

CHAPTER III

The *haaris* of Barapujia Village: Exploring the Questions of Agency

3.1 Introduction

The role of religion in social production of gendered power relationships is still being explored by feminist scholars, particularly from sociology. The contribution to a feminist social theory of religion has to, however, come from feminist scholars across disciplines (Erickson, 1992). From the discussion in the first chapter of this thesis regarding different viewpoints, it is understood that feminist scholars from Global South vary in their standpoints regarding the relationship between women and religion. As discussed previously, a range of non-Western feminist scholars like Sylvia Marcos, Saba Mahmood, Abu Lughod, Judy Isaac, Orit Avishai and so on have argued for different understanding of women and their sense of agency viz-a-viz religion and rituals.

This chapter extends Avishai's analysis of women's agency in religion to the specific context of women in Northeast India. It documents as well as provides an empirical analysis of women's agency through the lives of the *haaris*, the female ritual specialists of the Plains Tiwa community. By examining the nature of agency that is exercised through their ritual status, the chapter critically questions their sense of belongingness to their prescribed ritual role and thereby to the community. In other words, it uses feminist standpoint to examine the life narratives of the *haaris* and argues how agency is exercised 'through' the ritual status and not 'viz-a-viz' it. This chapter complicates the binary notion that is attached to women's agency with reference to religion. Examining the negotiations that these women carry out within the existing patriarchy in the community, this chapter argues that their agency through ritual status has to be understood in its situatedness, as exercising itself through the many ambiguities of 'doing religion' (Avishai 2008) that come along with it.

3.2 Contextualising the practice: Who is a *haari*?

Before delving into who a *haari* is and what are the ways in which the *haari* navigates through her ritual status and social position in the Plains Tiwa community, it is important to note that the priestess tradition is not absent from caste Hindu society. However, they

are all embedded in the patrilineal structure. The defined ritual position of the *haari kunwori*, on the other hand, is a characteristic unique to the Plains Tiwa society, considering the matrilineal and matrilocal attributes that are present in the institution of the *haari*.

The *haari* or the *kul haari* or the *haari kunwori* is the female ritual specialist of a *kul* or a clan in the Plains Tiwa community. As per tribe rules, she ought to stay in her natal home along with her husband and function as the ritual specialist of the *kul* throughout the year and throughout her life for various social and personal ceremonies and life events of the people belonging to that particular *kul*. The ritual position is ideally passed on from the mother to the daughter or from the grandmother to the granddaughter. Nonetheless, as we would see in the sections to follow, field observations suggest that in practice, the ‘doing’s around the ritual position of the *haari* involves a good deal of ambivalence, and that it is the ambiguities of ritual status through which agency is exercised in the lives of the *haaris*. This argument shall be discussed below in detail, through relevant case studies.

Although anthropological writings on Tiwas have established that matrilineage is still prevalent as a kinship norm among the Hill Tiwas (Senapati, 2018, Baruah, 1989, Sharma Thakur, 1985), they also state that the plains Tiwas are not a matrilineal community. Like all the tribes of the plains of Assam, the kinship and residence patterns of the Plains Tiwa are essentially patrilineal and patrilocal. The hills Tiwas trace lineage through the mother and hence property transfer is to the daughter. In the Plains descent is traced through both parents depending on the marriage of the offspring. The concept of *gobhia* (marriage resulting in matrilocal residence) is still prevalent in Plains Tiwa society and if the daughter brings home a husband then it is customary for her to get an equal share in the ancestral property (Senapati, 2018, 3). Similarly, a man who leaves home and goes to live in the wife’s house/family loses right over ancestral property. Such a man is also incorporated into the *kul* of the wife through a ritual process. ‘*Lalungor borola bamunor baari, jomeu nasai phiri*’ (‘even death does not look back to a Lalung or a Tiwa widower and a Brahmin widow’) is a popular folk saying that came up during one of the field interviews. According to the respondent, the phrase is used to depict the condition of a *gobhia* man whose wife dies. For both the widower and the widow, remarrying is common and socially acceptable (ibid).

In the context of the practice of *haari* or the female ritual specialist, what I was looking into could also be an anomaly because the fundamental requisite for a Tiwa woman to qualify as a *haari* is the nature of her residence and lineage which are matrilocal and matrilineal respectively. One wonders, apart from the unique attributes and a defined and dignified ritual status, what are the qualifiers to be called a *haari* in the community, or, simultaneously, what are the negotiations that might be in practice with regard to the position of *haari*? What is the nature of power associated with her status viz-a-viz spirituality and material inheritance? Can the institution of *haari kunwori* be read as a reminiscence, or a continuation of a kinship pattern that traditionally defined the Plains Tiwa society? In what ways does this institution of the *haari kunwori* explain or challenge the traditional patrilineal kinship structure of the plains Tiwa community?

Interestingly, as discovered from the field, the basic unit of Tiwa kinship is called *maahari*, i.e., children following descent from the same matrilineage. The people belonging to the same *maahari* are directly related through blood, usually born from the same mother. A number of *maaharis* get together to form a *kul* and a number of *kuls* form a *khel*. In broader terms, what could be the cultural, religious or economic catalysts, if any, that might have been responsible for a supposed shift from matrilineage to patrilineage for the plains Tiwa tribe? These questions were in my mind while I roamed around my field, along with the literature that I had looked up in order to understand the overall status of women in matrilineal societies of the global south.

3.3 The *haari*: An oral text of ambiguities

The interesting thing about studying religious traditions in northeast India is that in most cases there are no written texts that one can refer to in order to learn about the indigenous religious activities and rituals. The only way these religious traditions have reached their present stage is through passing down the details of the rituals and the dos and don'ts associated with them through oral means. Orality then becomes a means of attaining knowledge about the rituals and religious institutions as well as how knowledge itself is generated, sustained and passed on. Thus, in a way, the people practicing the rituals themselves become texts through which knowledge is transferred. Studying the institution of *haari* and the rituals she is involved in thus also means analyzing these rituals and as well as the *haari* as text. Orality as text leaves room for ambiguity in practice. It is as much

through the ambiguities of practice as through the orally prescribed regulations and restraints that these indigenous ritual practices come to life.

The context of Susan Bordo (1993)'s analysis of the feminine body may be situated differently, but what remains universal is the fact that, to quote Bordo, 'the body may also operate as a metaphor for culture'. In the Plains Tiwa community, the orality of ritual practices inform how gender is formed and reinforced within the community practices. The orality of these practices also creates ambiguous spaces for the *haaris* where agency is exercised not in acts of subversion of ritual practices or resistance to religion, but rather in multiple spaces of ambiguous assertion of their self, most of which are carried out through the power provided by their ritual status. This point shall be elaborated in chapter five with field observations.

During my interactions with the *haaris* of Bohgaon, I was looking at their lives as text to understand three things- a) the overall significance of ritual life within the Tiwa community, b) the institution of *haari* itself and its attached social significance, and c) how agency is exercised within the sphere of ritual status. What I found in my data analysis was that in the lives of these *haaris*, agency is exercised 'through' belongingness to their ritual role and not viz-a-viz it. Agency and belongingness are manifested within the structure of patriarchy in their many ambiguities. These are at times manifested outside the ritual sphere, but are carried out 'through' the social significance attached to the ritual status and in turn the ritual life within the community. This shall be discussed in detail in the sections below.

Before proceeding to explore the questions of agency in the lives of the *haaris*, the section to follow shall provide a preliminary glimpse of Barapujia village, the place where the fieldwork for this research was conducted and also present a basic mapping of the field.

3.4 Arriving at Barapujia

Mungsha Ratneshwar Phamjong, my contact person from Teteliya (the place of *Uwa Borot* where I initially thought of conducting fieldwork for this research, as discussed in chapter one) connected me to Dr. Bidyut Senapati, a resident of Barapujia who upon learning my research interest invited me to visit his village Baakorigaon in Barapujia. Dr. Senapati was a familiar name to me, from whatever I had managed to read so far on the Tiwas. He had

published multiple articles and booklets on the Plains Tiwa community and their social life and was known as someone who is vocal about the contemporary issues of language, culture and identity pertaining to the community. He was also the working secretary of the Tiwa literary organisation 'Tiwa Mathanlai Tokhra' (TMT). A few months later in the summer of 2018, with the hope of finally finding an entry to the field I began my journey to Barapujia.

Barapujia is a large village situated at a distance of 5 km from Raha, Nagaon and it is a conglomeration of a number of small Tiwa and Assamese villages. It is also a place where a distinct Tiwa ritual life is still being followed. I was also told that the traditional Tiwa practice of *haari kunwori* is still prevalent there. When I reached Baakorigaau of Niz Barapujia the next day, I learnt from Dr. Senapati that the elderly *haari* of his *kul* (clan), i.e. Hukaai *kul* was a learned and skilled priestess but she had died some time ago and as per the decision of the *kul*, the responsibility was passed on to the granddaughter. However, the latter eloped with a man and nn lost the ritual position of *haari* as she could not fulfill the criteria of taking a husband and staying at her natal home. I was also told that currently her mother i.e., the daughter-in-law of the deceased *haari* is serving as *haari* but that is just a temporary arrangement and they are still looking for a suitable one for the position. Dr. Senapati suggested that the current *haari* of his *kul* i.e. Hukaai *kul* would not be able to help me as she was not experienced enough, and hence he suggested taking me to nearby Bohgaon *chuburi* whose *haari* is the third generation *haari* and is quite learned and experienced in her vocation. So we went to Bohgaon and finally I managed to have my first conversation with Podumi Patar, the *haari* of Maadur *kul*.

Podumi Patar, a 58 year old female ritual specialist from Bohgaon *chuburi* or neighborhood of Barapujia village thus became my primary respondent in the field. It is with her help and assistance that I was able to enter the multiple spaces of the field that could have otherwise been restricted for an outsider. She took me to the other *haaris* of the village, enabled subsequent interviews, introduced me to the *xomaaj* (community) during the annual rituals, and made me comfortable even as an outsider. My relationship with Podumi was unlike any other *haari* or person from the village. This was perhaps informed by the fact that she came across as peculiarly wise and learned, despite having minimal formal education and exposure to the world. Though her worldview was shaped

by her environment she seemed to have her own understanding and analysis of the world around her. Again, this point shall be elaborated in the fifth chapter.

3.5 Mapping the field

Using snowball technique, I took help from Podumi Patar to establish contact with a person named Ankur Gaonkhowa, the village headman of Bohgaon. When the meeting was fixed, I expected an elderly person, mostly because of the magnitude of the responsibility. But as it would turn out in terms of a number of other social and religious responsibilities of the community as well, it is not uncommon for young Tiwa women and men to assume social as well as religious responsibilities when conferred upon by the consent of the community. The headman was a young man of 27 years of age. Nonetheless, a broad mapping of Barapujia village followed by that of Bohgaon hamlet was carried out with the help of this young headman through a separate, elaborate meeting.

As per field data, Barapujia is a part of the larger Kopili block, encompassing some parts of each of the adjacent districts of Nagaon and Morigaon. It is a cluster of a number of smaller hamlets divided into two major halves by the main Barapujia connecting road that drifts off from the national highway 37 and passes through Barapujia village to connect Raha (Nagaon district) and Morigaon town (Morigaon district). As one proceeds from Raha town for around four kilometers towards Barapujia, one reaches the Barapujia higher secondary school (estd. 1957) on the left. A few hundred meters ahead is the Nij Barapujia center. One half of Barapujia village begins from the school and extends towards the further left encompassing Nij Baakorigaon, Dorongialgaon, Putakolong and Amarawati. Dorongialgaon contains families from the Kalita caste and Putakolong contains some families from Das caste (referred to as SC by locals), apart from Tiwas. The other two hamlets are all Tiwa population. On the right hand side of the center is the Allahaband bank, Barapujia branch. Further right begins the other half of Barapujia village extending from Bohgaon, Gaokhuwa chuk, Bakorigaon and Uzonikusi through Rojagaon, Xoraligaon, Goraligaon and Khaplangkusi to Pukhuripaar, Patarchuk, Bordoloichuk, Napukhuripaar, and Xipagaon. Most of Barapujia is constituted by an Assamese-speaking Tiwa majority population. As per data shared by field respondents, the approximate number of total families in the village is 2400. As discussed above, due to reasons related to access and availability of respondents, the detailed ethnographic fieldwork for this study was carried out in the Bohgaon hamlet. However, the in depth personal interviews with

the *haaris* as well as a few community members were carried out both in the field site as well as in the privacy of their respective homes.

As per written records provided by the young administrative head of the village, Bohgaon is spread across four municipality wards- ward 4, ward 3, ward 9 and ward 7. The total population according to the records is 5571 out of which Tiwa population is 3022. Rest of the population contains the castes Sutiya and Das (fishing community belonging to scheduled caste, as described by the village headman) and their total population is 2549. The wards are named as Uzonikusi (ward 4), Bohgaon or Bhotiyonikusi (ward 3) and Pukhuripaar (ward 9 and ward 7).

The wards are further divided into *suburis* /neighborhoods which comprise different *kuls* of the Tiwas and also some settlements of non-tiwa population. Ward 4 is divided into Bordoloichuk, Rojagaon, Xoraligaon and Goraligaon. Bordoloichuk is a completely Tiwa settlement. Rojagaon comprises Kus and Tiwa settelement whereas Xoraligaon and Goraligaon are Sutiya settlements. Ward 3 is an all Tiwa ward and is divided into three *suburis* consisting of different Tiwa *kuls*- Bohgaon Gaokhuwa chuk, Bakorigaon and Uzonikusi. Bohgaon Gaokhuwachuk is inhabited by the *kul* Maadur, Bakorigaon is inhabited by the Hukai *kul* and Uzonikusi is inhabited by the *kul* Phamsong. Ward 9 is a mixed population settlement and is divided into three *suburis*- Bordoloichuk, Pukhuripaar and Napukhuripaar. Bordoloichuk is inhabited by Damlong *kul* of the Tiwa tribe. Both Pukhuripaar and Napukhuripaar are inhabited by people from the Fishing community (referred to as SC by the village headman). Ward 7 is also a mixed settlement divided into three *suburis*- Patarchuk, Xipagaon and Pukhuripaar. Patarchuk and Xipagaon are inhabited by Tiwas from Maadur *kul* whereas Pukhuripaar is inhabited by people from the fishing community (referred to as SC by the village headman). Upon being asked, the headman mentioned that although some households have members working in the government sector, they are mostly fourth grade employees. The primary occupation of the members that keep the village economy going is agriculture.

Near the main road, Ward 3 simultaneously houses the *borghor* (a physical structure used for community prayers and rituals) of Maadur *kul*, the Bohgaon *bornamghar* (a prayer hall affiliated to neo-vaishnavite ideology) and the *maas bazar shiv mandir*. As one furthers towards the inside of the hamlet, one comes across the *borghor* of Amshi *kul*, old *Bohgaon*

Shiv Mandir, the *Uzonikusi namghar*, and the *Burha-Burhi Than*, all in proximities of an average four hundred meters between one another and branching out from a single route.

Ward 3 proved to be important from the point of view of this study. The Bohgaon *borghor* (exact time of establishment could not be traced) and the Bohgaon *bornamghor* (estd. 1952) are two of the oldest structures in the locality and are established within close proximity. Standing for more than seventy years, the *bornamghor* is a physical representation of the long time influence of Neo-vaishnavite practices in the village. The Bohgaon *borghor* on the other hand is a physical representation of the ideal Tiwa community life, most of which is manifested through ritual practices carried out in its premises. The complexities associated with these two religious structures viz-a-viz self-identity and agency of Tiwa women was later revealed in personal interviews of respondents. As discussed and problematised in the previous chapter, overlapping of Hindu religious ideologies and Tiwa ritual practices were observed during fieldwork. We shall discuss the implications of such overlappings on the lives of the *haaris* in the later sections to follow.

3.6 The basic structure of Tiwa kinship

Like their other tribal counterparts in the region, the Tiwas too have a range of origin myths that try to validate or justify the existential significance of the tribe. According to one legend, there were originally twelve *kuls* of the Tiwas. In time these twelve *kuls* got divided into many *upakuls* or sub-clans. According to another, when the Tiwas were matrilineal in the beginning, there was only one *kul*. Twelve sisters from that *kul* who were looking for suitable grooms and upon not finding any, were ready to give up their lives when *Mindaipha*, the supreme God appeared before them and created twelve men. Marriage alliance among these couples eventually led to twelve *kuls* of the Tiwas (Bordoloi, 2014, 49) At present there are about fifty-five living *kuls* across the Tiwa community (Bordoloi, 2013, 80).

Podumi Patar and Dr. Bidyut Senapati helped me understand the basic terrain of kinship among the Plains Tiwas. The basic unit of Tiwa kinship is called *Maahari*, i.e., children following descent from the same mother/(matri)lineage. The people belonging to the same *Maahari* are directly related through blood, usually born from the same mother. A number of *maaharis* get together to form a *kul*. A number of *kuls* then go on to form a *khel*. The

Tiwa *chuburis* of Barapujia village are thus divided in terms of *kuls* and *khels*. There are a total of twelve *khels* of the Tiwas in the entire Barapujia village. In the areas surrounding Bohgaon and Baakorigau, seven *kuls* have combined to form a *khel*.

The *khel* represents an ideal community in Tiwa social life. From what could be interpreted from field data, unlike a *kul* which is essentially formed through immediate kinship ties, a *khel* is more of a social organisation and may or may not have kinship ties involved. The *kul* is the locus of social organisation of the tribe. From the point of view of this study, understanding kinship organisation of the community would thus mean looking at the organisational structure of a *kul*.

3.7 Sanctioned ritual hierarchies within the tribe: The *haari*, the *Ghorburha* and the *Borjela*

The Tiwas practice clan exogamy, i.e., marriage alliances have to be carried out outside one's *kul*. Each *kul* has a *ghorburha* or *ghorjela* and a *haari*- a male and a female ritual specialist. Usually all the decisions pertaining to a *kul* has to be taken in presence of the *haari* and the *ghorjela*. This includes rare incidents of marriage alliance outside the tribe and incorporation of the concerned non-tribal individual into one of the eligible *kuls*, decisions regarding farming and harvest feast, and other common community events, regarding offerings to be made to the *kul* Gods, goddesses and ancestors in case of illness or misfortune of any *kul* member, and so on. The *haari* and the *ghorjela* together take care of the religious rites and rituals of their *kul*. Besides the *haari*, the *ghorbura* or the *ghorjela* is the head of a *kul* and occupies the highest ritual status in a *kul*. As mentioned above, the *Ghorbura* and the *haari* must be from the same *kul* but they cannot be from the same household. All the seven *ghorburhas* and the *haaris* from the seven *kuls* have to be invited for the marriage and death rituals as well as in case of any emergency. All the *kuls* from one *khel* have a common *borjela*, a senior ritual specialist chosen from within the *kuls*. He is present and leads through all events of the *khel* including most community rituals carried out by the *kuls*. In terms of ritual hierarchy, the *borjela* officially occupies a superior position than that of the *haari* and the *ghorburha*.

The role of the *ghorjela* in the religious lives of the Tiwas is significant, but ought to be seen in relation to that of the *haari*. The status of the *ghorjela*, the *haari* of a *kul* and the *borjela* of a *khel*, the nature of their work in relation to one another give a glimpse about

the structure of religious authority and the ambiguities of gender hierarchies that are present in the Tiwa social structure. It shall be discussed in the later sections to follow.

3.8 Self, belongingness and ambiguous agency

“Feminist theory has sought to understand the way in which systemic or pervasive political and cultural structures are enacted and reproduced through individual acts and practices, and how the analysis of ostensibly personal situations is clarified through situating the issues in a broader and shared cultural context” (Butler 1988). In similar light, a feminist understanding of the institution of *haari* would require one to acknowledge how these women navigate their personal as well as social practices along the complex patriarchal structure of the plains Tiwa society.

I had identified seven *haaris* residing in Bohgaon village and belonging to seven different *kuls*. These *haaris* varied in terms of age and experience of practice. Two of them, Podumi Patar from Maadur *kul* and Premalata Patar from Phamsong *kul* were veterans of 60 and 85 years of age and have been practicing since the last 45 and 40 years respectively. Another two, Kamali Patar from Amshi *kul* and Ratneshwari Deuri from Hukai *kul* were 45 and 48 respectively and have been practicing for about a decade. Xoruphul Dewri, 26, from Hukai *kul* was chosen to be *haari* at 12 years of age but had given up the role after four years in order to fulfill personal choices. Ratneshwari Dewri, mother of Xoruphul Dewri was appointed *haari* after her daughter gave up the role. The other two *haaris* were Kunjalata Patar, 50, from Puma *kul* and Himanti Bordoloi, 46, from Damlok *kul*.

What emerged from the interactions with these *haaris* were a few themes that seemed like definitive elements constituting who a *haari* is, for herself and for the community. As per community norms, the choice of marriage acts as one of the primary criterias of being (or not being) a *haari* within the Plains Tiwa community. Although among the Tiwas, a woman is free to practice either uxorilocal or virilocal residence post marriage, the ideal condition for a woman to be chosen as a *haari* is for her to practice uxorilocal residence.

3.8.1 Podumi Patar: The ideal *haari*

The *haari* with a purer form of lineage is attributed a higher status within the community. Podumi Patar, the 60 years old *haari* of Maadur *kul* was one of the eldest *haaris* of the

khel and had been practicing her role since the last 45 years. She took over the role from her grandmother who had taken over from hers. As claimed by herself, Podumi is a third generation *haari*. The house where she lives with her husband is her '*ghaai ghor*' or ancestral home. It was inherited by her from her grandmother. She did not complete formal education but can read and write. She was the only *haari* who had the prayers and rules meant for the *haari* noted down. She mostly refrained from eating in public or from sharing food and maintained a general aura of purity around her. According to her, this was important to keep herself integrated for her role.

My initial meeting with Podumi Patar in the summer of 2019 was rather dramatic as well as enlightening, since it was my first encounter with any female ritual specialist of any religion. Co-incidentally, her residence was situated directly opposite to the community *Naamghor* of Bohgaon. As I first entered the residence with Dr. Senapati, my contact person from the field, I saw that it was a regular village household made of limestone walls and tin roof, with a *bhoralghor* (traditional granary) in the right side of the courtyard, outside the main house. There was a *guxaaighor* (traditional Assamese prayer space) that also stood outside the main house towards the left of the courtyard. A young man who introduced himself as Poromeshwar, the eldest son of the family welcomed us into the house. It was a Sunday, around 10 o'clock in the morning. We were told by the son that his mother was out in the neighborhood for some work and would return shortly. As we sat in the humble living room sipping tea served by the daughter-in-law and waited for the *haari* to arrive, I found myself wondering about the impending encounter. Shortly after tea and a round of informal conversation with the son and Dr. Senapati regarding their respective *kuls* and the basic ways around them, Podumi Patar entered the room. She was a regular looking Tiwa woman, 58 years old, slightly grey-haired, wearing a set of plain hand-woven *mekhela-saador* (Assamese traditional attire). However, there was no denying that the woman had an aura around her. The vermilion on her forehead and in the parting of her hair was prominent. The fine lines on her face radiated a sense of wisdom while enhancing her calm smile. Dr. Senapati had already informed the family about the purpose of our visit. After the initial introduction and exchanging a few informal lines about mutual well-being, the *haari* insisted on learning a bit more about the intention of our visit. When I shared that I am a researcher willing to know more about her and her ritual vocation, she laughed. The son later told us that their region is used to researchers, filmmakers and people from different backgrounds visiting and documenting rituals and

festivals but this is the first time someone was particularly interested in his mother as a ritual specialist. After some time into our conversation, Podumi Patar got up and went inside. She returned with an old-looking notebook. Upon being asked, she revealed that it was a journal of prayers and ritual rules that she had learnt from her guru, an elderly former *ghorjela* or male ritual specialist of her *kul*. The vermilion on her forehead prompted me to ask about her husband. When enquired, Podumi sent for her husband. A well-built Tiwa man in a white *Dhoti* and *ganji* came in with a shy smile. He was around 62 years old. In my later visits to the field, I had the opportunity to have some very interesting conversations with this man about his life as the *gobhia* (a Tiwa term for a husband staying at his wife's natal home) of a *haari*.

Podumi Patar from Bohgaon *chuburi* or neighborhood of Baropujiya village thus had become my primary respondent in the field. It is with her help and assistance that I was able to enter the multiple spaces of the field that could have otherwise been restricted for an outsider. She took me to the other *haaris* of the village, enabled subsequent interviews, introduced me to the *xomaaj* during the annual rituals, and made me comfortable even as an outsider. My relationship with Podumi was unlike any other *haari* or person from the village. This was perhaps informed by the fact that she came across as peculiarly wise and learned, despite having minimal formal education and exposure to the world. Though her worldview was shaped by her environment she seemed to have her own understanding and analysis of the world around her.

Among the seven *haaris* interviewed during the field, Podumi *haari* was the oldest practicing *haari* of all, abiding and observing ritual as well as kinship restrictions. This along with her lineage as a third generation *haari* ensured her higher status amid the other *haaris* and also among the common folk.

Upon being asked what was in her notebook, Podumi showed me her notes which were mostly ritual songs or prayers. Upon being asked, she shared that the songs are a very important part of performing the community rituals. These songs are considered highly sacred and are called *tuti*. The word seemed like a colloquial term for the Assamese word *stuti* derived from Sanskrit which means prayer. On being probed, Podumi explained the meaning and significance of *tuti*- since she lights the lamp in the *borghor* on behalf of the entire *kul* and it is the most sacred job for a *haari*, it is a must for her to pray to the Gods and Goddesses as the protectors of the *kul* and also to the ancestors of the *kul*. These *tutis*

are sung just as they have been passed down from the *maiki-bapekis* (meaning the ancestors). On my request she sang a few lines of one *tuti*. The *tuti* as sung by her was-

Aai raam issor probhu saagor tutti udong
Ghor juti ghor goxaani dalagara maligara sonbola
Paasbola posimbola dhunabola toporabola
Ijing khesa khisilokha pahekow
Bordeu mohadeu thanboli mohaboli
Dui maatti kalika buli,
Abalaka terkom bor aai xoru aai
Aapui aabui bingi bhabuliye sagulimalu muhe tuti udong
Apela kaperoxo pitti paropine paapti pitti paar (calling the ancestors)...

A rough summary of the song-

The song roughly addresses to the almighty lord who the *Haari* is praying to, in this case to Sonbola and Posimbola, the goddesses of Madur *kul*. They are addressed as ‘*ghor juti*’, literally meaning the light of the house and are requested to their seats in the *borghor* through the prayer. The song also mentions ‘*fa mahadeo*’, the Tiwa lord seen as equivalent to lord Shiva and addresses the two goddesses, one older (‘*bor aai*’) and the other younger (‘*xoru aai*’) as Kaali, the Hindu goddess. The prayer song expresses the presence of the foremothers and forefathers of the *kul* within the *kul* goddesses and gods and through prayer calls upon the ancestors that had been here before.

When asked, she responded that the exact meanings of the Tiwa words were not clear to herself but she could only tell the holistic meaning of the song which meant pleasing the goddess of the *borghor* she is affiliated to. The goddess that she was praying to is *Sonbola*, the *kul* goddess of Maadur *kul*, as told by her. Different *kuls* have different gods and goddesses. Through the *tuti* the *haari* also remembers and prays to the female ancestors (*maatripurush* as said by her) who had previously taken on and performed the ritual role of *haari* before her. Interestingly, the language of the song was a mixture of Tiwa and Axomiya language; for example, a line from the *tuti* was ‘*kesa goi kesa paan di tuti udong*’. The Tiwa word for betel nut is ‘*koi*’. It is possible that the origin of the word ‘*goi*’ is ‘*koi*’. Similarly, the ‘*udong*’ may be traced back to ‘*ridong*’, a Tiwa word meaning ‘*doing*’. If

one combines the meanings to articulate the sentence, '*kesa goi kesa paan di tuti udong*' would mean 'praying by offering raw betel leaves and raw areca nuts'.

In all its possibilities, Podumi Patar gives out a picture of who an ideal *haari* is. She ticks all the boxes of requirements for a *haari* set by the community- of residence, kinship and purity. In doing so she also represents an ideal ritual structure of the community. Her authority as a senior *haari* was evident during the community rituals and also from her husband's remarks on her influence in the region as a female ritual specialist.

Podumi's case suggests that the status of the *haari* is thus determined by the level of her ritual purity, which translates into the kind of life choices she endorses, including choice of kinship and residence. A *haari* with purity of matrilineage and practicing matrilocality is given a higher ritual status within the community.

It is also the innate sensibilities and interest towards her ritual role accompanied by the purity of lineage that determine the importance of a *haari* in her *kul*, and her social position and respect among the *baaro xomaaj* (twelve *khels*). In an informal conversation during the field days, Podumi Patar's husband had made a loving yet significant remark towards his wife- '*gutei baropujiyar buraxupaai iyake uporot tuli thoise!*' ('all the old men in Barapujia have held her only in high regards!') Podumi Patar had succeeded her grandmother as the *haari* of Maadur *kul*. However, it was her interest towards her vocation, her thirst to inherit the relevant knowledge and wisdom from the late *ghorjela* of her clan, and an innate sense of belonging to her role that made a special space for her in the community.

However, further field findings suggest that the ritual structure of the community viz-a-viz the *haari* is somewhat ambiguous. The *haari* ideally requires to follow matrilocality residence but as observed through empirical field data, in practice this rule is adjusted towards the convenience of the *kul*, or the lack of it.

3.8.2 Ambiguity of residence, ritual status and agency: The case of Ratneshwari Dewri

The institution of *haari* follows a matrilocality pattern of residence existing within a patrilocality, patrilineal and patriarchal social structure which in turn traces back its basic

kinship pattern to a matrilineal form of descent. However, the prescribed religious and ritual norms with regard to *haari* fluctuate according to the convenience of practice or in most cases, lack of it. Field findings show that what is primary for attaining the ritual status of *haari*, i.e., the choice of marriage and residence is also not a non-negotiable one.

Ratneshwari Dewri, the 48 year old *haari* from Hukaai kul took up her ritual role as *haari* of her spouses' *kul* when her daughter Xoruphul Dewri, the original *haari* eloped with her lover. Ratneshwari was a shy woman and was initially reluctant to interact regarding the whole situation. However, a brief, intimate conversation could be carried out with her during the later phase of fieldwork which proved an important point on the relationship between ritual status of the *haari* and her situation of kinship. The ritual hierarchy of a *haari* is directly proportional to her lineage and nature of residence. It also impacts her agency as a woman and as a *haari*, and her sense of self and belongingness to the ritual role attached to her. Upon being asked how she feels about being the *haari* of her husband's *kul*, Ratneshwari shared-

“Etiya ki koribi aa...suwali polaai gol jitiya...kiba etatu koriboi lagibo...xomaaje daai dhoribaatu dibo nuwarong...amitu lukey buwari he hoi...etiya upaai nuhua holey aa...hobaa dile aa, holung...kintu niti niyom teneke eku nejanuwei...burhatue jeneke dekhuwai diye kori jaang aa...aako beleg kulor haari aase je...ketiyaba aahi dekhuwai diye aa...”

(What to do...the girl eloped...so had to do something...cannot let the community get offended also...I'm only the daughter-in-law...now since there is no other way...they asked me to be... so I became... but don't know much about the rules and regulations...I follow whatever the ghorburha instructs...again there are *haaris* from other *kul*...they also come and show sometimes...)

-Ratneshwari Dewri, 48, present *haari* of Hukaai *kul*

Ratneshwari's case is a case of negotiation on the part of both the community and the individual in order to uphold traditions where a chosen *haari* exercised her individual agency to opt for another life. One cannot help but observe how the mother also in turn negotiated with the community in order to save the difficult social situation that her daughter created by eloping. Thus, the community and individual engage in frequent

negotiations in the terms of choosing a *haari* as per convenience or the lack of it, reiterating the argument that the ritual status of the *haari* is a rather dynamic one.

3.8.3 Ambiguity of self, domesticity, ritual status and agency: The case of Xoruphul Dewri

In the life of a *haari*, the relationship between ritual status and agency is complex. In an inherently patriarchal society, traditional domesticity intersects with women's lives ambiguously and therefore women's challenges to normative domesticity may be similarly ambiguous (Pintchman, 2007). The story of Xoruphul Dewri, a former *haari*, can be examined to support this argument. During my initial visit to the field, I was redirected from Baakorigaon to Bohgaon on the pretext that the older *haari* of Hukaai kul of Baakorigaon had died. Upon the death of her grandmother, a twelve year old girl was assigned the status of *haari* and she was expected to stay in her natal home. After four years of being a *haari*, when she was sixteen, she fell in love with a guy from her school and eloped with him to settle down in his natal house. She eventually lost the status of *haari* and her mother, Ratneshwari Dewri, the daughter-in-law of the Hukaai kul was assigned the role of *haari*. Dr. Senapati of Baakorigaon, my first contact person from the field, had said at the time that this was a temporary, make-shift arrangement and they were looking for a *haari* of pure lineage.

After a year of pursuing, Xoruphul Dewri (name changed), now 26 and a mother of three children, could finally be tracked. In a personal interview conducted later at her home, Xoruphul recollected her initiation ceremony from being a twelve year old girl to 'becoming' a *haari*. She shared how she was made to wear a new dress and then put on a cart that carried her to the *borghor* where community members sprinkled holy water, showered flowers and rice grains on her. She was welcomed with new clothes and the elder members of the *kul* announced that she would be the new *haari* of her *kul*. Xoruphul was also the youngest to be chosen as a *haari* that I could trace. Apart from Xoruphul and another *haari* (to be discussed below), none of the other *haaris* could recollect or narrate their process of initiation even after being asked repeatedly by the researcher. According to Xoruphul, before she could understand anything about the role, she was already recommended to be the next *haari* by her grandmother while the latter was still alive. The intentions of her grandmother according to her were that of personal gain whereby the former wanted to retain the ritual status of *haari* within the household and also the social

and personal benefits that come along with it. The former *haari* also alleged that in a way, her grandmother used her and that it was never her will to become a *haari* and give up on everything else that was possible in life. In her own words,

“...*amitu eku nejanisilu..xoru aasilu..xi nijor kothaai bhabile aa...taak xonmaan laage..xomaajot thaai laage..daangor manuh buliba laage..amak tu nalage... aami bhal palong aa, gusi aahilong..*

(I didn't know anything back then..was young...she only thought of herself...she needed status..a place in the community..she wanted to be someone big...I didn't want that for myself... I loved someone so I came out of it)

-Xoruphul Dewri, 26, former *haari* of Hukaai *kul*

This particular incident brings up a complex point regarding ritual status, belongingness and agency- while assignment of a religious role gives the woman access to a higher ritual status and respect, it may leave her with fewer choices in her own personal life. In other words, a ritual status can be maintained only by refraining from certain personal life choices, like falling in love and relocating to husband's residence, whereby exercising agency in terms of a deviant choice means loss of ritual status. Here, love isn't the deviant choice but the choice of residence is.

Ironically, the young *haari* exercised her individual agency to defy kinship ideologies and community expectations set for a *haari* when she eloped with a man but actually endorsed the already existing patriarchal normativity when she settled into the residence of the husband. The interview also revealed that Xoruphul was content with her decision to leave behind her status of *haari* and settle down with the man she loves. When I reached her extremely humble conjugal home, I had to wait for sometime in the living room as Xoruphul was busy doing house chores. She entered the room with a glass of water as her mother-in-law sat conversing with me, asking me my whereabouts and intention of visit. Upon being asked how it is to have a daughter-in-law who was once a *haari*, the mother-in-law responded, “*Buwaari holetu kaam koribaai lagibo. Xongxaaror niyomei no maa*” (My dear, if you are a daughter-in-law you will have to work, it is the norm of the world). Patriarchy puts women in different ambiguous situations both in and outside of the domestic sphere, but in the specific context of the domestic sphere, it exercises itself the

most through women who become its agents. We would never know how Xoruphul's life would have turned out to be as a *haari*, had she compromised on her individual agency and adhered to her grandmother's choice of life for her, but exercising her own agency to endorse a conjugal home that is patrilocal further put her in a patriarchal structure of which her mother-in-law is an active agent.

Xoruphul's interview adds newer questions of power and agency to the argument on women's ritual status. From what could be inferred from the data collected, the women's ritual status and power in the community are majorly shaped by their own perception of agency which also seem to sprout from patriarchal understandings of womanhood and femininity. Further, the fact that her mother, a woman wedded into the otherwise patrilineal household was immediately appointed as a makeshift *haari* after the girl eloped, hints towards the negotiations that happen around the ritual role of *haari* and the complexities of belongingness and agency that exist with the role. It is further safe to argue that the ritual status is also informed by a differentiated understanding of self, agency and belongingness by the *haaris* themselves.

Avishai (2008)'s argument about women 'doing' religion as a 'mode of being' can be juxtaposed with the context of the *haaris* where 'doing' their ritual roles involves perceiving ritual life both as a mode of being and also as a way of negotiating with spaces outside the ritual sphere.

Within their own situatedness and in their life choices, the *haaris* challenge normative domesticity by reinterpreting, expanding or rejecting prescribed spacial restrictions, domestic practices or familial expectations

My interview with Premalata Patar, *haari* of Phamsong *kul* adds to the above argument.

3.8.4 Self, ritual status, agency and the ambiguity of belongingness: The case of Premalata Patar

Premalata Patar, an 85 year old widowed woman and a mother of three children, lives with her unmarried, differently abled daughter in Baakorigaon. She has been the *haari* of Phamsong *kul* since the last 45 years. How she became the *haari* of her *kul* is yet another story of negotiation by the community and by Premalata herself. Premalata Patar was the

oldest and one of the most learned *haaris* that I met and interviewed during my fieldwork. Her wisdom regarding her ritual role was similar to Podumi Patar. What was different was the ways in which they were both chosen by the community as the *haari* of their respective kul. Upon being asked how it was to become a *haari*, Premalata shared-

“Ji manuhok haari paate, aagpaat ejaap lobo, loi pelai xeyaate bohuwabo..bohuwai pelai baaru xomaaje aahi pelai paani sitiyaabo...haari hol buli..taa paa borha tuta koribaa nuware aa...baaru xomaaje paati thoise je...kunubai esaat marileu taar daai aase...Muk aagote amar maa thakungte hobaa nidiye..xomaajor daayittobhar mukhor kotha nohoi nohoi...amar maa morar pisot he muk paatise...jundina patise moi inekuwa kaandisu nohoi... maayekir baikyo serai pelai pelai moi hoisong aa...amar ekhonei xomaaj nohoi janu...baaru xomaaj buli koi aa...xokoluwe jodi paani sitiyaai, taarmaane borha tuta koribo napaai...giriye holeu taak tungunaba napaai...jodi jaane, dhorabo taak...”

(The one who is chosen as *haari*, they will take a pile of plantain leaves, make you sit on those, after that the entire community will sprinkle water..saying that you’re *haari* from today on...after that no one can say anything...since it is a decision by the community...if anyone does anything they are held guilty...my mother when she was alive never allowed me to be...taking the responsibility of society is not an easy deal...they made me a *haari* only after my mother passed...I cried a lot on the day I was chosen...because I defied my mother’s words...we have only one community/society...it’s called ‘*baaru xomaaj*’ (literally translates to good society or twelve clans)...when everyone sprinkles water, it means you cannot mess with her...even the husband cannot beat her...if the community comes to know, he will be answerable...)

-Premalata Patar, 85, *haari* of Phamsong kul

What Premalata said about being a *haari* raises an important point regarding the normative domestic life of a Plains Tiwa woman. Her repetition about the mandatory taboo on any kind of violence on the ritually chosen woman hints towards a social setting where domestic violence is normal. What is not normal is any kind of violence, domestic or otherwise on the *haari*. This can be understood as a negotiating tactic of women in ritual status with the dominant patriarchal structure at work. Subsequently, the sense of self and agency of the woman with a ritual status takes shape which makes itself pronounced in front of a system that otherwise normalises patriarchal dominance of women. Elizabeth

Collin (1998) articulated two distinct approaches to the study of ritual: one that emphasizes what ritual does to people and another that emphasizes what people do with rituals. The first approach seeks to elucidate ways that ritual practices affirm and reproduce larger relations of social power, even without the conscious assent of ritual actors. The second approach on the other hand emphasizes on the ways in which people use ritual forms to pursue their own individual and collective interests, appropriating and sometimes modifying rituals when convenient, allowing agents to creatively deploy ritual for their own purposes. One can extend Collin's second approach of emphasis on the ritual agents to argue how the ritual agent, in this case, the *haari*, uses her ritual status for the purpose of resisting any possible violence on her as a woman. Upon being asked how her husband reacted to her status as a *haari* and if it changed anything in her conjugal life, Premalata shared-

“Oo manibai lagibo aako..moi taak biyaaai nohou bulisilu aajoni..beleg karubak he bhal paisilong...(smiles)...xi jiyaai asilei olopote morile...ghoror pora nidiye buli kole aa, iyaloike dile jur jobordosti...moi ekebare dekhibo nuwarisilong..taar pasot amar bhagor haarijoni biya hoi golot muk maati pothale nohoi haari hoba laage buli..moi naahu, ou xihe taali tupula bandhi aaha hole..moi naanu.. Bulu biya hoisu jetiya khaba paleu thakim napaleu thakim..roha topakusit biya disile.. nijor ghor thakute kiya jaba laage lukor ghorjuwai hoboloi...kintu xi nuxunilei, ghoror manuhor logot aalusona kori aahiye ulaale...moi koisu jaa moitu tuk ana nai jeneke ahiso teneke jaa...ta pa nogol aa..iyate thakile iyate morile...(haari) hua dina khub kandisilu maayekir haak nuxunilu buli...taar pisot daangorkhiniye dekhuwai dise aa niti niyomkhini...koise aajir pora haari holi aa xonmaan rakhibo lagibo...”

(...of course he will have to adhere...dear, I didn't want to marry him...(I) actually loved somebody else...he was alive only, died a while ago...my family did not agree, (they) forced me into marrying this one...I did not like (him) at all...but after the *haari* of our kul married someone they called me back saying (I) need to be *haari*...I opposed to come, but my husband was more excited to come, packed immediately...I would not bring him here...said I have been married off so whether I get to eat or not I should be there only...I was married off to Roha, Topakusi...when you have a house of your own why do you need to go to other's place to be house-husband...but he wouldn't listen, discussed with family and showed up...I said go away I did not bring you go back the way you came...but he

did not go...he stayed here and died here too...I cried a lot on the day of my initiation thinking I did not listen to my mother...then the elders showed me around the rituals...said from today you need to hold this honor...)

-Premalata Patar, 85, *haari* of Phamsong *kul*

Premalata was called back from her conjugal home to be a *haari* when the then *haari* of her *kul* (Phamsong) married a man and relocated to her husband's residence. This was an interesting revelation and a second case of giving up on the ritual role of *haari* that I came across during my fieldwork. Although this particular case took place decades ago, it still felt relevant because it suggested a social setting that was flexible with the individual or personal choices made by women who were ritually chosen by the community. Upon being asked if she had to undergo any social punishment for her action, Premalata and the other members present in the conversation confirmed that there is no punishment for a *haari* who wants to give up her ritual role in order to marry someone and relocate to the husband's residence. Premalata however remarked that her predecessor should have upheld the traditions and not married, or could have at least taken a *gobhia* (uxorilocal residence), but also said that it was the latter's choice and she acted accordingly- '*taar mon gol aa kune nu ki kobo, xi gol jitiya iyate kunu nathakil dayitto lobele gotike muk maati pothale..*' (she made up her mind so who could say anything..after she went they called for me as there was none left here to take responsibility).

Thus, the above narrative reiterates our previous argument that though the choice of kinship viz-a-viz marriage is one of the primary criteria for the community while choosing a *haari*, it is not rigid nor is it non-negotiable. Here, Collin's argument about how people use ritual forms to pursue their own individual and collective interests, appropriating and sometimes modifying rituals when convenient (Collins, 1998) can be applied. Field findings suggest that the process of choosing a *haari* is definitely a dynamic one, but so is the process of 'becoming' a *haari*. Exercising individual agency to withdraw from the ritual role conferred upon by the community does not amount to an offense and it also offers the women with ritual status a certain agency to exercise their personal will without the fear of consequence. The power that follows can heighten their sense of self and agency even when it is carried out within the boundaries of a patriarchal structure.

Haaris use their belongingness to their ritual role to negotiate with the patriarchy existing outside the religious sphere. The general type of residence in the community is patrilocal. Even if their type of residence is socially sanctioned, the *haaris* sometimes have to assert their ritual status and subsequent social authority to bargain their way through the societal expectations of conjugal residence and adherence to their husbands sprouting from patriarchal norms. The case of Kamali Patar substantiates this observation.

3.8.5 Ritual status, agency and and the ‘bargain’ of belongingness: The case of Kamali Patar

My first encounter with Kamali Patar (name changed) of Amshi *kul* seemed nothing like the one I had experienced with Putuli Patar of Maadur *kul*. Unlike Putuli, a 45 year old, comparatively young Kamali initially came across as a woman without any aura. I first met her inside the borghor in the annual *monshwo* ritual of the Amshi *kul* at Uzonikusi, the neighborhood bordering Bohgaon. She had been chosen the previous year as the *haari* of Amshi *kul*. Kamali was a lean, dark skinned, seemingly mal-nourished woman with a very humble appearance. On my first day of visit, I was greeted with a shy yet warm smile by her upon being introduced as a researcher by my contact person at Uzonikusi. She didn't speak with me any further on that day but kept a warm, shy smile on as I observed her working in and around the ritual activities. I observed how during the rituals the elder members of the community were both affectionate and strict with her. Upon being asked, some members said that as a new *haari* she still had a lot to learn from the elders. However, she has proved to be a dedicated *haari* and hence is adored by all. But it was on the second day that I succeeded in indulging in a conversation with her and amid the ongoing rituals, Kamali opened up about her life story. It was then that I realised her resilience as a woman and as a *haari* of her *kul*. She shared-

“I was a single child living with my mother. My father passed away when I was a child. Growing up, I learned to work in our paddy field as there was no male member in the family and our relatives stayed faraway. It was one of those summer days in the paddy field when I first met Lakkhi (name changed) who offered to help me with the paddies. In return, I offered him the snacks and rice brew that I had saved for myself. We instantly grew a liking towards each other but would not admit it. He helped me quite a bit in that season. The neighbors in the field used to ask me who this stranger was who was helping me in the field. I said he was a friend and there was nothing else. In a gradual progression

of events, one day Lakkhi came to my house with fish and vegetables sent by his mother. My mother felt both happy and sorry for the boy who carried food for us from far in the scorching heat. So she offered to cook a meal for him. There was nothing that was going on between us till then. But our neighbors showed up when we were eating and accused me of adultery. Even if my mother was present in the house, they asked what was a young man doing with a young unmarried woman in broad daylight. They even beat up Lakkhi in front of me and my mother. It was then I realised that I actually had feelings for him. I could not be a silent spectator to what was happening. I immediately went to the village headman to raise a complaint against the neighbors. My point was clear- no one came to help me as a woman when I was struggling alone in the paddy field. No one came to help when I was in need. But they all came to judge me when a man from another village came forward to help. I told everyone that I was innocent but I am going to marry Lakkhi. I asked Lakkhi in front of everyone if he had any bad intentions towards me. When he denied I asked him if he loved me and would be okay in marrying me. He said yes in front of the *gaubura* and the fighting neighbors. I was so angry at the neighbor and at everyone and everything, but when Lakkhi said he would marry me, I went red. I realised that he had saved my honor in front of everyone. So I asked him again if he would like to stay with us in our house, since I was the only child and there was no one else to look after our land and field. When Lakkhi agreed to be a *gobhia*, I knew I had chosen the right man. Lakkhi's family also agreed to our decision. His two elder sisters are married to well-to-do families and they were happy that he too found a home here. We have been married for the last 20 years and they regularly send gifts to me on occasions, till today. We had three children in the last 15 years but they were more dear to God. All of them are with Him now.``
(translated)

-Kamali Patar, 45, *haari* of Amshi *kul*

Kamali also introduced me to her husband Lakkhi who had just arrived. By then I had overheard their conversation where he said that he had cooked fish for lunch and came to ask if she would be home soon. During this ongoing conversation in the backyard of the *borghor* when Kamali was narrating her brave story of love and marriage, the women helping with chores nearby and listening to the story were empathetic towards her. One of them commented, “*issore kopaalot bhalei likhi thoise de xeibuli bhal giriyerotu paiso*” (God has written your fate well so you have been compensated with a caring husband). A

few others however opined that one should always obey the husband and keep the husband's home happy. To this Kamali smiled and responded, "*mur ghorot nu ki dukhot aase xi hoi, duta manuh dhuniyake kori khai aasuei dekhun*" (he is in no misery, the two of us are doing well together at my home).

Kamali's answer resonated with Pintchman (2007)'s argument about how women may challenge normative domesticity by reinterpreting, expanding or rejecting prescribed spacial restrictions, domestic practices, ideologies of kinship, or familial expectations. Kamali's emphasis on 'her' home implied that authority and agency was exercised 'through' her ritual status as a *haari*, this time in terms of positive sanction of residence.

Upon being asked how she was chosen to be *haari*, Kamali commented, "*Sob kopaalor likhon buiso maajoni, Teu bisarile aru nohou buliba paribi janu? Tewe nile tewe dise* (All is fate my dear, if He has it planned for you can you deny? He is the one who took and He is the one who gave). Her response suggested a sense of belongingness to her role as the *kul* priestess which was again inspired by a certain level of peace and truce with God for the fact that He took away her children and instead gave her a bigger responsibility of being a *haari*. When I further asked how she manages the dual role of being a *haari* and a wife, she said,

"Aami dutahe manuh. Maai tu dhukale. Amar maalik tuwo bhal. Muk sobote xohaai kori diye. Aaji iyate byosto aasu buli ghorot bhat randhi thoise. Bor morom muloi buiso. Ki khaisu ki pindhisu eke nozorot rakhe"

(We are the only two people in the house. My mother has already expired. My husband is also very supportive. Helps me out in everything. Today I am busy here so he has cooked lunch at home. Loves me a lot. Very conscious about my well being).

-Kamali Patar, 45, *haari* of Amshi *kul*

Her face beamed with a shy smile as she responded. Her husband who came to sit beside her in the middle of the conversation kept nodding with a smile. Upon being asked how the busyness of his wife is treating him, he again nodded with an unassuming smile. Despite the presence of a visible exercise of agency through status offered by her ritual role, what was interesting was Kamali's use of the term '*maalik*' to refer to her husband. Although it could be interpreted as a loving reference to someone who owns her heart, it

could also mean the ambiguity that accompanies the agency of women navigating through and negotiating with a social environment that is inherently patriarchal.

Nonetheless, Kamali's story of love and individual agency also sets a tone to her sense of self and her belongingness to the ritual role of being a *haari*. That normative domesticity and prescribed gender roles were challenged was evident and undeniable in her interactions with community members within the *borghor* premises and in the outside spheres. However, these were pronounced not through resistance or rebellion but through strategic negotiations and tactful bargaining of her ritual status and belongingness to her role as a *haari*.

All of the above narratives also highlight a complex sense of belongingness to the ritual role of *haari* assigned to these women. The question of 'who belongs' thus constitutes one of the primary prerequisites of 'being' a *haari*. While these women are found to have with their respective ritual roles a dynamic relationship of acceptance as well as agency, their narratives also bring up another fundamental question with particular regard to the role of *haari*- who 'does not' belong?

The case of Xulakhyana Bordoloi who 'should have been' a *haari* but, according to the other *haaris* and also the members of the community, 'did not belong' to the role further highlights how 'belongingness' is ambiguous and how it colors the 'becoming' of a *haari*. It also highlights how who belongs to the role of the *haari* (and who does not) is in many ways shadowed by the patriarchal notion of an ideal woman sanctioned by normative society.

3.8.6 Agency and ambiguity of belongingness: The case of Xulakhyana Bordoloi

Xulakhyana Bordoloi had passed away long before I first heard about her or perhaps before even the thought of documenting the Plains Tiwa women first occurred to me. All that I came to know about her was from all that I had heard about her during my fieldwork from different respondents in different settings. Nonetheless, an interesting observation about this woman who I otherwise was not supposed to be looking for during my fieldwork was, Xulakhyana Bordoloi did not 'become' a *haari*, but she did come up in the common memory of most of the respondents when the question of who can be a *haari* was raised, decades later. According to some senior residents in Uzonikusi, Xulakhyana was unlike

any regular girl in their village. She was a straightforward person who was also brave and kind hearted. Another of the younger residents recollected the stories of Xulakhyana's bravery and will narrated to her by her late mother-

“Until very recently, the Plains Tiwas had a common, infamous custom of conducting marriage by a form of kidnapping. A family could trick a boy or a girl of choice by luring him/her into a sort of trap in their house. Although this custom was looked down upon, it was not considered a social offense and hence did not attract any fine or punishment except for a social marriage between the concerned individuals. Once a boy from another village had visited his relatives in Uzonikusi and was trapped and kept on hold for marriage by a family. The family and relatives of the boy became worried as they did not want the alliance but had no clue how to get the boy out. It was Xulakhyana who used her wit to visit the household and ran out of the house holding the boy by hand, thus single-handedly rescuing him from the trap and also from a possible forced marriage. The entire village witnessed this act of bravery. As an only daughter, Xulakhyana was also wedded to a man following the traditional *gobhia* rule of the Tiwas whereby her husband came to stay with her at her natal home. She infamously kept the groom outside of her room for several days because she was wedded by her family without consent. They however fell in love eventually and consummated the marriage later.”

-A young female resident of Uzonikusi village

Amid the several stories that were shared about this woman, a common opinion among the respondents was that Xulakhyana fulfilled the primary criteria for being a *haari* and yet was not deemed fit to be one by the members of her *kul*. When asked, Premalata recollected, “*Xiye hobaa lagisile kintu xomaaaje nibisarile aa, xeikarone muke paatile*” (It was she who should have been but the *kul* did not want, so they gave it to me). Another elder woman, a friend of Premalata present in the conversation remarked, “*xiye kintu thik manuh asile...taar gobhiau aasile...ei mukh khon okomaan sukaa aru xei karone nidile janiso...*” (she was actually fit...had *gobhia* also...just that she had a sharp tongue so they did not choose her you know...)

Premalata, the current *haari* of Phamsong *kul* was not allowed to marry the love of her life and was married off to someone she couldn't love all her life. And yet, when the *haari* of her *kul* married, she was called back by her *kul* to assume the role of *haari*. She did not

want to as her mother had told her long ago to not take up the responsibility as it is a big one. But it was her husband who convinced her that she should. She cried a lot thinking about her dead mother's words and worrying if defying her mother's words would get her into trouble. While saying so she also revealed that she couldn't forgive the husband for marrying her despite her unwillingness. She and Xulakhyana belonged to the same *kul* and Xulakhyana actually fulfilled the criteria of *gobhia*. Yet, according to the respondents, the community deemed her unfit because of her blunt nature. According to Premalata, it needs a lot of bravery, patience and wisdom to be a *haari*. Xulakhyana was brave and wise, but she was not patient. On the other hand, though she was barely brave and wise, Premalata was a patient woman and hence the community deemed her suitable for being a *haari*. The 85 year old face of the woman beamed as she said the line.

Thus, while the *Haaaris* have their own sense of belongingness which is carved out of their ritual status, the degree to which agency is exercised by these women determines who can be accommodated within the structure and who cannot be, in turn suggesting who 'belongs' and who 'does not', to a role that is determined by a community that is steeped in the patriarchal understanding of who is an ideal woman. Agency as exercised by Xoruphul has to be seen and understood differently from agency as exercised by Xulakhyana or Ratneshwari. Likewise, agency as exercised by Kamali, Ratneshwari and Premalata each also have to be understood differently. What remains common throughout these *haaris'* stories is the ambiguity that surrounds the very notion of agency and the bargaining that these women carried out through as well as *viz-a-viz* their ritual status.

3.9 Conclusion: Agency as an ambiguous (exercise)

The chapter thus argues that a feminist understanding of the *haaris*, their ritual status and agency will need to take into account the patriarchal structures that have been present in the Plains Tiwa community. Their sense of belongingness to the community and the ritual status assigned to them has to be seen as layered by a subconscious that is burdened by patriarchal norms and values. As discussed, field findings suggest that the anxieties and pressure of staying in ritual power may exist among these *haaris*. This complicates the ability of these women to exercise agency through their assigned ritual status.

Pintchman (2007) argues that Hindu women's religious practices are not isolated from social, cultural, domestic or larger religious roles or frames of meaning but tend to engage

realms that transcend individual ritual contexts. The role of agency however often remains ambiguous when women exercise it within the normative religious systems. The conversations with the *haaris* were carried out on an informal note, trying to blend the questions with the spirit of the house and intending not to make them conscious of the questions asked. The conversations with these *haaris* established the religious reality of the community. The prescribed religious and ritual norms fluctuate according to the convenience of practice or in most cases, lack of it. Of these, the ritual norms surrounding the female ritual specialist are the most dynamic and fluid. For instance, some *haaris* carried out *gobhia* and were chosen by the *kul* for the ritual role as per existing norms, some *haaris* chose to go live in their husbands' house and in order to do so had to give up the assigned ritual role, some were married off initially but were called back to natal home under different personal and social circumstances and made to assume the role of *haari*, some had to take up the role of *haari* of their spouses' *kul* as part of negotiation over a personal situation, and so on.

Ritual status of the *haari* comes with certain material benefits. Scholars like Bina Agarwal (2008), Prem Chowdhury (2009) have argued how in south asian context, women owning land is important. However, the centrality of a role comes with responsibilities. Scholars like Tiplut Nongbri (2001) have argued how although unlike societies that are traditionally patrilineal matrilineal societies do attribute certain material gains to women, matrilineage actually burdens women with more responsibility. In the case of the *haaris* too, there is a material dimension to the ritual status. The *haari* is entitled to ancestral property. All of the *haaris* who were interviewed inherited property and owned farmlands. The *haari*'s ritual position is central to all the community events and hence she is also entitled to regular customary gifts and offerings. Understanding the ambiguities of self, agency and belongingness among the *haaris* thus also has to take into account the material aspects of being a *haari*, the ways these aspects enable her to negotiate with the social structure that is otherwise patriarchal as well as the material stakes that are involved when agency is exercised by a *haari* to give up her ritual role.

Although the interviews were conducted purely for the purpose of research, the conversations that came out with these women from different ages, the stories that they perhaps have been carrying within themselves without much sharing did form a bridge of trust and sisterhood between them and the researcher. These stories were as much about a

kind of wisdom that sprouted out of acceptance, negotiations, compromises and a sense of trust in themselves as they were about a ritual role and a social status within the community. As Catherine Bell (1997) argues, ritual practice is understood as a performance that is inherently constructive and strategic in nature and hence can facilitate the ability of ritual agents to appropriate or reshape values and ideals that help to mold social identity, thus producing, reproducing, transforming, resisting or even defying the larger norms. The constructive nature of ritual in this regard extends to ideologies and practices that concerns gender and one can thus extend this argument to understand the dynamics that constitute the institution of *haari*. Acting under multiple normative social situations within the community that influence and impact their sense of religious belongingness, agency and self, the *haaris* use their ritual status to negotiate with the patriarchal structures of power and arrive at an idea of their own identity as a *haari* or a female ritual specialists of the community. At the same time, agency is also pronounced viz-a-viz ritual status, and is carried out not outside of the patriarchal structure but within it. As Mary Hancock (1999) argues, ritual engenders through the performance of actions that help to produce identity, including gender identity, in relation to predominant social norms in ways that may be compliant, resistant, or both, complexly and simultaneously.

Marjorie Smith (1993) distinguishes between the emancipatory function of religion (including ritual practices), where religion may help women to transcend existing social restraints and behave in ways contrary to social expectation, and a sacralising function, where religion may serve to establish women's traditional roles and experiences as sacred. This is tricky because, while the sacralising function can serve to justify traditions that limit women's power and freedom in both private and public spheres, it may also serve to reveal the dignity and holiness of women's work and to enhance women's self-esteem and feelings of self-worth. This resonates with Saba Mahmood's analysis of the politics of piety by the women participating in the mosque movement and also with Avishai's analysis of Jewish women 'doing religion' as a 'mode of being'. The female ritual specialists of Bohgaon were seen to have internalized the ritual status of *haari* assigned to them by the community which in turn enabled them to assert a sense of dignity, self-worth and self-esteem in spheres outside rituals within the community.

The sense of self, agency and belongingness of a *haari* to her ritual role is in constant dialogue with the social environment in which she operates. It continuously influences her

sense of self and the ways in which she exercises her agency to carry out her negotiations with the existing structure, and hence, how she navigates through it. In the context of these accounts, subordination and subversion thus cannot be understood independently of each other. To understand agency in its situatedness, one has to go beyond the duality of agency viz-a-viz subordination and resistance. These case studies thus extend the idea of ‘doing religion’. What these religious women with a designated ritual status get in terms of material and non-material gains, what they do not and how they strategically negotiate with systems outside the ritual sphere through ‘doing’ their ritual status is what defines their self, agency and also belongingness to their role.

The identity of the *haari* as the female ritual specialist of the Tiwa community is also an important marker of the traditional identity of the tribe. Their sense of belongingness to the ritual role of *haari* directly translates to a sense of belongingness to the community at large, a willingness to keep up with a tradition that holds deep religious, cultural and social meaning for the tribe.



Figure: 3.1. *Haari* of Madur *kul* reading from her handwritten notes on prayers and rituals of the *borghor*.



Figure: 3.2. *Haaris* inside the borghor of Madur kul.



Figure: 3.3. Some of the *haaris* with a few women of Bohgaon neighborhood.



Figure: 3.4. Bohgaon *bornaamghar*, estd.1952.



Figure. 3.5. *Haari* of Amshi *kul* inside the borghor of her *kul*.