

Chapter- 8

Religious Life of the Molsoms

We shall start this chapter by giving an idea about the world view of the Molsoms. The Molsoms generally believe that the man came to this world from under the earth. Long ago, according to a folk-story existing in their society, man used to live under the earth from where they tried to come out but they found no way. Fortunately, after an intensive search, the Kukis discovered a way but they had to stop coming out through that path because as soon as they came over and stepped on the ground, they were killed by a big bird, named *rumuluenpa*. By that time, the Molsoms had reached there under the headship of the *Suprai* and came to know about the mishaps that the Kukis had to meet with. The *Suprai* took it as a challenge and decided to go out through that opening and to take on the *rumuluenpa*. He took a bow, some arrows, a shield and his pet dog with him. As soon as he stepped out of the tunnel and stood on the ground on earth, the *rumuluenpa* came out, before it could strike the *Suprai* his pet dog subdued it and then the *Suprai* killed the bird by shooting an arrow. In the meantime the leader of the Kukis came out and fired an arrow at the slain bird and claimed that he had killed the bird first. The *Suprai*, after hearing the Kuki-leader's claim, got angry and waited silently to teach him a good lesson. The Kuki-head went down underground to bring out all members of his community. By that time all the Molsoms came out before the Kukis could come out. The *Suprai* closed the passage with a big stone and thus the Kukis were trapped inside. The Kuki chief then requested the

Suprai to open the gate-way. The Suprai told him that if the Kuki chief promised not to claim himself as the killer of the *rumuluempa* and not to fight with the Molsoms, only then he would open the gate-way. The Kuki-chief agreed and the Suprai removed the stone opening the way for the Kukis to come out.

The Molsoms believed that earlier man was immortal and was as powerful as the supernatural forces. There was an *awchai* of the Molsoms who actually, with his extraordinary supernatural power, as they believed, was protecting the human beings from death and other dangers. They believed that it was *asengoi*, the god of death, who made the man mortal. In this regard there is a myth which goes on as follows.

The *asengoi* tried hard but failed to make human being mortal, because the *suprai* could make alive everyone whom *asengoi* had killed. Being tired of his failure, once the *asengoi* asked the *suprai* how he could die. The *suprai* replied that he would die only of a snake bite. The *asengoi* then, with his supernatural power assumed the shape of a poisonous snake and hid himself under the bed of the *suprai*. At night when the *suprai* went to sleep the snake bit him. He cried out loudly in pain and the people rushed there. The *suprai* told them about the mishap. He requested them to bring some leaves from a medicinal plant. He gave them a dry fish for finding out that plant and told that the dry fish would get its life back after it was touched with that plant. He also warned them that the leaves must be brought before the sun rose, else he would die by then.

The people went to the forest and started looking for that plant by touching every tree with the dry fish. Finally, they found a tree which brought the dry fish back to life. They collected some leaves from it and started for *suprai's* house. The *asengoi*, however, came to know of their endeavour and decided to foil their attempt to save the *suprai*. He changed himself into a villager and reported to the people that the *suprai* had already died. He then took them to a place where, with his supernatural power, created the

illusion that the *suprai*'s house stood there and the members of the *suprai*'s family were mourning his death. Thus the *asengoi* had put the people in a trance and they believed him. The people threw away the leaves realising that their efforts had gone in vain and they were about to leave the place in guile. But no sooner had they thrown the leaves, their trance was over and they were back to reality. They saw that the house, the dead body of the *suprai* and everything else that they were made to see in their illusion vanished. The people then realised that they had been fooled in their attempt to save the *suprai* as there was very little possibility of finding out another medicinal plant in time because they had no dry fish with them. However, they rushed to the village to get another dry fish and again started the search. But it was too late as the sun was about to rise. So they could not locate the plant before sun rise and thus the *suprai* could not be saved. After the death of the *suprai* there was no other *awchai* powerful enough to protect the people from the *asengoi* and therefore, they believed that from then man became mortal.

The Molsoms have full faith in the existence of soul. They believe in the survival of soul after death. They cremate the body after death and they have been practicing this since long past. The rites and rituals performed after death namely, *busak*, *samsir*, *zuthak*, *besu* etc., provide the vidence of their belief in the survival of soul after death. But they have no clear idea or belief about the rebirth of the soul. They believe that the dead ancestor gains some higher supernatural powers and, with these, they can help the living people in time of crisis or to get rid of diseases.

Besides ancestors, some other supernatural powers and spirits are also appeased or worshipped by the Molsoms. Some of these powers and spirits, as they believe, are benevolent while others are malevolent by nature. Malevolent powers and spirit are appeased to prevent them from ill doing. Such appeasement, in most cases, is done by arranging their worship by the *awchai*. Benevolent powers and spirits are worshipped in the same manner as the illustrious ancestors are worshipped. The activities of some

supernatural powers and spirits and how they came to be worshipped are described below.

Suprai

The Molsoms believe the *suprai* to be the most powerful ancestor-soul. He was once a great *awchai*. According to the myth mentioned above, he had been saving the human beings from death and thus he made man immortal. It is believed that the *suprai* who is worshipped by the present *awchai* by sacrificing two hens, can still save the Molsoms from crisis.

Sangrak

The *sangrak* is also an ancestor soul who was, before death, a great warrior-Molsom. In every Molsom village the *sangrak* is worshipped collectively once a year. The village chief has to arrange for annual *sangrak* worship by collecting subscriptions from every household of the village. The village council, in a formal meeting, fix a date for annual worship of the *sangrak* as there is no prefixed date for this. Generally it is performed after the winter harvest with the objective of defeating evils – both natural and supernatural ; and as a preventive measure against accidents in *jhum* activities especially during clearing the jungles and *jhum*-fire. During the *sangrak* worship at the village level, some restrictions are observed. No outsider is allowed to enter into the village and no villager is allowed to go out of the village on the day of worship. If any outsider enters or any villager goes out, then the worship has to begin afresh. Beside worshipping collectively, The *sangrak* is also worshipped at family or individual level as and when such worship is considered necessary. Regarding the death of the warrior *sangrak* there is a myth prevailing in the Molsom society which goes as follows.

There were, long ago, two friends named Gorla and Sangrak. Both of them were brave warriors who also possessed some supernatural powers. The two friends were living together in a house where a little girl used to do cooking and other domestic works for them. On attaining puberty, the girl grew so beautiful that both the friends fell in love with her. One day, they expressed their minds to each other but none was ready to sacrifice his love to resolve the deadlock. However, they arranged for a test and decided that the fittest person would win the girl. The test was to be held in two rounds. In the first round, they were to sharpen their hand chopper on two separate boulders and the person who would be the first to break his boulder into two pieces would also get the first chance in the second round of test in which a supporting pillar of a house which is made of a bundle of *muli* bamboo and locally known as *diu* would have to be cut by hand chopper in one stroke. The other person would have to stand close behind the *diu* so that he too be chopped into two pieces along with the pillar.

Gorla won the first round and got the first chance in second round. As per terms of the second round Sangrak stood close behind the pillar and Gorla struck it with his hand chopper. But Gorla was unable to slash the pillar and hence failed to hurt Sangrak because while sharpening his hand chopper on the boulder, he had wrongly rubbed the sharp edge holding the hand chopper vertically instead of in a slanting position which is the normal method of sharpening instruments. Due to this the blade of his chopper had got blunt instead of getting sharp. Then came Sangrak's turn. But when Gorla saw the sharpness of Sangrak's chopper he immediately realised that his end was near. He therefore turned and fled. Sangrak gave him a chase but Gorla used his supernatural power and sought refuge in the uterus of a pregnant women. Sangrak too used his power and was able to detect where Gorla had hidden himself and he removed the uterus of the pregnant women. While doing so he hurt Gorla's hip. Gorla also struck Sangrak with his hand

chopper and injured his leg. Sangrak then become furious and started killing the inhabitants of neighboring village. After some time he came to the bank of a river where he heard a women's voice calling for help in carrying her water pot. Sangrak went towards her but as soon as she saw him she disappeared. He was puzzled by this happening but through his supernatural power he discovered that she possessed the leaf of a particular tree by which one can disappear by holding it on the head. He then resumed slaughtering the villagers keeping such a leaf on his head. After some time, when he had resumed his normal human self, he became thirsty and entered the house of a widow to drink water. The widow knew of his deeds and as soon as he entered her house she crippled his leg with one stroke of an axe. Sangrak became crippled and was also unable to move. The widow called the villagers and asked them to slay Sangrak. Accordingly, the villagers attacked Sangrak but all they could do was only to injure him, since killing him was beyond their power. Sangrak requested them not to torture him anymore because his death would come only when he wished to die. He then told them to bring a piece of wood. They took a piece of wood and Sangrak carved out his own image on it. After having done so, he died voluntarily but his soul entered the wooden image.

After some day, he appeared in the widow's dream and told her to worship the image. The widow refused, but Sangrak kept on persuading her in dreams. Notwithstanding Sangrak's insistence the widow persisted with her stubbornness not to worship his image. Sangrak then turned dream into nightmares, but the widow still remained steadfast in her resolution and did not relent. Sangrak, however, realised that the widow would not give in. He then requested her to hand over the image to the Molsom. The widow then gave it to the Molsoms and since then, as they believe, the Molsoms have been worshipping Sangrak.

Napangoi

The Napangoi is a female spirit believed to reside in the forest. It can make one ill by possessing one's body or just by casting its fearsome looks. The symptoms of such illness appear usually with high temperature accompanied by headache and pain all over the body. In some cases, it causes delirium to the patient. To get rid of such an evil spirit and its evil look the *awchai* worships the spirit by sacrificing two hens or one pig. The process of worship, however, varies from case to case depending on the nature of symptoms. If delirium continues for a long period then it is considered that the *napangoi* has dominated the soul of the patient and is trying to take possession of the patient permanently. In this case the *awchai*, in addition, worships Sangrak by sacrificing two hens or a pig to drive out the *napangoi*. In fact, any type of mental imbalance is considered as possession of the patient by *napangoi*.

Asengoi

The malevolent male spirit, *asengoi*, as stated earlier in the folk tale related to mortality of human being, is believed to cause one's death. The *awchai* worships this spirit, in case of serious illness, by sacrificing two hens or a pig to prevent the death of the patient.

Kolopaoen

The *kolopaoen* is also a malevolent male spirit believed to reside in an old abandoned house. In the evening, as they believe, it comes out of its residence and moves around everywhere. If anybody, especially a child, comes on its way it possesses the body of that person and causes illness. The symptoms of such illness are rise in body temperature and

shivering. The *awchai* appeases the *kolopaoen* through worship as a remedial measure for such illness by sacrificing a hen preferably in the evening. There are some trees which are believed to be the dwelling places of the *kolopaoen*.

Tuio

This is a female spirit believed to live in water. It inflicts, if gets hold of one's body, illness in the form of loose motion, stomach pain, and rise in temperature. The *awchai* appeases it through worship by sacrificing a hen in a stream or river.

Khosher

The Khosher is worshipped once in a year praying for an overall development of the people of the Molsom village. The date of the worship is settled in the meeting of the village council in presence of the village priest. Some regulations are observed on the day of the worship. No one can enter the village and none can go out the village area on the day. None is allowed to do any cultivation work on *jhum* or other land. The violator of these regulations is to be punished and the nature of punishment is decided upon by the village priest. Some decorated bamboo splits are placed round the boundary and alongside the gate-ways of the village as a signal to the outsiders about the ceremony. The symbol attached to the decorated bamboo splits used for the purpose is understandable to all tribal communities of the state. Traditionally, capital punishment was the usual punishment for the violators of these prescription. At present, however, the punitive measures have been softened remarkably. To use the Durkhemian

terminology, the nature of traditional laws has changed from repressive to reformatory mode.

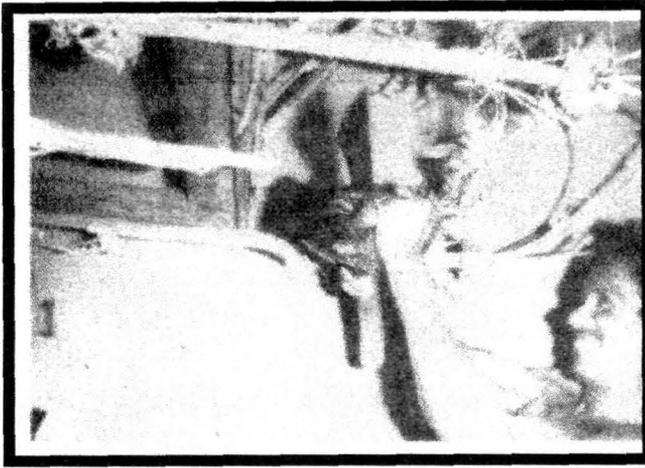
Besides the powers and spirits described above, the Molsoms worship some deities. These deities are supposed to be benevolent by nature and most of them are, by some means, related to social or other activities of the Molsoms. The *Tuisangro*, *Arthengoi*, *Thingkungnoi*, *Samalaimilika*, *Baklak* etc. are some such deities. The *Tuisangro* is believed to be the god of femininity; *Thingkungnoi* of masculinity; *Arthengoi* of perfection and *Samalaimilika* of over all development of life. These four deities are collectively worshipped by the *awchai* by sacrificing two hens during *pantapui* ceremony during a social marriage.

In Molsom society some rites and rituals are performed at some important stages in the life of an individual such as birth, attainment of puberty, marriage, death etc. The *aburzuk* rite is performed after the birth of a baby; *takbrokmi* and *punmizel* are performed during the first occasion of wearing of cloth by the boys and girls respectively; *risabomb*, when girls attain puberty; *adende*, *tusin*, *pantapui*, *dalani*, *oikbulfulpantate* etc. during marriage; *besu*, *zuthak* etc. after death. All these rites are the rites of passage as these are associated with some transitional stage in the life of an individual member of the society. On the other hand, the religious rites like annual worship of the *Sangrak* and *Khoser* may be called the rites of intensification because these rites emphasise on some basic value of their society which also promote social interaction.

Influence of Hinduism and Christianity

It is not known how and when exactly the Molsoms came under the influence of Hinduism, though they claim themselves to be Hindu since the time immemorial. However, a good number of animistic traits are

found in their religious activities which are in practice even today. Some of these animistic traits appear to be contradictory to Hinduism in so far as religious activities, especially those prevailing among the neighbouring Bengali Hindus, are concerned. Married Molsom women, for instance, do not use vermilion mark on their forehead, do not wear conch bangles or iron bracelets which are commonly used as the signs of a married woman especially among the neighbouring Bengali Hindu. In fact, there is no symbolic dress or ornament which can differentiate a married Molsom woman from an unmarried one. A few of them follow Vaishnabism and worship lord Krishna and Radha. These Vaishnabs wear, as neighbouring Bengali Vaishnabs do, a set of *tulshimala* around their neck and paint *tilok* (the holy clay of the Ganges and other holy places) on different places of their body; but most of them take nonvegetarian food like pork, fish, dry fish, etc. which are tabooed for the neighbouring Bengali Vaishnabs. They worship some of the Hindu goddesses but in their system of worship some animistic rites are also followed. They worship, for instance, the goddess Laxmi but instead of making an idol of the goddess, they make the image of Laxmi with rice and egg. They keep some rice in an earthen pot and place an egg longitudinally on the rice. Then they place the earthen pot containing rice and egg under a bamboo-made rectangular structure locally known as *roseng*. The Laxmi is worshipped by them generally on the full-moon day by sacrificing a hen and by offering local liquor and egg. The activities like sacrificing of animal, use of alcoholic liquor, egg etc. are the animistic traits in their worship of Laxmi which are found to be in practice among the Molsoms are uncommon among the Hindus. But commonly with the Hindus they practice *pranam*, *zoker*, fasting etc. Thus the Molsoms have been following a number of traditional religious practices along with some Hindu religious activities.



Sacrifice of hen during the Laxmi worship

Conversion to Christianity started among the Molsoms from the middle part of this century. Though it is not possible in this study to record the actual number of Hindus among the Molsoms in the state, yet it may be stated that there are quite a considerable number of Christians among the Molsoms many of whom I met personally. However, among the Molsoms Hindus outnumber the Christians. In our sample villages 89.66 percent of the households are reported to be Hindus and the rest 10.34 percent are Christians.

Table 8.1 : Distribution of households according to religious affiliation

Name of religion	Total number of house holds	Percentage to the total households
Hinduism	260	89.66
Christianity	30	10.34
Total	290	100.00

One may observe a few things about the Christian Molsoms as have been observed about the Molsom Vaisnabites. The Christian Molsoms follow some of their traditional customs, values, norms etc. which very often go against their religious sanctity as Christians. Mention may be made of their practice of animal sacrificing during the worship of some spirits to get rid of decease.

The spread of Christianity among a section of the Molsoms has not created any sense of isolation so far as other cultural activities, except religion, are concerned. The Christian Molsoms attend the socio-religious rites, ceremonies, etc. of their Hindu neighbours. They obey, participate in, and depend on the traditional village council alongside the Hindu Molsoms.

The predominant ruling tribe of Tripura, the Tripuris, had long taken to Hinduism and they generally claim of having Kshatriya status in the Hindu caste-fold, For long the Tripuris have been practicing most of the Hindu religious practices. Being the subjects of the Tripuri kings and having close association with them and the neighbouring Hindu castes it quite natural that the Molsoms would be influenced by Hinduism and even embrace it. But coming of Christianity to the tribes of Tripura is only of recent origin. We must, however, try and understand why at least a small section of the Molsoms, and for that matter, some of the other tribes of the state, accept Christianity. The case-study outlined below will help understand the process, at least partially.

After selecting the Kalabon Molsom Bari as one of my sample villages in the middle of eighties, I conducted a pilot study of the village. At that time, I noticed that there was neither any pre-primary or primary school nor any primary health center, run by the Government of Tripura, in or around the village. There was, however, one pre-primary school in the village which

was being run by the Christian missionaries. An young man of about twenty-two belonging to the Lushai community was the in-charge of that school who also was extending some medical facilities to the inmates of the village. The residence of the in-charge was used as the school house. Since there was no other educational institution in the village a good number of children were attending the school at morning. The day at school began by singing a prayer song the content of which was based on the Bible and the life of the Jesus Christ. That Lushai teacher was also a good Spanish guitar player. This missionary pre-primary school attracted the villagers and three persons of the village were converted to the Christianity. I had a prolong discussions with the newly converted Christians and found that it was the educational and medical facilities, extended by the school-in-charge and one missionary visiting doctor to the people of Kalabon Molsom Bari which had attracted people towards Christianity. In order to confirm this finding I talked to the convertees about how they were feeling being converted to Christianity. They told me that they were getting educational and medical facilities from the Christian missionary which were otherwise not available in the village before the coming of that missionary school teacher. I discussed the problem with the then Sub-divisional Officer Mr. Ranjit Kumar Deb Burma with a request to take necessary steps to establish a pre-primary school and a primary health center in or nearby Kalabon Molsom Bari village so that the people of the village could get the necessary educational and health facilities. The S.D.O, Udaipur told me that he would take necessary steps from his end and suggested me to talk to the Chief Minister of Tripura for an early action. I explained the problems to the Chief Minister accordingly. During my intensive fieldwork in Kalabon Molsom Bari, later, I found that one pre-primary school had already been established in the village and work for one primary health center in Tulamura area, which was nearer to the Kalabon Molsom Bari, had been completed from which people of Molsom Bari, along with other local people, were getting medical facilities. During my fieldwork I discovered that the persons who were converted to Christianity had came back to Hinduism.

From this case it can be drawn that the Christianity has been spreading in Tripura not only because it presented before the people a better belief system but also, and significantly, because it carried a social welfare package loaded with avenues for meeting the basic needs of the otherwise backward people. For the common people it was not the belief system but the material package, which could take care of some of their real life problems, was meaningful.

The above discussion can be summarised by saying that belief in the supernatural spirit, animatism and the indigenous deities formed the core of the traditional religious life of the Molsoms. Their overdependence on nature, the high degree of uncertainties associated with their struggle for existence provide the rationale for the kind of religious rites and rituals they usually practice. Religion for them is not a reflection of their otherworldliness as we find among the Hindus who, because of their surplus economy, had the luxury of earning virtues for a happy living in the otherworld. On the contrary, the Molsom religion is directly addressed to and tuned to resolving their everyday life problems and therefore thisworldly. Even when the Molsoms take to Hinduism or Christianity this material aspect of religion is very much retained.