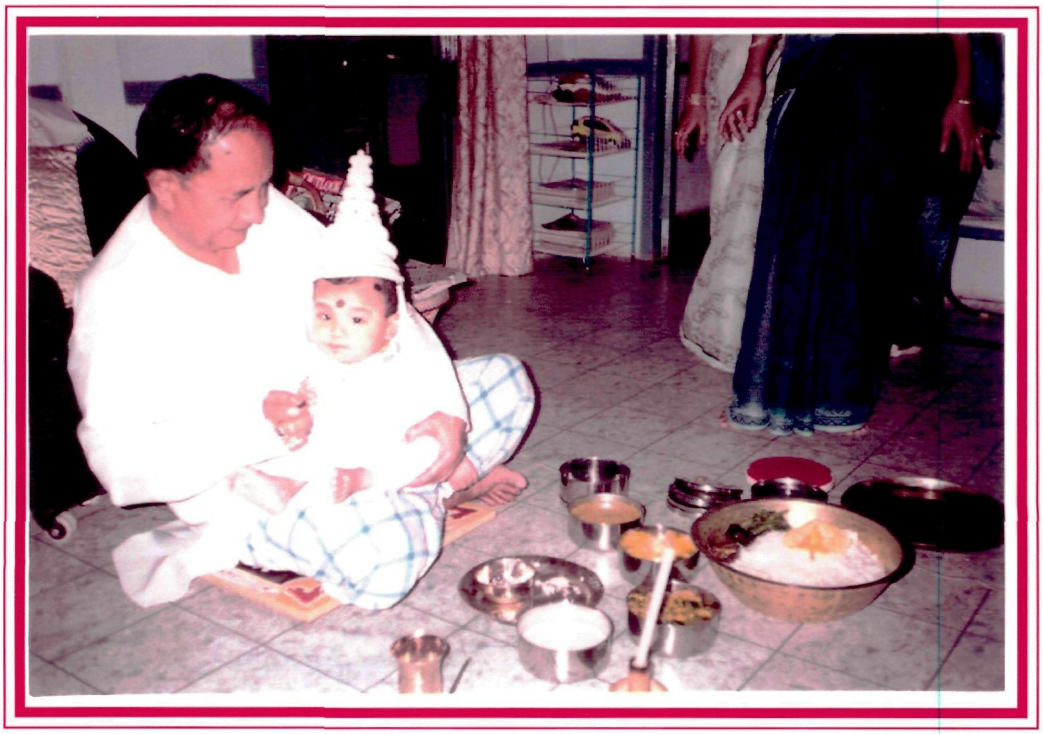
As the urban Barmans of Silchar town usually admit their pregnant wife in a hospital and the baby is delivered by doctors and nurses, the service of their traditional midwife (*Hojaijik*), assistant midwife (*Barowajik*) and wait nurse (*Annuajik*) are not required and, therefore, their roles have vanished from the urban Barman community. Besides, due to the urban living amidst the non-tribal, many of the urban Barmans feel relieved of the detailed customary procedures. Now-a-days, they briefly perform the rituals from the birth onwards. However, a few rituals are observed by them for the welfare of baby and mother.

The husband of a pregnant woman performs two rites *Naisod-Naisodi* and *Kharaoba* by calling a *Hojai* (the traditional male priest).

Generally, in the villages, after delivery the mother and her new born baby are not allowed to enter the main house and they have to live in outhouse for a month.

But, though the Barmans of the town are living in small houses having limited number of rooms either their own or rented ones or official quarters, yet, there is no provision of out-house. So, the Barmans take the mother and newborn baby in their main house after they are discharged from the hospital. But for one month, the mother and the baby are restricted to come out from the house. After one month, a barber is called in who shaves off the impure hairs of the baby. The *Hojai* then performs the ritual *Mayofar-gurba* for the welfare of the baby.

After the baby attains the age of 6 months a suitable day is fixed for *Annaprasana*, i.e., the ritual of offering first rice to the baby. On the occasion the hosts arrange a community feast for all the invites and the invites give gifts and blessings to the baby.



Annaprasana Ceremony (Ritual of offering first rice to the baby)

The traditional rite *Mayofargurba* is being performed by a Hojai (traditional Barman priest)

2. *Mayofar* (Rituals for welfare)

There are 108 types of *Mayofar* practised by the Barmans with help of their traditional priest (*Hojai*) and his assistant *(Borowa)* on different occasions for their welfare and success in every sphere of life. On different occasions different *Mayofars* are practised to worship and propitiate different deities. There are some occasions *Mayofars* are compulsorily practised as per the Barman custom. These are given below:

(i) *Mayofargurba*

This ritual is performed before as well as at the time of marriage for welfare of the bride and the groom. Before a marriage it is compulsorily performed at the houses of the prospective bride and groom. On the day of the marriage, it is held at the groom's house just before he leaves for bride's house with his companions and at the time of marriage, in the backyard of the bride's house. Before the groom leaves for the bride's house the *Hojai* is called in to worship. The two deities *Hajongdiro* and *Dieongdiro* to get rid of any forthcoming difficulties. The *Hojai* performs it in the traditional way by sacrificing a male duck. In the evening the *Hojai* perform it in the backyard of the bride's house to worship two different deities, *Eithidiro* and *Khunthaidiro*, by sacrificing a female duck (Source : Sudhir Barman, a traditional priest (*Hojai*) of the Barman community in Silchar).

In another *Mayofar* performed at the time of marriage, the *Hojai* worships, the deities Bri Sivrai and Bri Gamadi (equivalent to Lord Siva and Durga) in the traditional way to call their favour upon the bride and groom. After the groom returns with the bride the *Mayofar* of Bri Sivrai and Bri Gamadhi is again performed in his house for a long

and happy married life of the couple (Source : Sudhir Barman, a traditional priest (*Hojai*) of the Barman community in Silchar).

(ii) ***Mayofar Gedeba***

This type of Mayofar is practised before entering a new house or to start a new business. Here, the *Hojai* worshipped the deity *Sinsirindi-Reinglaidi-Rangsingdi* (Source : Sudhir Barman, a traditional priest (Hojai) of the Barman Community in Silchar).

(iii) *Habra*

This is another type of ritual, mainly performed by the Barmans living in the villages of Cachar when a child becomes sick, lean, and thin. The guardians of the child perform *Habra* with the help of the *Hojai.* In the ritual, the *Hojai* worships the god, *Hafai-Raja,* i.e., the king god of the area to get the child freed from the illness. (Source : Sudhir Barman, a traditional priest (*Hojai*) of the Barman community in Silchar).

(iv) *Naijuni*

This ritual is performed once in a year for welfare of one's family in the same way as the Bengali perform Bipodnashini (a form of Goddess Durga) puja to protect their families from forth coming difficulties. Here, the *Hojai* worships the Lord Siva in the tribal way (Source : Sudhir Barman, a traditional priest (*Hojai*) of the Barman community in Silchar).

(v) *Khasaingdirao-Nasaingdirao*

This is another ritual annually performed in the tribal manner by the Barman families to achieve favour of Goddess Lakshmi and Saraswati (Source : Sudhir Barman, a traditional priest (*Hojai*) of the Barman Community in Silchar).

(3) *Sengphong Puja and Julu/ Jadi Puja*

According to Barman custom, each of the 40 *Sengphongs* and 42 *Julus/ Jadis* has to worship its respective clan god at least once in a year. This kind of ritual is compulsory for all the clan groups. All the members of a particular clan perform it together with help of their *Hojai* and *Barowa*. The ritual is held in the house of the eldest member of that clan group. This is organized collectively and all the members of the clan have to be present in the ritual and contribute to it as they wish (Source : Sudhir Barman, a traditional priest (*Hojai*) of the Barman community in Silchar).

These traditional tribal rituals are performed not only by the Barmans of the villages but also by the Barmans of the town. Besides *Hojai* and *Barowa*, other Barman people are not allowed to perform these rituals. But in the Silchar town there are very few *Hojai* and *Barows.* So, they have to call the *Hojai* from the villages. The tradition of sacrificing an animal duck or hen, is still observed by the urban Barmans during all the tribal rites for fulfillment of their desires. The traditional use of rice-beer locally called *Judima/ Ju* is continuing among the urban Barmans during all the rituals such as marriage, funerals, festivals, *Mayofars* etc. At least a few drops have to be taken. But, now-a-days, the urban Barmans are not willing to prepare rice-beer at home and therefore they bring it from the villages where they have relatives (Source : Sudhir Barman, a traditional priest (Hojai) of the Barman community in Silchar).

Moreover, the Barmans of the town have little interest to perform *Sengphong* Puja and *Julu* Puja of their respective clan, now-a-days. Even if some members of a clan may like to perform it collectively, all the members are not eager to join it. So, now-a-days, the willing members like to observe the puja in the Kachakanti temple in Udharbond totally in a Hindu way rather than the traditional manner.

4. *Shimang* (Ritual of testing rebirth)

The Barmans believe in rebirth (punarjanma). They believe that the dead person will take birth again in his/her own family with another face. To know who is that person, they perform a ritual called *Shimang*. The *Hojai* will perform it after birth of a new baby in the family such kind of beliefs and practices are prevalent among the urban Barmans of Silchar town (Source : Sudhir Barman, a traditional priest (*Hojai*) of the Barman Community in Silchar).

5. *Thaiba* (Death rites)

The Dimasas burnt the dead bodies and never buried them. Cremation took place usually on a river bank. The fixed period of mourning and the date for the Shradh ceremony were introduced subsequently in the plains of Cachar when a part of the Dimasas formally embraced Hinduism and became 'Barman' (Paul 2001 :210).

The rituals performed by the Barmans living in villages in relation with death are as follows :

(i) Jubaich Khaiba

This is a ritual performed after one week of the death. The head of the community *Khunang* is invited on that day for fixing the date of the Shradh ceremony know as *Maimutharba* without which the departed soul can't be appeased. This ritual is performed in a simple way by offering traditional rice-beer *Judima/ Ju*) alongwith other food items to the invited guests (Paul 2001 : 212).

(ii) *Maimutharba*

This ritual is equivalent to the Shradh ceremony of the Hindus, but they observed it in the traditional tribal way. The traditional priest *Hojai* is called to perform the rites

and he worships their tribal deity and the ancestral god of the dead by sacrificing a cock. Then, he offers rice-beer to the departed soul alongwith cooked rice and chicken meat. On the occasion all the relatives, friends and neighbours are invited and a community feast is offered with rice, chicken and other curries alongwith rice-beer. The invites, males and females, wear the traditional dresses to attend the function (Paul 2001: 212)

Though this is the traditional death rite of the Barmans, yet the Barmans of the town now-a-days do not perform the two rituals *Jubaich Khaiba* and *Maimutharba*. Instead of these, they perform the funeral ceremony (Shradh) totally in Hindu way at the 13th days of the death. At that time two Brahmin priests are called for performing Vishnu Puja and the actual Shradh rituals. Yet the rice-beer is compulsorily offered to the invites on the occasion.

5. *Nagungainba* (Initiation)

As the Barmans formally accepted Hinduism as their religious faith, many dissimilarities have taken place between the Barman and the Dimasa in course of the time in spite of many similarities. One of the important ritual of the Hindu tradition is *Upanayan* (Initiation) which the Barmans have adopted since the time of the King Krishnachandra. As the surname 'Barman' is to indicate the ruling castes of 'Kshatriya', they wear sacred thread after performing the initiation ceremony (*Nagungainba*), in the Hindu manner. It is exclusively done for boys in the age group of 7 to 15 years and a sacred thread is given to them after performing a set of formal activities. The Barmans have their own Brahmin priests who are the descendants of the 12 brahmin families called as *Baroghori Brahmin* who were brought to the plains of Cachar by the King

Krishnachandra as 'Raj Gurus' (masters of kings). These Brahmin priests in stead of their traditional priest *Hojai* called in to perform the initiation ceremony only. A group of boys are initiated on a particular day fixed earlier. The boys are kept in a room for three days without seeing a women, even mother. On the fourth day, they come out of the room and a barber shaves their heads. After taking bath in a pond or river they wear *dhotis* (a white 5 m. long cloth) and go for alms to the neighbours. After that, the boys have to put one Trishul (the weapon of the Lord Siva having three sharp sticks) inside the river bed and on the bank they perform a short tribal ritual alongwith the Hindu rituals. After return of the boys from the river, the priest worships the Lord Vishnu in the Hindu way and the boys are given to wear the sacred threads alongwith chanting of religious hymns. During this occasion, all the relatives, friends and neighbours are invited and a community feast is organized. As this ritual is performed in the Hindu way, the offering of their *Judima* (rice-beer) is not allowed here (Paul 2001 : 203-204).

Those youths who are not initiated up to the age of 15 years due to some reasons are not allowed directly for *Nagungainba*. They have to perform a ritual *Paichitclaiba* for atonement and then they are allowed for initiation only (Paul 2001 : 204).

This type of ritual is an indicator of a high degree of their cultural assimilation with the Hindu Society.

This ritual is compulsorily performed by all the Barman males, irrespective of rural and urban areas. In order to perform this ritual, the urban Barmans usually go to their villages to avoid the difficulties like shortage of space, manpower, non-availability of scarce roots, trees and leaves, paucity of time, *Hojai*, etc.

Magico-religious Practices

Alike religion, magic also occupies a very important place in the primitive society. Magic is considered to be the aggregate of superstitions. They believe in the existence of good and evil spirits (mystic forces) behind every action and interaction. The primitive people practice many magico-religious rites to coerce the supernatural powers into service for achieving a definite goal or benefit (Singh 1987 : 239).

The Dimasas have an intense belief in the powers of certain evil spirits behind any abnormality of the body which exists in nature. In order to propitiate those evil spirits, the menfolk practised some magico- religious rites like *Madai-Huba, Madai-Kalimba, Madai-Daingiba*, etc. Whenever any type of epidemic like cholera, measles, small pox, etc. broke out in any Barman village, all the villagers together perform some magico-religious rites through the *Hojai* to propitiate the evil force responsible for it.

Besides, in order to safeguard against omnious powers, the villagers perform many magico-religious rites annually in the luminous fortnight of *Magh- Phalgun* of the lunar calendar (approximately in February - March).

This ritual is called *Gadeba* where many evil spirits are worshiped such as *Habra, Saggo and Sagain* (the three demoness). As in all their tribal rituals the tradition of sacrifice of animals is must, in magico-religious activities also the tradition of sacrifice of animals such as goat, sheep, duck, hen or pigeon is must in order to propitiate the forces. The animals are killed in the jungle, in the morning or at mid night as per the necessity that arises (Sources : Sudhir Barman, a traditional priest (*Hojai*) of the Barman community in Silchar town).

In the Barman pantheon, *Devi Hidimbi Madai* (the demoness wife of the second Pandava Bhima) is considered the supreme deity and another one, Hamyadau Madai (the assistant of the demoness Hidimba) on her left side also worshipped with the former. But for the two deities the *Hojais* and the *Barows* are appointed separately. In their worship the necessary items used are as follows : A goat, 25 eggs, a hen or duck, leaves and flowers of banana, traditional rice bear (*Judima*) in traditional gourd (*loutai*), bamboo ashes, rice powder and 15 bamboo strips with their tips wrapped with the threads to be lit. During the days of rituals, the boundary of the village is fenced with bamboo sticks to prevent the entrance and exit of the people (Source : Sudhir Barman, a traditional priest (*Hojai*) of the Barman community in Silchar town).

These beliefs and practices are prevalent among the Barmans in the town also. They detect the supernatural causes of diseases and illness and try to cure them with supernatural aids. It is believed that the diseases are caused due to the wrath of some supernatural power. There are two wide spread beliefs about diseases among the primitive Barmans. The first belief is that some foreign body enters the body of the patient causing illness and in order to cure the illness the foreign body should be driven out. The second belief is that the free soul of the patient might have been lost or kidnaped by some foreign power or supernatural forces causing illness and in order to cure the illness the soul should be brought back. So, their traditional priest or medicine man, i.e., *Hojai* and *Barowa* are called in as doctors to treat the disease. Before starting the treatment, the *Hojai* will first make some calculations called *Sama-Nairinang*, a process through which he can ascertain the cause of the illness alongwith the two wide spread beliefs. If the *Hojai* finds no cause of the illness, them it is considered a simple

disease and he allows the patient to leave after uttering some religious spells. But if the *Hojai* is able to find some causes, i.e., the impact of some evil powers called *Sagainju Madai*, then, it becomes necessary to perform some magico-religious rites along with spells in order to propitiate them and to coerce them out of the body of the patient. As soon as the patient gets cured, he has to perform another rite called *Madai Huba* to convey his/ her thanks to the spirit. The evil supernatural power(s), i.e., Sagainju *Madai* are of three types; viz., (i) *Sagainju Phaiboyadee* consists of five sisters, (ii) *Sagainju Phaishindee* consists of seven sisters, (iii) *Sagainju Phaishindee Gajam* consists of seven sisters. Through proper consultation with the *Hojai*, the type of *Sagainju Madai* is decided. The way of worship varies according to the force involved. Except *Hojai*, nobody has the right to perform such kinds of rites. Before he performs the rites, he is offered the traditional rice-beer, i.e., *Judima* and traditional *gamucha* (towel). After performing these rites, the *Hojai* and the *Barowa* never demand any fee. The guardian of the patient offers them cash or kind according to his own capacity (Source : Sudhir Barman, a traditional priest (*Hojai*) of the Barman community in Silchar town).

There is only one *Hojai* in Silchar town. So, the urban Barmans are compelled to go to the villages in search of a Hojai in any exigency. The Hojai sometimes gives some amulets and talismans alongwith folk medicines externally or internally with magico-religious spell for curing different diseases. The service of the *Hojai* is also called for some special purpose such as in the case when a boy and a girl fall in love with each other but their parents do not agree to the relationship and the couple seeks help from a *Hojai* who can manage their marriage by convincing their parents by practising some magical rites. On the other hand, if the parents of a couple-in-love seek help from the

Hojai, he is able to make separation of the couple by throwing some magical spells. Sometimes, some young boys may use this method to impress upon a girl and her parents to marry her (Source : Sudhir Barman, a traditional priest (*Hojai*) of the Barman community in Silchar town).

In the opinion of some urban Barmans, a few people may secretly practise black magic or witchcraft to harm others out of jealousy. For some personal benefits or out of jealousy if any one wants to harm others, he goes to the black-magician and seeks his help. Then, the black magician performs some magical rites with the objects like a piece of cloth used by the living body or the nail cuttings, hair trimmings or excreta which were once a part of the body of the victim. By performing such rites the black-magician is able to harm the person targeted. In some cases he can harm simply by throwing some magical spells in the air. Some times the black-magician utter magical spells over any food item and that is given to his enemy to eat by any means. In all the cases whatever may be the process the black-magician has to perform a rite called *Shivirdi-Shawaldi* by sacrificing a black hen for achieving a definite goal or benefits (Source : Sudhir Barman a traditional priest (Hojai) at the Barman community in Silchar town).

A case study of the *Hojai* of the Silchar Town is given below :

Case :	Name	:	Sri Sudhir Barman
	Position	:	Hojai (traditional priest)
	Age	:	48 years
	Sex	:	Male
	Occupation	:	Serving in Tribal Development Office as a Peon
	Education	:	H.S.L.C.
	Birth place	:	North-Laduma, Cachar
	Marital Status	:	Married
	Present Address	:	Mahadev Para, Rongpur, Silchar
	Date of Interview	:	30/10/07

Sri Sudhir Barman is the only Barman priest, i.e., *Hojai* in Silchar town and practises traditional rites and rituals and other magico-religious rites for last 15 years. His original house is in North Laduma where his old mother, wife and two children are living. But he has migrated in Silchar in the year 1981 after getting a job in Tribal Development Office at Park Road in Silchar. He is living alone in a rented house in Rongpur Karatigram. In addition to this, he performs priestly duties and acts as a medicine-man through some primitive way of treatment. These activities he has learned from two gurus (masters); viz., Sri Joudou Barman of Joypur Udharbond and Sri Jotindra Barman of his own village. All the Barmans of Silchar town call him in order to perform tribal rites. Besides Silchar, he is called in the rural areas also, like Dolu, Nayagram, Harinagar, Joypur, Rongpur, Darmikhal, etc. Besides magico-religious activities as a part of primitive treatment, he also gives amulets and talismans and some folk medicine alongwith magico-religious spells to a patient while curing his disease. According to him, he has been successful in curing about more than 300 cases till date. For performing the activities, he never charge any fee. It is the obligation of the guardian of the patient to offer him some cash or kind.

As a folk medicine man he uses different kinds of ethno-medicinal plants, barks, leaves alongwith some religious compulsions and ritualistic obligations as given below

(1) For treatment of asthma he takes one glass of water and adds a little ashes by uttering some spells and gives it to the patient to drink just five days before the full moon night as well as five days before the new moon night. Such type of activities must be repeated for about seven or nine times.

(2) For treatment of allergy he uses the midrib of China rose and makes a paste with vermilion to be smeared over the allergic areas alongwith magical spells.

(3) In case of injury or burns he brushes up the place by young leaf of banana while uttering some magical spells.

(4) For curing cough, he brushes seven times the neck of the patient with two stems of arum for five or seven days continuously.

(5) For stomachache and headache he simply takes water in a glass of brass and spreads the water with his hand by chanting magical spells.

(6) For treatment of tumour the necessary items are catechu, clove, garlic and small portion of the shell of turtle. He prepares a paste of these items alongwith magical spells and prescribes the patient to eat it daily in the morning and the evening for five to seven days continuously.

(7) For treatment of jaundice he prepares a mixture of a little water and mustared oil and magical spells in a small bottle and gives to the patient to apply it over the whole body after taking bath for seven days. After that, on a Saturday he performs one magic-religious rite by sacrificing a red hen which has yellow legs only.

Now-a-days, he is trying to cure one patient of cancer by his primitive way of treatment with a great hope.

As these are primitive methods of treatment, such practices are very common in the Barman villages of Cachar district and he visits the villages whenever any body called in.

Thus, both magico-religious practices and primitive treatments are prevalent in rural Barman community as well as in urban Barman community.

To sum up, one can say that the urban Barmans believe in the major Hindu sects Shaktism, Shaivism and Vaishnavism and practice various religious festivals, rites and rituals, magico-religious practices and various religious paths.

Because of space shortage, high education, belief in scientific reasoning and business of modern life, the urban Barmans have cut short many of the rites and rituals. In case of the *Naisod-Naisodi* and *Kharaoba* before the date of expected delivery of a baby, they have introduced a little change. The urban Barmans usually admit their pregnant wife in hospitals wherein the baby is delivered by doctors and nurses. Due to this the service of the traditional midwife (*Hojaijik*), assistant midwife (*Barowajik*) and wait nurse (*Annuajik*) are not required and therefore their role have vanished from the urban Barman community. Thus, the rest of the traditional birth rites; viz., *Gamadi Puja, Nanadhihonaba, Nanabechingjriba* have vanished from the urban Barman community and instead of those they perform the Hindu Bengali ritual *annaprasana* (the ritual of offering first rice to the baby) at the age of 6 months, though they have no such tradition in their society originally.

Of the 108 *Mayofars*, only five are observed by the urban Barmans such as *Mayofargurba, Mayofar-Gedeba, Naijuni, Habra* and *Khasingdirao-Nasaingdirao*. Most of the Barmans in the town have little interest to worship their clan god or ancestor (*Sengphong puja and Julu puja*) and even the interested ones perform it in the Kachakanti temple in Udharbond in Hindu way.

Shimang ritual of testing rebirth is another custom on which the urban Barmans perform this with the help of *Hojai* (the traditional Barman priest).

However, the death rite (*Thaiba*) is also not performed in the traditional way. Instead, they perform the Hindu Shradh ceremony (*horad*) in its place.

Moreover, though the *Nagungainba* (initiation) rite is compulsorily performed by all the urban Barman males, yet they often to their original place in order to perform it, in stead of performing in their urban habitat.

Like their rural fellows they perform the magico-religious practices with the help of the *Hojai*. The *Hojai* is three-in-one; priest, magician and medicine-man.

The urban Barmans go first to the doctors for treatment of diseases. When the modern medical treatment is not effective to cure the diseases they go for primitive treatment.

On the whole, there is found a continuity of the religious beliefs and practices among the Barmans in the town. Yet, there are the changes taking place in their sacred domain under the impact of urbanization, education, modern facilities, constraints of urban life and close contacts with the more advanced and politically and numerically dominant caste society in the town. The change are perceived on the two lines. First adoption of Hindu rituals such as the *annaprashan sanskar* and the Shradh ceremony. Second, under the constraints of time and preoccupations many of the religious and magical rituals have been either dropped or cut short in the practice.

REFERENCES

Apadar, Z. A. 1996 **Dimasa Annesha**, Haflong : Nikhil Bharat Bongo Sahitta Sammelon.

Banerjee, H. N. 1997 **Introducing Social and Cultural Anthropology**, Calcutta : K.K. Publication

Nunisa, P.T.	2006	*The Dimasa Women : Role and Status in the Society* in M. Longmaili and M. Hagjer (ed.), **Gonthai**, Haflong : Dimasa Mahila Samity.
Paul, N.	2001	**Social Change among the Barmans of Barak Valley**, An Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis Submitted to the Assam University, Silchar.
Sen, G	2003	**Life in Kachari Kingdom at Khaspur**, Silchar : P. Dutta
Singh, K.	1987	**Social and Cultural Anthropology**, New Delhi : Gyan Publishing House