



Illness as an Act of the Deity: Perspectives from Tribal Religion in India

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the interconnection between illness, ritual, and religious belief among the Rabha tribe of Northeast India. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, it examines how deities are conceived as both protectors and sources of affliction, particularly in response to lapses in ritual norms. Illness and suffering are interpreted as manifestations of spiritual imbalance, addressed through elaborate ritual practices involving animal sacrifices, symbolic offerings, bamboo structures, sacred stones, and other materials. These practices function not only as spiritual remedies but also as instruments of social integration and moral regulation within the community. The study further analyses how religious syncretism with Hindu traditions has shaped Rabha cosmology while maintaining indigenous ritual forms. By highlighting the material and symbolic dimensions of these practices, it contributes to the broader anthropological understanding of how tribal communities negotiate health, morality, and spirituality through culturally embedded religious frameworks.

Introduction

Belief represents the highest possible level of certainty and conviction, constituting the psychological state through which an individual perceives reality. However, the way of conceiving reality is shaped by an individual's emotions and imagination within a particular environment. The reason for belief is undoubtedly the bodily commotion that the existing idea provokes (James, 1889:333). Tribal religious beliefs involve the presence of supernatural beings, spirits, gods, and deities. Numerous anthropologists and sociologists, such as James Frazer (1922), Malinowski (1948), Durkheim (1964), Tylor (1871), Turner and Turner (1978), Geertz (1973), Luhmann (2012), and Srinivas (2018), have examined religion from various theoretical perspectives. Rossano (2006), however, defined religion as beliefs or actions based on the existence of supernatural entities or forces with agency that can intervene in or otherwise affect human affairs. These beliefs are always common to a particular group, which professes adherence to them and practises the rites associated with them (Hicks, 2010). Religious belief results from humanity's cognitive needs. The gods and deities are psychological constructions created by humans according to their environmental and social circumstances, and hundreds of myths are generated by adherents (Sang & Hewamanage, 2015). Religion involves complex relationships between experience, behaviour, and belief, which do not always co-vary (Watts & Bretherton, 2017). Therefore, religion in practice has drawn a sharp line between social relations among living human beings and social

relations with ancestors, gods, God, and other ‘supernatural’ beings (Woodhead, 2011). According to Devi (2004:9), “Religion is the expression of manner and mode of adjustment effected by people with their concepts of the supernatural. The most widespread manifestation of this attitude is in the shape of beliefs and rituals which form the basis of all religion – whether primitive or modern.”

Since ancient times, belief in God and deities has been integral to religious cosmology. God’s involvement in individual lives is often experienced and expressed through positive social contact and relationships (Schieman *et al.*, 2010). For example, discoveries of artefacts from ancient Greek civilisation provide evidence that multiple deities were worshipped, each associated with specific purposes. The gods of the sun, sea, earthquakes and calamities, beauty, fertility, and war demonstrate the polytheistic religious ideology and strong religious beliefs.

Most tribal communities across the world strongly believe that nature is the supreme power. Since ancient times, people have worshipped natural elements as protectors of human life. Today, numerous tribal communities continue to worship natural elements through distinct ritualistic traditions and customs. Some tribes of Jharkhand (a state in the eastern part of India) strongly believe that spirits are scattered throughout their habitats, which abound in hills, forests, springs, streams, ponds, puddles, trees, shrubs, huts, and so on. It is believed that if all these spirits are properly worshipped, they will augment the food supply, ward off illness, and bring prosperity (Singh, 2019). The worship of natural elements provides insight into the harmonious relationship between humans and nature, sustainability, and the importance of conserving nature in human life. Many tribal and non-tribal communities worldwide believe that deities protect from evil entities and natural calamities. Before the introduction of Hinduism and Christianity, most Southeast Asians practised animism and naturalism. They consider nature to be both a god and the residence of deities. In simple societies, each deity is believed to be responsible for a particular purpose. These deities are worshipped to achieve specific goals in everyday life, such as good health, fertility, agricultural productivity, and victory.

Religious rituals are an integral part of divinity and the process of connecting with deities. Belief in deities and various ritualistic traditions is deeply embedded in the social system and serves to maintain social solidarity. Even today, many tribal groups across the world believe that illness or mental and physical afflictions are caused by malevolent spirits, angry deities, evil forces, black magic, or as a consequence of misconduct in ritualistic traditions. Such beliefs are observed among many tribes in Andhra Pradesh, such as the Koyas and Sugalis, who worship goddesses like Sammakkā, Sonalāmmā, Peddāmmā, and Uppalāmmā, all regarded as presiding deities of various viral diseases (Yadav 2022). In numerous simple societies, when illness is attributed to the will or displeasure of a deity, efforts are often made to appease the responsible deity and seek its favour for recovery.

The Rabha tribe of Northeast India believes that misfortune, sickness, and madness are acts of deities, spirits, and magical practices. When an individual makes mistakes during ritual practices, the deities may distress the individual. This article provides a brief discussion of deities and their perceived connection to illness and misfortune. It also examines the religious rituals performed to appease these deities for prosperity and good health. This study is based on an anthropological investigation conducted in villages under the Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council in Assam, India. All information presented here is derived directly from the researcher’s observations, in-depth interviews, and case studies. To gain a deeper understanding of the traditional belief system and various ritual practices, the researcher interviewed traditional healers, priests, and elderly persons. In addition to empirical insights, a diverse range of materials, including books, ethnographic monographs, and academic journal articles, was reviewed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the tribe.

The Rabha Tribe in North-East India

Before analysing the diverse perspectives on deities and religious rituals, the researcher provides

an overview of the socio-religious life of the Rabha community. The Rabha are an Indo-Mongoloid ethnic group linguistically affiliated with the Tibeto-Burman language family. They are primarily concentrated in the north-eastern region of India and in Bangladesh. Scholars hold differing views on their ethnogenesis. Some believe that the Rabha are a subgroup of the larger Boro Kachari ethnic group of north-eastern India, while others suggest a lineage connected to the Garo tribe, citing notable linguistic similarities. There are various opinions and explanations regarding the origin of the Rabha (Basumatary 2010:2). It is widely recognised that the Rabha are a culturally distinct indigenous ethnic group within India. Within the Rabha community, there are several subgroups (sub-tribes): Pati, Rangdani, Maituri, Dahuri, Bitlia, Hana, Koch, and Totla Rabha. Although the Rangdani, Maituri, and Koch subgroups have been influenced by Hindu religious traditions, elements of their ancestral beliefs and cultural practices are still preserved to some extent in their contemporary practices. The socio-cultural and linguistic aspects of the Pati and other subgroups have become almost identical to those of Assamese Hindu culture. In this context, Rabha (2002:25) stated, 'A large group of Rabha people, in their bid to reform their traditional socio-religious life under the influence of Hinduism, have separated themselves from their traditional society. The word "Pati" means separation from the other groups; thus, this group was distinguished as Pati Rabha.'

The Deity and Human Relations in the Religious Worldview

Kumarappa (1934) provides a comprehensive analysis of the concept and nature of deities, drawing on key Hindu texts such as the Upanishads,¹ Bhagavatgita,² Pancaratna,³ and Puranic literature⁴. However, Bennett (1967: 815) categorised deities into three distinct types based on their roles and existential characteristics, providing a framework for understanding the various manifestations of divine presence. He distinguished deities as beginning, middle, and end, corresponding to "was, and is, and is to come." (a) The Alpha Deity (God) is necessarily existent and self-existent, causally dependent on nothing else for existence. Another type is (b) the Iota Deity (divine episode, theophanies; if the Alpha Deity exists, it acts or experiences – these are items in its biography). (c) The Omega Deity is consummate, ideal, all-inclusive, and possibly emergent, and is primordial, with everything else causally dependent on it.

Bennett's threefold classification of deities provides a useful framework for understanding the Rabha people's conception of divine presence. Although the Rabha strongly believe in multiple deities, they regard Khoksi as their chief deity. Khoksi is associated with agricultural prosperity and community well-being. "*Khok*" means a basket made of bamboo, and "*si*" means blood. This deity is represented in Rabha society as a stone placed in a bamboo basket, and offering blood to Khoksi is considered essential; hence, the deity is known as Khoksi. When Khoksi is worshipped to ensure success in agricultural production, dances on fire ash (known as the Khoksi dance) serve as a test for the priest and his assistant, assessing whether they are fully devoted to worship. If a person is injured while performing these sacred dances, it is believed to be a bad omen for society and may lead to misfortune. A critical analysis of the significance of this traditional belief reveals that it symbolises an individual's perfection and Conscientiousness in life.

The religious practices of the Rabha community involve a deep connection to their deities, with the belief that these deities can cause harm to individuals or groups when angered by misconduct. Their religious beliefs incorporate elements of animism, naturalism, ancestral worship, and Hinduism.

1 Ancient Hindu philosophical and spiritual scriptures forming the foundational teachings of Hinduism.

2 The *Bhagavad Gītā* is a sacred Hindu scripture found in the *Mahābhārata*. On the battlefield of Kurukṣetra between the god-avatar *Krishna*, acting as Arjuna's charioteer, and the warrior *Arjuna*, where Krishna guides him on duty (*dharma*), selfless action (*karma yoga*), devotion (*bhakti*), and spiritual wisdom (*jnāna*).

3 A Sanskrit play by Bhāsa based on the Mahābhārata epic.

4 A vast collection of sacred Hindu religious texts offering an extensive overview of Indian mythology.

For generations, the community has worshipped its traditional deities by erecting stone monuments in a linear arrangement near forests or riverbanks, with each stone representing a specific deity. These stones are installed through sacred rituals performed by priests and village community members. Animal sacrifice is a crucial aspect of nearly all religious ceremonies dedicated to native deities, with pigs being the primary animals sacrificed and their blood offered to the deities. Deities are believed to have control over an area and exert authority and power over the land and its inhabitants (Chakraborty, 2015: 172). Clan deities are thought to reside in rivers, foothills, forests, and lakes, and may appear in dreams in fearful forms, distressing people and sometimes demanding special worship and offerings. These deities can transform into different forms and may appear as wild animals, birds, or snakes. Deities responsible for illness are believed to relieve the affected individual when they receive satisfactory worship. Moerman (1979: 60) reported that throughout North America and much of northern Asia, sickness was understood to result from the intrusion into the body of some sort of malevolent influence. The central metaphor of curing was the removal of some 'thing', visible or otherwise, from the body. This conceptualisation resonates with the Rabha tribe's contemporary healing practices. Even today, if a person experiences distress or illness, the Rabha worship the responsible deity to seek their favour.

Religious Syncretism and Cultural Continuity among the Rabha Tribe

Historically, the term syncretism has served as the conceptual foundation across academic disciplines in the study of interreligious borrowing and mixing (Sigalov, 2016). Syncretism is generally understood as the fusion of different religions or the contamination of one by another (MARY, 2001). Ringgren (1969) states that in practical usage, syncretism denotes a mixture of two or more religions. However, it is a value-laden term (Sahay, 2019) and refers to the hybridisation or amalgamation of two or more cultural and religious traditions (Mandal, 2008). In theology, the mixing of religious ideas is known as syncretism (Rangiwari, 2021). If another religion provides a more current answer or new perspectives on a question present in a particular religion, syncretism is warranted (Nweke, 2017). For anthropologists, this involves reinterpreting and reinventing elements from two or more distinct cultures (Lopes, 1999). Since the arrival of the Aryans, there has been interaction between different cultural and religious streams (Bharadwaj, 2019). In India, tribal religious practices have hybridised but have not lost their identity despite years of interaction with Hinduism and Christianity (Atungbou, 2022). This blending of traditions is also evident among the Rabha. Although it is not well known when they adopted Hinduism, they have been worshipping Hindu deities for a long time. Thus, their religious landscape is characterised by a rich diversity of deities, each accompanied by distinct beliefs and rituals. They worship a number of deities, and the forms of beliefs and practices vary from deity to deity (Sabar, 2017, p. 304).

This plurality in worship highlights the dynamic and nuanced nature of Rabha religious life. Based on ritualistic traditions, Rabha Hakacham (2012), a prominent Rabha writer, categorises the Rabha deities into two groups: the Rabhabai and the Lemabai. The Rabhabai are considered indigenous deities specific to Rabha society. The Rabha have worshipped this group of deities since ancient times by offering 'Choko' (the traditional rice beer of the Rabha) and sacrificing animals such as pigs, goats, pigeons, and chickens. In contrast, the deities belonging to the Lemabai are Hindu deities. When worshipping Hindu deities, the Rabha do not offer rice beer or blood. In particular, the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam introduced significant reforms in the Hindu religious tradition, emphasising social solidarity and actively opposing animal sacrifice. This movement has influenced not only the Hindu Assamese caste population but also other tribal groups already affected by Hindu religious beliefs and traditions. The Rabha also came under the influence of this religious movement. However, in the case of worshipped mother goddesses or Shakti (the Goddess of Power), blood sacrifice is considered essential. Among the Rabha, Jagar is regarded as a manifestation of feminine power and is identified as the goddess of death, traditionally worshipped through blood offerings. This local belief aligns with broader Hindu interpretations, in which deities associated with destruction often embody protective power. In Hindu

religious beliefs, this deity is worshipped as the mother goddess Kali, an angry manifestation and slayer of demons, a masculine evil force (Sharma, 2004). As many Hindu religious elements have spread to various tribal communities in Northeast India, Jagar may be the result of Hindu religious influence within Rabha society. This worship is related to awakening the deity to ward off evil. A similar belief is observed among the people of Uttarakhand (a state in northern India), where Jagar is a ritual related to spiritual healing and the practice of awakening folk deities (Bhatt, 2023). Such parallel practices across geographically and culturally distinct regions point to the shared symbolic frameworks of indigenous belief systems. It is clear that religious syncretism among the tribes within the Indian context provides a unique yet diverse religious complexity.

Within the Rabha community, deities such as Ghargohani (female deity who protects the home), Lakhor Thakur (deity who protects the cattle), and Paoradeu (deity who protects the village) belong to the Lemabai group of deities. Notably, the Rabha sub-groups Pati, Hana, Totla, Bitila, and Dahuri have merged with the larger Assamese Hindu tradition and culture; therefore, along with the Rabhabai, they also worship Lemabai according to Hindu traditions. Other Rabha sub-groups, namely Rangdani, Maituri, and Koch, have preserved their ancestral traditions. This continuity of traditional belief is evident in their devotion to a distinct set of indigenous deities deeply rooted in their agrarian and ecological lifeworlds. The Baikho or Khoksi (agricultural deity), Langabura (deity associated with well-being and prosperity), Koncho (deity who protects livestock and the granary), Bagheswari (forest deity), Kasaikhaiti (female deity who protects against evil), Moiradeu (forest deity), and Bakharadeu (deity associated with pain) are notable deities in Rabha religious beliefs. These deities collectively reflect the Rabha's deep connection to nature, community welfare, and the cycles of life that sustain them. The Rabha pay homage to these deities in their villages and worship them for a prosperous life.

Between Humans and Deities: Rituals as a Means to Divine Favour

Every culture, regardless of its simplicity or complexity, has a concept of health and health-seeking behaviour, often referred to as “health culture,” which forms an integral part of the community's overall culture (Samakaya & Subramanyam, 2019). According to Moyaert (2017:335), ritual behaviour is formal rather than informal or casual, as it follows patterns based on established lines. In many cultures, ritual practices serve as essential means by which people communicate with deities to seek protection, healing, and favour. Religious rituals may facilitate effortful self-control among practitioners and promote implicit forms of self-regulation, which can improve the alignment between explicit and implicit processes (Koole *et al.*, 2016). However, rituals tend to be collective and are characterised by prescribed tradition, formality, customs, regularity, and procedure (Tinson & Nuttall, 2023). A religious ritual is understood as any repetitive and systematised behaviour dictated by religion, culture, or tradition, with the purpose of connecting to or pleasing a deity or supernatural power (Pachpore & Mehta, 2024).

In traditional societies, when the body suffers from a particular illness or when such an illness is detected, there is a strong belief that it is connected to supernatural powers, and several rituals are performed to heal the body (John, 2017, p. 378). In Rabha society, various rituals are observed to address illness and misfortune, which are believed to result from the actions of deities. Religious rituals in Rabha society involve paying homage to deities, sacrificing animals, and making offerings to deities. The worshipper seeks not only to appease those forces in his environment that he regards as influencing his welfare, but also to establish a proper relationship with those he seeks to appease (Mathews, 1911). The sacrifices establish the bond between the giver and the deity or spirit who receives the gift. These offerings symbolise reciprocal relationships and strengthen communal ties and shared spiritual experiences. Rituals can regulate emotions, performance goal states, and social connections (Hobson *et al.*, 2017). Among the Rabha, traditional religious rituals serve a public healing function. Various rituals dedicated to the worship of different deities are conducted by priests, sacred specialists, and shamans. In the performance of religious rituals within the Rabha community, the priest, who is a full-time religious

practitioner, is locally known as “Deuri”, while the shaman, a part-time religious practitioner, is referred to as “Ojha”; both play significant roles in the ritual process.

In the following discussion, the researcher examines the nature of different deities and the various religious rituals performed to seek divine favour and address illness, distress, and misfortune.

The Koncho

Koncho is a native deity of the Rabha people. It is unknown when the Rabha began worshipping this deity, who is believed to be the protector of livestock and granaries. The Rabha worship this deity on the religious occasion of Khoksi (as Khoksi is the chief deity), along with other deities. Special worship is arranged when this deity targets an individual and causes problems in their life. When a person comes into contact with this deity, they come under its control. If someone urinates in a sacred place or crosses the shadow of a deity, the individual may face problems in life. This deity invites an individual by transforming into an elderly person, a beautiful girl, a family member, or a neighbour. Interestingly, this deity does not physically harm people. Instead, it protects them from heavy rainfall, wild animals, and other dangers in the jungle.

During my fieldwork in the Goalpara District of Assam in 2024, an elderly family stated that they had observed two incidents involving the Koncho deity affecting an individual in their village. I asked how the individual behaved when targeted by the deity. They replied that the person behaved abnormally and distanced himself from others. When the individual came into contact with others, he would suddenly run away to the jungle and try to hide. The affected person regained a normal state after proper worship of the Koncho deity. Even today, the Rabha believe that if the family fails to provide timely treatment when this deity acts on an individual, the person may become irrevocably mad or even lose their life. In the special worship of the Koncho deity, the family builds a small shed in the courtyard with bamboo. Inside the shed, a platform is created to hold the offerings. The deity is worshipped by offering a garland made of snail shells and small pebbles, which are placed on the platform. The family members of the affected person offer rice powder to the deity and pray for the wellbeing of the individual.

The Bakhara

In addition to natural causes, the Rabha attribute pain in the human body to the actions of a deity. The sensation of pain in the waist, foot, hand, and other body parts is believed to be caused by the Bakhara deity. The Bakhara deity is considered malevolent and is thought to exist in the surroundings. The Rabha believe that when an individual is injured in a body part and the pain persists for a long time, or when pain arises due to old age or from carrying heavy objects, it can be cured by appeasing this deity. The Bakhara deity is believed to target individuals to weaken them by inflicting pain. Belief in the deities among the Rabha is conditional, as they relate their everyday life and challenges to these supernatural agents; if something is inexplicable, they create an imaginary form to relate it to reality. In this context, we can refer to Evans-Pritchard’s work on witchcraft, where he notes that witches, as conceived by the Azande, do not exist in a physical sense. However, belief in witchcraft encompasses a system of values that regulates human conduct (Evans-Pritchard, 1976). Pain is a challenge to maintaining everyday life, so the Rabha conceive of it as a deity and worship to remove pain from the body. Successful worship of this deity is believed to have a positive influence on the subconscious mind of the patient.

Worship of this deity sometimes takes place at home and sometimes in open fields. The ritual to worship the Bakhara deity is not communal. Only the family members of the suffering person or the patient arrange this worship. In traditional worship, family members create a small shelter in the courtyard. Inside the shelter, a platform is made using bamboo to hold the offerings. The priests draw a boundary with rice powder, connecting each corner of the shelter. The priests then place the offerings and pray for relief from pain. Sacrificing ducks and offering their blood to the deity is an essential part

of worshipping the Bakhara deity.

The Moiradeu

In the cosmological worldview of the Rabha community, childhood fear is not regarded as merely a psychological phenomenon but as a spiritual disturbance caused by a supernatural entity known as Moiradeu. Children may experience fear for various reasons, such as hunger, injury, or encounters with frightening objects. However, within Rabha belief, such fear is attributed to divine intervention. Moiradeu, the deity responsible for this condition, derives its name from “Moirā,” meaning peacock, and “deu,” meaning deity. The deity often appears before children in the form of wild animals— such as monkeys, peacocks, and bears— or as other fear-inducing objects. In some cases, it may also enter the dreamscape, frightening children through visions of threatening creatures.

To counteract the unsettling influence of Moiradeu, the Rabha perform specific rituals either at home or near forested areas. During these ceremonies, a priest constructs symbolic representations of animals using bamboo, believed to embody the spirit of the deity. Ritual performance is a collaborative affair, involving the priest and his assistants, who chant sacred songs and perform ritual dances using a Taal, a bell-metal musical instrument. In this context, the songs serve as sacred mantras, transforming sound into a medium of worship and negotiation. Through these chants, the bamboo effigy is invoked as Moiradeu, and prayers are offered to protect children from fear and suffering.

The Paoradeu

In the spiritual landscape of the Pati Rabha, Paoradeu emerges as a revered village deity whose presence embodies both protection and divine power, anchoring the community in ritual and belief. Deities are regarded as protectors of individuals and society from misfortune and uncertainty. This protective role is not unconditional, as they do not harm individuals who properly regulate their conduct. This mutual relationship between human action and divine response reflects a sacred moral code, wherein moral reciprocity between deity and devotee forms the foundation of Rabha spiritual ethics. Within this ethical and spiritual framework, among the Pati Rabha, Paoradeu is the female village deity who protects villagers from unfortunate events. More than just a guardian, she holds a revered place in their cosmology, closely associated with divine kinship and feminine power. Her divine stature is deepened by the belief that this deity is the younger sister of the mother goddess Kamakhya.

The rituals associated with her are performed with great care and reverence, especially during significant cultural occasions. This deity is worshipped in the courtyard of the priest’s home during the Assamese New Year for the prosperity of society. In this sacred ritual, symbolism plays a vital role, as a long bamboo serves as the embodied representation of Paoradeu. Following the worship, the ritual takes on a communal dimension when, after successful worship at the priest’s home, the villagers visit each household to show the condition of the village along with Paoradeu for blessings. This act is both spiritual and social, reaffirming collective unity and divine oversight. When they walk around the village, they must carry the deity very carefully. It is strictly believed that they cannot place it on the ground; instead, they erect it with the help of other pieces of bamboo, ensuring that the main stalk does not touch the ground. Such care is necessary because if there is any mistake during worship or if someone neglects this deity, it may retaliate by targeting the individual’s eyes. To maintain harmony and prevent divine retribution, the Pati Rabha sacrifice pigeons to appease this deity. This act of offering continues to hold relevance in the community’s belief system, as even today, the Pati Rabha believe that when an individual experiences eye-related issues, they appease this deity to recover.

The Kasaikhaiti deity

It is widely believed that deities are supernatural powers capable of protecting society from evil spirits, misfortune, epidemics, and disease. The Pati Rabha worship a deity known as Kasaikhaiti, who

is believed to ingest disease and evil power. The meaning of Kasaikhaiti is “the eater of raw flesh and blood.” This deity is regarded as an incarnation of the mother goddess Parvati, who is revered as the Goddess of Power. The Rabha believe that Kasaikhaiti is a powerful deity who can control evil spirits, ghosts, and demons. This belief highlights her role as a fierce guardian and a vital force in the Rabha spiritual universe. Kasaikhaiti is communally worshipped in Rabha-inhabited villages. On the day of the religious ceremony, the community worships this deity on the riverbank, sacrificing animals such as pigs, goats, and pigeons to seek favour and protection from disease and evil spirits.

A significant aspect of Kasaikhaiti worship is the Haolkheda tradition. Rooted in communal belief, this practice serves as both a spiritual and social expression of collective well-being. The tradition is associated with warding off evil spirits and removing misfortune from the village. It reflects the Rabha community’s deep conviction that spiritual imbalance can affect communal harmony. In this communal ritual, young boys visit each household, strike the walls, and then run towards the sacred place of the Kasaikhaiti deity where the rituals are performed. Through this tradition, they surrender disease and evil powers to the deity. This act of surrender represents a form of spiritual negotiation, in which the community seeks divine intervention in exchange for devotion and ritual performance. The symbolic meaning of the Haolkheda tradition is the removal of disease, evil spirits, and misfortune through communal action.

Discussion and Conclusion

The ethnographic findings from the Rabha community provide a compelling insight into how indigenous cosmologies interpret illness not as a biological accident, but as a result of moral and spiritual imbalance. In Rabha belief systems, deities are not merely revered beings; they are active participants in the rhythms of human life, governing health, emotion, natural forces, and social outcomes. This perspective reflects broader anthropological interpretations, where religion functions not only as a system of faith but also as a worldview and a mechanism for regulating conduct, interpreting misfortune, and restoring order within society.

The relationship between humans and deities among the Rabha is fundamentally reciprocal. While deities protect both individuals and the community, they are also exacting in their expectations, forming a moral framework that guides daily life. Misconduct, whether ritual or moral, invites retribution in the form of illness, pain, or psychological distress. This belief structure, though often dismissed as ‘superstition’ by outsiders, represents a sophisticated cultural logic that interprets suffering through symbolic causality and collective responsibility, reinforcing accountability within both personal and communal contexts. Crucially, illness in this context is not only personal; it is also social and spiritual. When an individual is afflicted, the entire community responds in a coordinated manner. Through rituals such as the Haolkheda, sacred dances, symbolic offerings, and dream interpretations, the Rabha enact a process of healing that reinforces community cohesion, spiritual clarity, and moral reflection. These rituals are emotionally charged events that draw on the power of collective participation, echoing Turner’s (1969) concept of *communitas*, where shared ritual dissolves boundaries and reinforces social bonds by uniting people in a sacred purpose.

Furthermore, the Rabha conception of deities is not static but adaptive and evolving. Through syncretic blending with Hindu traditions, especially the integration of deities such as Kali as Jagar, or village deities like Paoradeu, the community demonstrates how indigenous religion remains fluid, responsive, and resilient in the face of historical and cultural change. This religious syncretism does not erode tribal identity; rather, it exemplifies cultural negotiation and adaptation, enabling the Rabha to sustain their core cosmological values while embracing selected elements from dominant traditions. Symbolism plays a central role in these ritual expressions, infusing meaning into every aspect of worship. The Rabha are not passive recipients of dominant religious narratives; they actively reinterpret external

symbols within their own cosmological logic, preserving agency and cultural distinctiveness. The use of bamboo structures, snail shells, animal sacrifices, and rice powder drawings is not arbitrary. These elements are imbued with layers of meaning, linking the material world to the spiritual, and serving as tangible expressions of intangible beliefs. Various ritual practices express social cohesion within the community, enabling individuals to find belonging and meaning. The deities remind individuals of their responsibilities. If neglected, they may respond with misfortune, reinforcing the sacred order and the importance of ethical conduct. In this context, ritual acts as both a moral compass and a mechanism of social control, reinforcing the interdependence between the sacred and the secular in everyday tribal life.

The diverse religious rituals associated with illness form part of the 'little tradition' and may be considered local heritage, carrying both spiritual and historical significance. The ritual practices of Rabha society represent a deeply integrated cosmology in which deities serve dual roles as agents of misfortune and as sources of protection, and are approached through elaborate, symbolically rich rituals that engage all senses and members of the community. In examining how religious rituals foster social cohesion, Alcorta and Sosis (2005) explain that "the ability of religious ritual to elicit both positive and negative emotional responses in participants provides the substrate for the creation of motivational communal symbols. Through processes of incentive learning, as well as classical and contextual conditioning, the objects, places, and beliefs of religious ritual are invested with emotional significance." This insight aligns with Rabha ritual practices, where collective emotion and symbolic acts create meaning that extends beyond the ritual space.

The belief in deities among tribal society as causes of suffering, madness, pain, and distress is a cultural construction of reality. Consequently, these problems are addressed through communal cooperation and psychological encouragement, reflecting a deep integration of spiritual belief and mental well-being. These practices also help preserve social order and transmit cultural values from one generation to the next. Thus, religious beliefs function not only as spiritual frameworks but also as adaptive strategies that foster collective resilience and cultural continuity. Although the Hindu religious tradition has become impartial, it has introduced religious complexity into traditional tribal society. Tribal societies have not abandoned their ancient religious traditions; rather, religious syncretism has added new dimensions to their traditional beliefs and practices. In India, the relationship between the individual and the deities reflects a complex understanding of health, well-being, and spirituality. This connection transcends mere belief, embodying a lived experience in which the sacred and the physical are deeply intertwined. Through religious rituals, communities find meaningful ways to cope with illness and social strain, drawing strength from both practical interventions and spiritual grounding in the face of transitions and uncertainties.

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