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## **Ritual, Rain and Resistance: *Hudum Deo* as Indigenous Ecological Practice**

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### **Abstract**

In a time of climate emergency, it's very urgent for us to move towards the non-canonical archives to folk rituals and customs as the repositories of ecological knowledge. *Hudum Deo* is a cultural performance of Rajbanshi community people, found in North Bengal and Assam. In Dinajpur districts of West Bengal this performance is known as '*Jol Maangar Gaan*'. This tradition not only negotiates between the human and non-human entities but also the climate uncertainty and agrarian survival. This ritual is mainly performed by the women and is completely women centric so, it's deeply connected with the women's social, cultural and ecological roles. This paper will study how the spiritual relationship between women and the nature has been highlighted by their folk cultural performance and also how this oral performance of *Hudum Deo* acts as a crucial site in order to rethink about the environmental sustainability through indigenous, gendered and performative ecological practices.

**Keywords:** Folk Ecology, Eco-feminism, Environmental sustainability, Oral tradition, Indigenous knowledge.

### **Introduction:**

The word Rajbanshi literally means 'royal lineage' or 'descendants of kings'. Rajbanshis are the indigenous group of people living in the greater part of North Bengal and lower Assam. In North Bengal they are predominantly found in the districts such as Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Alipurduar, North & South Dinajpur, and Malda. The main occupation of this community is agriculture and their agricultural economy is sustained not only by the men labour but also by the women, who maintain a beautiful balance between their household responsibilities and agricultural tasks- seedlings, transplanting saplings, threshing, winnowing, husking etc. So, they have an intimate relationship with nature and also, they have a common belief that the natural calamities are mainly occurred by the influence of evil forces. Consequently, they need the help of auspicious powers in order to overcome these forces, seeking to restore harmony between humans and nature. This belief system gives rise to the rain-invoking ritual of *Hudum Deo*, which becomes a symbolic negotiation with nature to please the rain deity and overcome the harmful forces. *Hudum Deo* is considered as a rain deity among the Rajbnanshi people and there is a scholarly debate regarding the exact meaning of the term '*Hudum*'. Some argue that '*hudum*' means 'nudity' or the 'nakedness', which signifies the naked female bodies that

indulge in an erotic pleasure to invoke rain. Others assume that 'Hu' means 'fire' and 'Dum' means 'suppress or subdue', as it is performed in the time of severe drought for rain to subdue the fire by which both the land and people are suffering. According to Koch-Rajbanshi mythological belief, *Hudum Deo* is regarded as the son of Basumati and Indra, the god of rain and thunder. There is another belief that the word '*Hudum*' is derived from 'Hudu Poki', an uncommon bird found in Koch-Rajbanshi culture. There is a local belief, when two Hudu birds- a male and a female, sit and talk together on a branch of a tree, rain begins to fall immediately. So, the Hudu birds are treated here as a living symbol within the community's indigenous ecological knowledge. This folk cultural performance, enacted by the women holds their Rajbanshi cultural identity and also the environmental consciousness. This ritual is practiced with a combination of music and dance often characterized by sensual expressions. In this way, this ritual embodies an interconnection between women, nature, religious devotion and a collective welfare of the community, keeping alive the community's rich cultural heritage.

This ritual is associated with fertility cults and reproductive symbolism and also the symbolic union between the women and the rain deity functions as a harbinger of rainfall and agricultural renewal. So, this paper will highlight how women act as ecological agent, how oral performance acts as an ecological archive and also how this performance becomes as a response to the long-term ecological distress.

### **Ritual Process of *Hudum Deo* Puja:**

#### **i. Time and Occasion**

This ritual is mainly performed in the period of drought. There is no fixed date in calendar. It is normally performed between the end of Baisakh and mid-Asharh, means in the month of April-June. They mainly choose Amavasya nights on Tuesday and Saturday for this puja.

#### **ii. Participants**

As this ritual is completely women centric, no men and outsiders are entertained here. Only married adult women participate here and one elderly, experienced woman play the role of a priest.

#### **iii. Ritual Materials**

The offerings that are necessary are- a banana plant (symbol of *Hudum Deo*), earthen pot, mango leaves, curd, flattened rice, flowers, rice grains, earthen lamps, plough and yoke, winnowing basket and bird's nest (symbol of agrarian life) etc.

#### **iv. Invocation and Performance**

The women mainly choose the open fields or riverbanks, which are far away from their homes. A group of women collectively go to the field in a dark night by singing and dancing, plant a banana tree, offer the garlands to it and dance around it, accompanied by uludhwoni and dhak. The elderly woman starts the puja. After the puja, two women bend their knees, place a yoke on their shoulders and pull a plough, enacting a symbolic performance on the field. Then one of them scatters seeds on the ground and at last all of them pray to *Hudum Deo* for quick rainfall. They have a belief that if the puja is successful, the instant rainfall will occur. The songs sung by them are centered on fertility, rain and longing. The main singer is called 'Gidali' and the *Hudum Khuti* represents the phallus and the masculine generative power. Here the women hug the *Hudum Khuti* and act to

seduce *Hudum Deo* as their own lover in order to become fertile like the land, waited for rain. While returning home they announce their arrival by striking the drums in accompaniment with song and dance. On that moment the male members stay within the house. There is a local belief that if any male members watch the women of *Huduma* group, he will be cursed and lost his eye sights permanently and there would be no rainfall in future.

### **Women as Ecological Agent:**

In the traditional Rajbanshi ritual of *Hudum Deo*, women emerge as powerful ecological agents, using their bodies, voices and collective performance to intervene in moments of environmental crisis, particularly, drought. The female body becomes the central ritual instrument symbolically enacting the fertility and abundance. Men are strictly prohibited in this ritual. The women, being completely nude, participate in this puja collectively in the darkness. Within this symbolic framework, women are closely aligned with Mother Nature itself. Their naked bodies are compared to the barren, open land lying exposed beneath the sky during periods of drought. When rain, imagined in spermatic terms, falls upon the earth, figured as a fertile female body, it signifies fertilization and renewal. The ritual thus enacts a cosmological marriage between the sky and the earth, transforming ecological crisis into a performative union of elemental forces. Charu Chandra Sanyal in his book *The Rajbansis of North Bengal* says that- "It is a special puja. When there is protracted draught, the women of the village each with a sharp knife in hand, as a protection against 'bhuts', go in dark night, into a distant paddy field. They make a small image of the rain-god with plantain leaf stalk and instal him on the field. In some places, a plantain tree is planted. Then the women stip off their clothes, untie the hair of the head allowing the hair to hang freely on the back. Thus, completely nude they dance and sing (mostly obscene songs) abusing the rain-God. Two women kneel on the ground like cows and draw a plough to scratch a few feet of the land. Into the furrow thus formed they spread some paddy seeds or plant a few paddy seedlings. They then put on their clothes, tie the hair and come back. It is the general belief that rain invariably falls shortly after this puja is done. No men are allowed to go near the dancing place. If somebody ventures no one will abuse the women if they attack the man with the 'daos' they possess or even kill him" (144).

Music and dance form an integral part of *Hudum Deo*, and these performances are often overtly erotic in nature. This eroticism, however, should not be read as mere sensuality; rather, it represents a celebration of female freedom and bodily autonomy outside patriarchal surveillance. Elaine Showalter conceptualizes such spaces as the "wild zone" - a domain beyond the control of dominant social rules and regulatory structures. In *Hudum Deo*, this wildness becomes a site of resistance, where women temporarily step outside normative boundaries.

The songs performed during the ritual frequently carry double meanings, where erotic expression intertwines with ecological anxiety and agrarian despair. This convergence invites a critical question: can the erotic function act as an ecocritical mode of expression? In *Hudum Deo*, women are not objectified in the conventional sense; rather, their bodies become vessels for rain, harvest, and collective hope. The ritual demonstrates that women do not speak about nature from a distance but speak for and through nature itself. Vandana Shiva observes that women are the first to suffer when ecosystems are destroyed, and they are also the first to know how to regenerate them. *Hudum Deo* powerfully

embodies this insight, foregrounding women embodied ecological knowledge and positioning them as agents of environmental regeneration rather than passive victims of ecological collapse.

### Oral Tradition as Ecological Archive:

*Hudum Deo* also functions as a non-textual ecological archive. The songs performed during the ritual are transmitted orally across generations, embedding knowledge of climatic patterns, agricultural rhythms, and indigenous ecological ethics within collective memory. *Hudum Deo* insists that ecological knowledge need not be written to be legible; climate literacy can be sung, danced, and ritualized. The performative dimension of these songs transforms ecological experience into embodied knowledge, making environmental crisis perceptible through voice, rhythm, and collective participation.

### Songs illustrating water scarcity:

#### Song: 1

Hudum Deo re, Hudum Deo  
Hagi acchi, paani deo.  
Hamar dyashot nai paani,  
Haga tikaay bara baani.

**Translation:** O Lord Hudum, O Lord Hudum, I have defecated, please give me water. There is no water in our country and we are forced to farm without washing after defecation.

**Meaning:** This song shows the actual situation faced by the community and their situation is so painful that they do not have water even for their daily necessary activities.

#### Song: 2

Hilhilachhe komorta mor sirshirachhe gaao,  
Kunte kona gele ela hudumer dekha pao.  
Patanikhan porechhe khosiya,  
Aisek re Hudum Deo.  
Tor bade mui achho re bosiya.  
Dingsal mor komorta  
Tate nai mor vatarta,  
Koro ki mui kai ba koy  
Konte gele dekha hoy,  
Dekha hole dehata juray.

**Translation:** My waist trembles and I am feeling a shiver throughout my body, where can I have a glimpse of *Hudum*? My *patani* slips down from my body, please come *Hudum Deo*. I am sitting here for you. My waist is *dingsal* and my husband is not present at home. Who can tell me about what can be done, where can I find you? My heart will be pleased to see you.

**Meaning:** In this song a lady is invoking *Hudum Deo* and expressing her feelings to see a glimpse of him. Here this lady is actually making her sensual plea to Hudum and the union with the rain deity metaphorically ensures agricultural abundance.

#### Song: 3

Kala meghok pujo mao mui  
Kala koitor diya,  
Dhoula meghok pujo mao mui

Dhup sendur diya.  
Ki meghoraj jomine boiso giya.  
Tomar noronok morechhe meghoraj  
Pirthibi chhitiya.  
Ki meghoraj jomine boiso giya.

**Translation:** I worship black clouds with black pigeon and white clouds with dhup sindur. Oh, king of clouds, you sit upon the earth. Your people are dying all around the world. Oh king of clouds, you sit upon the earth.

**Meaning:** Here through this song the women invoke Meghoraj, the king of clouds. They call upon him to respond to the sufferings of the people for the lack of water. The women here act as mediators between a drought-stricken earth and the rain-bearing sky.

The songs associated with Hudum Deo not only represent the water scarcity but also challenge the anthropocentric approaches to climate crisis and by invoking rain through ritual, communities emphasize the reciprocal and non-extractive relationship with the natural world.

### **Conclusion:**

*Hudum Deo* functions as a dynamic indigenous medium for responding to environmental distress, particularly drought. By centering women's embodied performances and orally transmitted songs, the ritual transforms ecological vulnerability into communal action, turning human, non-human, and spiritual relations into an active site of environmental negotiation. The songs act as non-textual ecological archives, preserving climatic knowledge, agrarian rhythms, and ethical practices across generations. In this way, *Hudum Deo* highlights the significance of ritual performance as a culturally embedded response to ecological crisis, demonstrating how indigenous traditions sustain both environmental consciousness and community resilience.

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