Rolling on Sacred Soil: Newborn Bodies, Agrarian Life and Lived Religion Around Baba Panchanan in Mangalkote, Purba Bardhaman

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100900497

Received: 23 September 2026; Accepted: 28 September 2026; Published: 15 October 2026

ABSTRACT

At the shrine of Baba Panchanan in Khudrun and the surrounding villages of Mangalkote, Purba Bardhaman, there is a local rite for newborns known as *'Goragori deoa'* which means rolling on the soil. This article puts that ritual under scrutiny. The procedure is straightforward: on the occasion of a birth, a family will bring the infant to the shrine and have it roll on the earth nearby. But while the act is unpretentious, what it signifies is not. In the telling of those who perform it, one hears of the blessing of Baba Panchanan, the misfortune that might befall a family for neglecting the rite, the importance of an unbroken line of descent, and the special nature of the soil at the shrine's feet.

The shrine itself is an open affair with no roof or temple walls to speak of, set under a tree next to large paddy fields. Locals have their reasons for this lack of conventional structure, relating stories of how Baba Panchanan was put out by any effort to put up a permanent covering. The article does not set out to prove or disprove such claims on empirical grounds; instead it looks at the role they play in the religious life of the area.

To arrive at its analysis, the researcher has drawn on qualitative fieldwork with 40 people in all , 20 young mothers in their early twenties, 10 of their husbands and 10 older women in the position of mother or mother-in-law. Information was gathered in the course of unstructured interviews, some informal talk and time spent observing.

Viewed through the lens of the sociology of lived religion and material religion, *goragori deoa* emerges as something more than a mere custom to mark a delivery. It is a physical means of drawing the new arrival into the web of kinship, memory and obligation that already exists. The child's body makes contact with the soil of an agrarian landscape that underpins the household, and in doing so is linked to both the family line and to Baba Panchanan. One can see the logic of it in the way older women equate the bringing of a new born to the shrine with the first offering of paddy to God. These are not isolated beliefs but part of a whole local religious world. The case at hand would suggest that continuity in matters of faith is as much a product of repeated family habits and the ordinary body as it is of any formal institution or doctrine.

INTRODUCTION

One is inclined to find religion in the obvious: in temples and shrines, in scriptures and festivals, or within the confines of an organised institution. But religious life is not so easily contained. It can be found in a family's reaction to a birth, in counsel from a mother-in-law to one who is young with child, or in the choice to bring a new born to a certain tree or piece of ground. These are things people have been doing for so long they come off as ordinary; there is no need for a formal explanation or a rule put in writing. One simply knows this is how it is done.

The concept of lived religion is what allows us to look at these practices in a sociological manner. As McGuire (2008) puts it, the approach is less concerned with institutional definitions or official doctrine and more with the way religion is actually put into practice in the course of day to day life. This is a helpful lens through which to view the ritual of 'goragori deoa' at the local shrine of Baba Panchanan in Khudrun, Mangalkote.

In this context, goragori deoa means having a person roll on the soil. Here the subject is a new baby. Following a birth, the family will take the child to the shrine and set him or her down to roll on the ground. There is nothing elaborate about the proceedings, but families place great simportance in it. Some see it as merely what is expected of them after a child is born. Others talk of the blessing and protection it affords, or of what might happen were the ritual to be neglected.

The nature of the shrine itself adds to the interest of the practice. There is no conventional roof over Baba Panchanan's temple; it is open to the air under a tree, with paddy fields all around. The locals will tell you that any effort to put a roof on has been met with the displeasure of Baba Panchanan. While this article does not put forward the story as objective proof of the supernatural, it is the accepted local account for the form of the shrine. To a visitor, the lack of a roof is not an indication of an unfinished building but something with its own significance.

The landscape is of equal import. The earth here is no different from what the farmers till in the adjacent fields, but those involved do not think of it in purely agricultural terms. As one put Asalata Devi ,woman of 50 years old and gramd mother of a newly born put it:

"*Mati sob, mati r modhye ishwar er asirbad ache, ei mati amader jibon dharoner fosol jogan dei, ei mati amader bachie rakhe, ei mati amader kache iswar."*

Which is to say: "Everything is soil; God's blessing is within the soil. "This soil is God for us; it is what we live on, and the crops that come from it are how we sustain life."

There is a striking quality to such a statement in the way it makes no distinction between the practical and the religious. On one hand, there is the matter of the soil yielding crops to keep us alive. On the other, the same earth is seen as a conduit for divine blessing, if not God himself. Consequently, one can hardly separate the religious import of the shrine from the agricultural world around it.

The ritual is tied up with family lineage as well. Brishti , young woman of twenty two years old below put it plainly when asked what would befall a family for not bringing a newborn to Baba Panchanan:

"*Bachcha jonmalo ar take baabar kache na anle amader bongsher ar bachchar akolyan hobe*."

Which means "If a child is born and we do not bring the child to Baba, there will be misfortune for the child and our lineage."

In one breath she has linked the new born to the entire line of descent. This is more than a matter of safeguarding an individual infant; it is about the continuity of the family. A new generation is being brought into an old web of expectations and obligations.

One is left to wonder why the body of the new born is set down on this particular patch of ground, or how the faithful see the link between the shrine and the farmland. What is the ritual for a young mother today, as opposed to her elders? Why do men still partake in something so bound up with childbirth? And in the absence of any formal institution to pass it on, how does a local custom retain its meaning?

To answer these sorts of questions, I have put forward the notion of *goragori deoa* as an embodied form of religious incorporation. It is an analytical phrase rather than one the participants would use, but it captures how the child is physically made part of the social and religious order by means of the inherited practice and contact with the shrine and the soil.

The body is at the heart of it. The child is carried to a specific spot and put on the earth, which is anything but a neutral surface to those who work it; it is a source of life and of God. In a sense, a chain of associations is formed:

Newborn body - soil - shrine -Baba Panchanan - family - lineage - agrarian life

This is not a formula the locals would recite, but it sums up the kind of meanings that come through in their telling.

I have kept the scope of this article deliberately local. There is no attempt here to build a general theory from a single shrine or to say this ritual is typical of every rural practice in Bengal. The point is to remain close to the place and see what it tells us about religion in the way it is lived.

Five research questions set the direction for this research:

1. In what way do local participants make sense of and account for goragori deoa?

2. What is the significance of putting a new born's body on the ground of a sacred site?

3. How are childbirth, family lineage, divine blessing and agricultural livelihood tied together in the minds of those involved?

4. By what means is the ritual taught, remembered and carried on from one generation to the next?

5. What does this case have to offer the sociological conversation on embodiment, materiality and lived religion?

There are a number of objectives that follow from these inquiries. The study aims to put the practice on record as it is found in its local context and to see how the shrine, the soil and the ritual are characterised by the participants. It will also look at the matter from the standpoint of lived and material religion, probe the gendered and generational aspects of how the practice is handed down, and assess how even a small ritual can be part of broader social and religious continuity.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Religion as it is lived

The value of the lived religion approach lies in its ability to move the focus away from religion as an organised entity and towards what people actually do. McGuire (2008) makes the point that the everyday reality of religious life is not always a tidy fit with the institutional version. Individuals will put together personal experience, inherited belief and local custom in ways that defy easy categorisation.

This is borne out in the Baba Panchanan case. One will not find an elaborate theological vocabulary in the way participants talk about goragori deoa; their accounts are more to the point. A child is born and so he or she is taken to Baba. The family has always done so. If they do not, there may be misfortune. Such remarks are not systematic theology but rather pieces of an everyday understanding. Sociologically speaking, that is no less important. Indeed, a practice often takes root because it is part of ordinary family life and does not need to be constantly justified by doctrine.

Then there is the matter of sensory experience which McGuire (2016) stresses. Words and ideas are not the only components of religious feeling; touch and bodily sensation count too. With goragori deoa, the contact between the newborn and the soil is the ritual itself, not some incidental feature. It is something to be enacted and passed on.

Embodiment and the new born body

We also turn to the anthropology of embodiment for our second theoretical strand. Csordas (1990, 1994) would have us view the body not as an object for cultural meaning to be imposed upon, but as a medium through which one inhabits the social world.

The connection is obvious here. A new born is not in a position to articulate what Baba Panchanan signifies or to give conscious assent to a belief. And yet the child is brought into the rite. Carried to the shrine and made to

roll on the soil, the body has its first encounter with the sacred before any conscious comprehension is possible. This is a revealing aspect of the practice.

It is not as though the child becomes religious in any simple fashion. The ritual simply puts the new born in an environment where certain meanings are already in place. The story and the expectations of Baba Panchanan can be learned later.

One could say the same of the young mother. She may not feel the need to give a lengthy account of the rite, but she knows when it is to be done. She has picked it up by watching and doing. In that respect, the body is where religious continuity is kept.

Material religion and sacred soil

Morgan (2010), as well as Houtman and Meyer (2012) and Hutchings and McKenzie (2017), have shown how material forms figure in religious life. Objects and surroundings are not just window dressing for belief; they inform how it is put into action.

With the soil, this is very much the case. It is there to be worked by the farmer and for the paddy to grow, but it is also where the new born is laid and is spoken of in religious terms. For the participant, the line between the two is not hard and fast; the soil is both productive and hallowed.

The shrine is no different. There is no requirement for the sacred to be locked inside some monument when the tree and open ground are sufficient. The material environment is of the ritual, not merely its setting.

Place, landscape and the sacred

Eck (2012) offers a good way to consider the link between place and religion in India. Devotion, memory and story can fix a kind of sacredness to a landscape.

The shrine of Baba Panchanan is a highly localised example of this. Its importance is not a matter of architecture so much as the stories told and the acts performed there. Being situated next to the paddy fields gives it further resonance. The same ground is encountered by the devotee and the agricultural labourer alike. To say the soil has “another meaning” when a child is placed on it might be an oversimplification; as one participant put it, the meanings are more likely to overlap.

Gender, generation and the passing on of religion

One must account for gender in any analysis since the ritual is rooted in the context of childbirth; generation is equally relevant given that the practice is an inheritance.

The young mother holds a special place here as she is the one to see the ritual through for her child. An older woman will have the recollection of how things were done in bygone days and can put forward why they ought to be carried on. Yet this is not a simple matter of a younger woman accepting a tradition and replicating it without change. In putting it into practice for her own offspring, she is in some way part of what keeps the tradition alive and meaningful.Then there are the men. Their input raises matters of lineage, household continuity and livelihood. So the practice is not the exclusive domain of women but part of a broader family religious world.

Research Gap and Analytical Contribution

When you put these theoretical strands together, the import of the case at hand is easier to see. Lived religion has us look at the everyday, embodiment at the body, material religion at the substance of things and sacred geography at the place itself. The Baba Panchanan ritual unites all four.

Consider the new born body. The soil as material. A local shrine under a tree for the place. Family and lineage for the social fabric. An agrarian setting for the environment. Viewed in isolation each of these perspectives has

its blind spots, but taken as a whole the picture is more complete. The ritual is not simply a question of belief or of the landscape or the body. Its meaning is to be found in how these elements relate to one another.

In this the article offers a modest contribution. There is no attempt to put forward a new general theory of rural religion. Instead we show how something as local as this ritual can shed light on the interplay of embodiment, materiality, sacred space and continuity across generations.

METHODOLOGY AND FIELD SETTING

The field setting

Our work in Khudrun and the neighbouring villages of Mangalkote in Purba Bardhaman was underpinned by some seven years of getting to know the area and its ways, as the researcher currently posted there for seven years for her job purpose. It is this kind of repeated observation that fostered an interest in the Baba Panchanan shrine and, in turn, gave the research a certain shape. One did not come upon the shrine as some isolated incident for the purposes of fieldwork; it was simply part of the landscape one would see from day to day. And while a short visit might have left things unexplained, time spent in conversation with the priest and the local farmers and residents served to bring out deeper meanings.

The shrine itself is open to the sky, situated under a tree next to the paddy fields. There is no roof to speak of. The locals will tell you this is because Baba Panchanan has no use for anyone trying to put a cover on his shrine. We take this at face value as a religious narrative of the place, making no attempt to prove any supernatural cause. Nor should the agricultural surroundings be viewed as mere scenery; they are integral to how those involved make sense of their livelihood, the soil and the shrine.

Participants

We made a purposive selection of 40 participants who visited the shrine and local residents. In all there were 30 women and 10 men, drawn from: 20 young mothers in the 20 to 24 age bracket; 10 older women, typically the mother or mother-in-law of the younger ones; 10 of the husbands of the women we spoke with.

One should not look to this sample for statistical representation of the population at large. The idea was to assemble a range of viewpoints from the social world of the ritual. The younger women could speak to what is done now, the older generation had the memories and explanations to offer, and the men brought a perspective on matters of lineage, the household and livelihood.

Data collection

Field observations, informal talk and unstructured interviews formed the basis of data collection. We spoke with the priest, with those working the fields and other residents. An open-ended approach was called for so that the significance of the ritual could be put in the participant's own words. We did not start from the premise that the practice was about fertility or protection or any such fixed category and let the conversation reveal what it meant to them.A number of themes came up again and again: the need to take the new born to Baba Panchanan, divine blessing or the possibility of displeasure, the goragori deoa, the first of the paddy harvest and how older family members keep the practice alive.

Interpretation and reflexivity

In interpreting these accounts thematically, we have been attentive to the interplay of gender, generational transmission, the land and the rituals surrounding childbirth and blessing. A line is drawn between the researcher's conclusions and the words of the participant. If someone says that misfortune is the price of not performing the rite, we record it as a belief that governs behaviour; we do not assert that the ritual is an objective cause or prevention of such misfortune. This way the religious element is given its due without being turned into an empirical claim unsupported by evidence.

There is also the matter of the researcher's own long standing in the locality. While it makes for better conversation and a feel for local idioms, it can breed assumptions. What is seen often enough starts to seem self-evident. Part of the analysis is to make the familiar strange once more and question what work the practice is doing socially.

All participants have been anonymised and we have omitted any details that would identify the families or their children.

A Shrine Beneath a Tree

There is nothing ostentatious about the Baba Panchanan shrine. One will find no large edifice, no hall to enclose it or anything in the way of a conventional roof. It is a modest affair, open to the ground and set beneath a tree with paddy fields not far off. But do not mistake its unassuming physical presence for a want of religious significance.The locals have an explanation for the lack of a roof: any effort to put one over the shrine has been met with the displeasure of Baba Panchanan. For the purposes of this analysis it is immaterial whether one is inclined to view that as a supernatural fact. What matters is that the tale is integral to how the shrine is regarded. The open structure is not an architectural shortcoming in need of fixing; it has a religious rationale.

And with that comes a different way of seeing the place. The tree, the soil, the open sky and the fields are all part of the shrine's setting. So when a newborn is brought here, the child is not being put into some small building but is entering an open landscape. This has bearing on how one interprets goragori deoa. The ritual might be done in other quarters, but here it is inextricably linked to the place and the soil.

Goragori Deoa: Birth, Body and Place

It is a matter of birth to start with.The family will bring the new arrival to Baba Panchanan and put the child down on the soil to roll. There is no complexity to the act itself, though the meaning behind it is more so. Some see it as an inherited custom to be followed, others as a way to secure the blessing or protection of Baba Panchanan, while for some the thought of not doing it is enough to invite misfortune. These views do not always sit comfortably together and there is no point in trying to make them conform to one narrative.

What is consistent is the bodily element. The child is carried and put to the ground. Csordas (1990) would have us consider the body as the very means by which we inhabit our cultural worlds, not just an object of culture. The newborn does not make a conscious choice; the family acts for him or her. But in doing so the child is physically made part of the practice. That is a distinction worth making. In a way the ritual is initiated by the action, with the religious meaning following on from there. Even if the child cannot yet comprehend it, he or she is thereby woven into the family tradition.

Young Mothers and the Weight of "What We Do"

In conversation, the young mothers tended to regard the practice as something that ought to be done once the child is born. Their reasons for it differed, but they spoke of it as part of the natural order of things after a delivery.

Then again, the most potent social rules are often the ones left unwritten. As one put it:

"Bachcha jonmalo ar take baabar kache na anle amader bongsher ar bachchar akolyan hobe."

Here the child and the lineage are bound up with one another. To not take the child to Baba is seen as having consequences for both. It also tells you how the newborn is placed in the family scheme of things. The child is not merely an individual whose welfare is a private parental matter; the child is of a lineage and comes with certain expectations.

Some of the women would tell their story of childbirth in terms of a personal religious experience, crediting Baba Panchanan's blessing. It is not necessary to think they are dismissing other ways of looking at it. A woman can have a medical understanding of conception and delivery and still see the birth as a blessing. Lived religion

allows for such coexistence. The religious dimension of the event does not supplant the biological; it is simply another layer to it.

Soil as Livelihood and Sacred Substance

There is no better way to get inside the local religious imagination than to listen to what is said about the soil:

"Mati sob, mati r modhye ishwar er asirbad ache, ei mati amader jibon dharoner fosol jogan dei, ei mati amader bachie rakhe, ei mati amader kache iswar."

The speaker starts with the tangible. Soil yields crops and that sustains you. But then the words turn to the sacred, to God's blessing and eventually to God itself.

It would be tempting to say the participant has put a religious gloss on an economic resource and leave it at that, but that would be to miss the mark. For those whose lives are tied to cultivation, the soil is already a matter of survival. Its holiness is a natural extension of that material bond. Morgan (2010) makes a good case for this kind of material religion, where the forms are not just containers for ideas but part of the experience.

So the ground near Baba Panchanan's shrine is all of these things: it is agricultural, it is where the infant is rolled, it is part of the shrine and it is held to have divine favour. None of those meanings negate the others.

The First Paddy and the New born Child

One can see the connection between the fields and the nursery more clearly in the stories of older women. They will tell you that when the paddy is in, the first of it goes to God. And they draw a parallel with taking a new baby to Baba Panchanan.

On the face of it the comparison is odd; a child and some paddy are hardly the same. But it holds water one think of it as a matter of first presentation. The initial harvest is set aside for the sacred in a way. In the same vein the new born is taken to Baba Panchanan first.

It is an act of acknowledgement that something new has come into the house and must be put in relation to the sacred. The fact that the families who till the land and rely on the paddy find the shrine in the very same landscape is no coincidence. The soil is the link between livelihood and faith.

While one could be tempted to label this a formal fertility system, the evidence from the participants does not support such a conclusion. A more sensible would be the continuity of the family and the farm are both accorded religious standing.

Women, Men and Intergenerational Memory

It is the women, the older ones in particular, who make it clear how the practice endures. They are the ones with the stories of Baba Panchanan and the memory of what their own families did. They let the younger women know what is to be done after the birth, and so the young mother will go through the motions for her own child. In doing so she is not just receiving a tradition but reproducing it. It is a reminder that a community does not "have" a tradition in some abstract sense; someone has to be the one to do it.Men are part of the equation too. The husbands we met with were quite content to see the ritual as a matter for the family. Some made the connection between Baba Panchanan and the prospects of future children and the household's livelihood. Given the role of agriculture, those implications run deeper than the birth itself. Gender will determine who performs and explains the various parts of it, but in the end the ritual is of the household's wider religious world.

Divine Displeasure and Divine Blessing

One finds two motifs in the stories told by participants: a fear of Baba Panchanan's displeasure, and thankfulness for his blessing. They are not so much at odds with one another as they might seem. It is logical to view a deity who has the power to bestow a blessing on a family as equally capable of a negative response should a customary

duty be neglected. The relationship is reciprocal; people put forth action and in return expect the sacred to answer.

This is felt with some force in the case of childbirth, an affair of uncertainty. A family will have its hopes for a healthy child and its concerns over the future and the line of the family. The ritual provides a tangible outlet for this. To call it nothing more than a means of curbing anxiety would be reductive. There is also the matter of obligation, gratitude and a sense of belonging. Yet, the uncertainty is what lends meaning to the practices of protection and blessing, offering a way to deal with an event whose ramifications go well beyond the delivery room. One must be careful with the word fear, too. To brand the practice as "fear-driven" is to do a disservice to the accounts of those involved. Hope and affection for the deity, habit and family expectation all have their part to play.

Sacredness without a Roof

The absence of a roof on the shrine poses the question of what confers sacredness upon a place. In most religious settings one is accustomed to architecture doing some of the heavy lifting: walls to set boundaries, a roof for enclosure, making a building identifiable as a temple. But this is not in the case of Baba Panchanan. To the devotee the openness is no weakness. The very fact of the missing roof is now part of the shrine's character, as locals will tell you. The tree and the soil are there to be seen and touched, as are the open sky and the fields around them; the site is not walled off from the landscape. For an examination of material religion or sacred geography, the shrine is instructive. The sacred is not confined to the interior of a structure but is found in the interplay of place, story and the actions of people. When the new born comes into contact with the earth, this is made plain.

From Birth to Social Reproduction

There is a dimension of social reproduction at work in the ritual. While biological reproduction puts a new child in the world, social reproduction is how relationships and meanings are carried forward. At the shrine the two converge.A child is born and the family goes through an inherited rite, inducting the child into something that was there before he or she was. One could chart it like this:

Birth – new born body - ritual presentation - sacred place - lineage - continuity

Or consider the agricultural side of things: soil - paddy - household livelihood - continuity

These are analytical links, not necessarily the way a participant would lay out the sequence in conversation. But sociological interpretation is about drawing together such elements of meaning. The ritual matters because it is where they come together.

Tradition Is Reproduced by Doing

To label goragori deoa a traditional practice is to note its origins, but it does not account for its endurance. Much of the reason for that is simple repetition. An older woman has the memory of it, a younger one picks it up, a child is taken to the shrine and the cycle is set for the next generation. It is hardly a dramatic process, which is perhaps its strength.

The ritual is tied to the birth of a child, an occasion on which family life is once again put in order. Each new child is an opportunity to enact the tradition. It stays alive not by virtue of some unaltered relic of the past, but because people make it part of their present. This allows for some leeway. You will not get identical explanations from every participant; one will talk of the blessing, another of the soil or of lineage. A practice can be recognisable enough even if its meaning varies a little from one person to the next.

DISCUSSION

Lived religion in a local shrine

One need not start with the question of whether *goragori deoa* fits into some formally recognised religious category to understand its value; the participants make that clear enough by treating it as a meaningful action. The Baba Panchanan case is instructive on this point and shows why the concept of lived religion is so well suited to the study of small-scale practices. From a sociological standpoint, the import of the practice is what it accomplishes: it ties religious observance to a given landscape, situates the newborn in the continuity of the family and forges a link with Baba Panchanan at the time of childbirth. McGuire (2008) provides an approach that lets us view these things as religion in practice, not as mere offshoots of an institutional system.

The body carries the tradition

The ritual would be nothing without the body of the new born at its centre. This is a good example of what Csordas (1990, 1994) has written on embodiment. Here, religious continuity is not something passed on by way of explanation but is put into action. The child will have touched the soil long before he or she can comprehend its significance. It is a fact that warrants more consideration than it might at first seem to, pointing to a form of religious socialisation that is rooted in bodily participation and predates any conscious identity.

Materiality matters

One should not mistake the open landscape, the tree and the soil for decoration at the shrine. They are what give the ritual its particular shape. The earth yields paddy, the tree is the marker of the shrine and the open space keeps the surrounding country part of the encounter while the new born rolls on the ground. In this sense materiality is not just an illustration of the experience but what gives it form.

Sacred and agrarian worlds overlap

It is no accident that the shrine is near the paddy fields. For those who rely on agricultural production the soil is spoken of in sacred terms, so the religious and the livelihood landscapes are one and the same. We cannot make the broad claim that all agrarian communities come to such religiosity; the case is too parochial for that. But it does show how closely the two sets of meanings are bound up in this setting.

Religious continuity is relational

In the end the practice is sustained by relationships. Young mothers are the ones who perform it while older women recall and put it in words; men have their say in the household decisions and interpretations. The children are the subjects by whom the practice is made new. What gets handed down is less a belief in Baba Panchanan than a manner of acting, which is perhaps the most telling thing about the case.

Embodied Religious Incorporation

To tie the argument together we can speak of embodied religious incorporation. It is an analytical term, not emic; one will not hear the participants use it.

Yet through a fairly straightforward act the new born is brought into a number of overlapping orders. There is the biological order of birth and the kinship order of family and lineage. Then there is the religious order via presentation to Baba Panchanan, the spatial order of the shrine and the material order of the soil underfoot. The ritual is set within an agrarian order where paddy and soil are tied to the household's means of living. And in becoming part of the next generation the child enters an intergenerational order that ensures the practice goes on. Physically the ritual is unassuming, but its social implications are far reaching.

Livelihood, Children and Household Continuity

What comes across in the accounts from various generations is an abiding concern with continuity. For an agricultural household paddy is synonymous with livelihood and children with the perpetuation of the line. Baba Panchanan offers a framework to acknowledge both.

There is a certain utility in comparing the first paddy with the new born. One is offered, the other presented. Yet the field material does not support reading this as some formal doctrine of fertility. Rather it reflects a moral sensibility about what is required for the household to endure. Both are grounded in the same soil.

A Local Ritual in a Changing Social World

That goragori deoa has survived is not evidence the community is immune to social change. Rural people are engaged with markets, government programmes, healthcare and education, as well as the migration and digital communication that are now part of life.

A family may see a doctor for the mother and child during pregnancy and then take the new born to Baba Panchanan without any sense of contradiction. The former is about health, the latter about obligation, blessing and a sense of belonging. The lived religion approach is useful precisely because it permits such different forms of knowledge to coexist instead of setting them up as traditional versus modern.

As for how the ritual might evolve, this research is not equipped to say; that would call for a more extensive historical or comparative study. The point here is a more modest one: the practice retains its meaning even as the social world around it changes.

Limitations

There is an intentional narrowness to this study. Focused as it is on Khudrun and the neighbouring villages of Mangalkote, one would be wrong to regard it as statistically representative of rural communities at large, or to project the results onto West Bengal in general.The 40 participants were chosen for a purpose: to elicit a range of generational and gendered viewpoints, not to map out patterns at the population level. Then there is the matter of the researcher’s own long acquaintance with the area. While this has been a source of access and contextual understanding, it can also breed assumptions, so some reflexive distance was called for.

We are also dependent on the word of adults when it comes to a ritual performed on newborns; the children themselves are unable to tell us of their experience. And the article makes no move to adjudicate the truth of any claims regarding Baba Panchanan’s blessing or anger. They are taken as religious understandings that have a bearing on social relations and action. In sum, these constraints put the argument where it ought to be: in a qualitative reading of a single local practice.

CONCLUSION

On the surface, a newborn rolling on the ground under a tree might appear a modest affair. But in Khudrun and the surrounding part of Mangalkote, the act has a much broader social resonance.

The goragori deoa ritual is what ties the newborn to the family line and the shrine to the agricultural land around it. The child is brought to the shrine and set down on the soil, physically entering into a custom that predates its birth. One could say the soil is telling in this respect. It is worked by the farmer for paddy and sustains the household, yet it is also spoken of as sacred. There is no need to keep the practical and the religious apart here.

Older women make the link plain enough in their accounts. When they draw a parallel between the first paddy harvest and the infant, they are not equating the two. It is more a way of acknowledging through a sacred bond something new that has come into the home, a sort of first presentation. Gender and generation play their part too: the older women recall and put words to the practice, young mothers see to it for their children, and men are involved in the matters of lineage and divine protection.

The practice endures because of these relationships. That is the sociological point of the case. Tradition is not merely passed down from the past in some unbroken form; it lives on because people do it. The shrine itself defies some conventional notions of sacred architecture. Without a roof and not clearly demarcated from its surroundings, the open sky, the earth and the paddy fields are all part of the setting. Local lore about the shrine's resistance to being walled in is how its physicality is understood. What we have is several facets of lived religion coming together. The body of the new born, the materiality of the soil, the space of the shrine, the economics of the farm and the social fabric of the family. None holds up without the others. "Embodied religious incorporation" is a fair way to describe it. In goragori deoa the child is introduced in every sense to an inherited world of obligation and memory. It is worth the attention of the sociologist of religion to look at such small shrines and unassuming rituals. Major temples and formal doctrine do not tell the whole story of religious life. Sometimes the mechanics of it are best observed in the aftermath of a birth: who is carrying the child and why, what they put the child on and what is said in the process. At the shrine of Baba Panchanan, the answer is found in the soil. The soil puts food on the table for the household, the household gives rise to the next generation, and the new born is brought to the shrine. In that straightforward bodily contact an old practice is done once more.

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