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माटलर संस्कृतर उतुस सङ्काने—

# लोक-उतुस

मुखुतु सडुडडक  
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# **Mashan deity: a symbol of cultural transformation amongst the Rajbanshis**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper attempts to study Mashan deity of the Rajbanshis from the perspective of religious folklore. It forms the interface or border-zone in which the social world of human and the mythical realm of deities are merged into one textual space of mutual interaction. According to Yoder (1974), folk religion is "the interaction of belief, ritual, custom, and mythology in traditional societies", representing that which was often pejoratively characterised as superstition..." and "the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion". For this study, the author collects information from both the sources: primary and secondary. Data were also collected from different online sources, Facebook pages and telephonic interviews and also from first hand survey. The study will also examine whether Mashan deity is a powerful symbol of cultural transformation among the Rajbanshis or the old traditional practices of worshipping Mashan deity is going to disappear in the age of globalization.*

**Key words:** *Mashan, religious folklore, Worship, Rajbanshi, gods, deity, folk belief and rituals*

## **1. Introduction**

Mashan<sup>11</sup> is a very powerful male deity. It is believed to be very strong, awakening, violent, most dreadful and dangerous of all spirits. It is

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<sup>11</sup> Mashan, Masan or Masna is believed to be either a deity (debota) or a powerful spirit (deo). Some people address Mashan as Mashan baba or Mashan Thakur. Many people believe that the status of the powerful spirit Mashan is elevated to godlike stature following the popularity and

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worshipped in different places of North Bengal, Assam, Rangpur of Bangladesh. It is mainly worshipped by the Rajbanshis or Koch-Rajbanshis. Coochbehar remains as the epicenter of worship, the sacred sanctum of the Mashan god (mafan ঠাকুর মশান ঠাকুর) is visible almost everywhere in one or two miles near the road or desolate areas. The Rabha, Hajong and other non-Rajbanshi folks also take part in the worship.<sup>12</sup> After the Aryanization, Mashan god is not only restricted to the Rajbanshis or Koch Rajbanshis of North Bengal and Assam, it also became a powerful cultural symbol of transformation for the community and some non-Rajbanshis also started taking part in the much wider community celebration. According to Sanyal (1965), Masan lives everywhere excepting human habitats. But recently, Mashan god also got its sacred shrine from outskirts of the village to inside the house premise {See Appendix 5 (f)}, and it also became a prestigious cultural symbol for the self and the community. It is believed that Mashan will protect the fellow Rajbanshis from the impending cultural annihilation in the age of globalization {See Appendix 5 (k), (l), (m)}. In many places, the Rajbanshi folks realized the significance of their indigenous culture and cultural symbol, and in order to save and protect it, they built concrete temples of Mashan god in various places of North Bengal, and they started worshipping it which widely became a matter of much needed community celebration.<sup>13</sup>

## **2. Religious folklore and Mashan**

Religious folklore genres such as Mashan deity of the Rajbanshis forms the interface or border-zone in which the social world of human and the mythical realm of deities are merged into one textual space of mutual interaction. They are partners and cohabitants of village life, the deities are the protagonists of the narratives, fierce guardians of morals and religious orders in the society, it can bring pain and sufferings to the one who does not abide the traditional social customs and religious sanctity. The following saying expresses the common sentiments of the people;

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widespread embracement of Aryanization process into Rajbanshi traditional life and culture.

<sup>12</sup>In the Garo hills and some parts of Moyensing of Bangladesh, Mashan is believed to be a powerful and awakening god.

<sup>13</sup>See Appendix 5 (h), (i), (j), (k) Mashan and community celebration\_see details in the appendix

a. ভৱ দুপুৱা পোয়াতি যায়,হামাৰ মশান গোসা হয়[bʰər ɖupura poaʈi  
jae, hamar maʃan goʃa hœ] <sup>14</sup>

“If a pregnant woman crosses the sacred sanctum of the Mashan god at full noon, the Mashan god becomes angry.”

Mashan deity also sets a peaceful model for the village where misunderstandings, strict adherence to traditional faith and beliefs, tensions, poverty, illiteracy and conflicts, nonexistence of doctor and modern healthcare facility, are part of the mundane reality. There are various stories, sayings, anecdotes and narratives are found regarding the birth, origin and the types of Mashans. <sup>15</sup> It is heard that if the deity is dissatisfied it can attack or possess anyone any time of the day or night. But mostly at noon, at midnight or twilight or in desolate places and water bodies, it remains very active. There are many stories, the Rajbanshi folks remember while talking about the strength and power of the spirit. As for example, the Mashan god can stop a moving vehicle or misdirects a bullock cart into water body, it comes in the dreams of many if not worshipped or disrespected. It is often seen in Coochbehar that the driver or conductor of buses throw a coin from a moving vehicle towards the sacred sanctum of Mashan god. The reduplicated word [gʰuʃuŋ gʰuʃuŋ]ঘুসুং ঘুসুং or [hoʃoŋ hoʃoŋ]হোসোং হোসোং is a form of tribute shown towards the deity. According to Yoder (1974), folk religion is "the interaction of belief, ritual, custom, and mythology in traditional societies", representing that which was often pejoratively characterised as superstition..." and "the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion". The official religion of the Rajbanshis is Hindu but many traditional rituals, gods, goddesses of the Rajbanshis are different from the mainstream Hindus of Bengal and Northern India.

### 3. Origin of the word Mashan, Masan, or Masna

There are various interpretations for the origin of [maʃan] মশান, [maʃan tʰakur]মশান ঠাকুৰ, [masan ɖeo]মশান দেও or [maʃan baba]মশান বাবা;

- (a) The meaning of the word Mashan মশান is ‘free oneself from fear, from disease’. If we look at the internal structure of the word

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<sup>14</sup>Rajen Barman, 12<sup>th</sup> May 2017, Mashan Association, Facebook Post

<sup>15</sup>{See Appendix 5 (a), (b), (c) (d) (e)}  
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Mashan, it can be divided into [moe]ময় and [assan]আসান. [moi]ময় means ‘I’ and [assan]আসান means ‘make it easier or release or free’. By worshipping Mashan, one may easily free oneself from anger, ego, fear and cravings for the worldly things. The internal sandhi is [ma+assan]মা + আসান which gradually became ‘mashan’মাশান; ‘masan’মাসান or ‘macan’মাচান.

- (b) The word Mashan can be analyzed as [mac<sup>h</sup>]মাছ+[an]আন “fish” + “bring”. If the deity is worshipped and if is satisfied, it can help the believer to bring more fish which means more financial benefits. Mashan is believed to be a water deity. Initially, Mashan inhabits in water bodies mainly in pond, river and deep lake.
- (c) In everyday discourse, we also find the use of the word [maʃan]মাশান, [maʃan ʃoʃan]মাশান শোশান, [ʃoʃan maʃan]শোশান মাশান. Even someone is addressed as [maʃan]মাশান because of their physical attributes or the person may have Mashan like characteristics. The use of the reduplicated words [maʃan ʃoʃan]মাশান শোশান, [ʃoʃan maʃan]শোশান মাশান has made it easier for people to conjecture about the nature and dwelling of Mashan. It is believed that Mashan dwells in the cemetery. The analogy is often made with the Lord Shiva as it freely roams in the cemetery.
- (d) The words [masna]মাসনা, [macan]মাচান, [maʃan]মাশান, [masan]মাসান are the regional variations found in different parts of North Bengal and also in lower Assam. Many Rajbanshi folks have their own myths and understanding about the Mashan god. One of the informants, Dipak Barman comments, “in order to celebrate power and strength which basically comes from eating ‘*curd and flattened rice*’ [doi c<sup>h</sup>ira] দই চিড়া. Rajbanshi people must have started worshipping Mashan {See Appendix 1.(iii)}.
- (e) The establishment of Mashan deity or powerful spirit grew out the fear from different kinds of diseases. In earlier days people did not have hospital and proper health infrastructure. As people do not have control over the nature and various disease, they must have believed that certain supernatural beings or spirits or gods are behind these diseases. They wanted to appease them. In order to satisfy them they imagined their forms and started worshipping them to get rid of those diseases and uncontrollable things as for example incessant rain, drought, storm, flood, wind or any forms of natural disaster. They imagined that some power must be controlling these forces of Nature. According to Girija Sankar Ray

(1991:21), “depending on its different types of nature, Mashan is called by many names and these names are nothing; these are actually the pseudonyms of different diseases. The village folks did not get the facilities of doctors and modern medicines and it is assumed that they have diagnosed different diseases and their symptoms and most probably they carried out rightful measures for those”.<sup>16</sup>

- (f) The women must have occupied a very important role in the earlier traditional Rajbanshi society. In the traditional marriage systems of the earlier Rajbanshis woman occupies a central role. The Rajbanshi women were believed to be independent and they could choose their life partners freely. Sati burning was not observed and widow remarriage was a norm of the traditional Rajbanshi society. But in the traditional Hindu society Sati burning had to be abolished by law and widow remarriage started by the initiatives of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. In the traditional Rajbanshi society much before the Aryanisation a prospective groom had to pay a sufficient amount of money, amount and gold to the parents of the bride. The role of woman was not only restricted to the household chores but they enjoyed their free independent space in agriculture, farming and other social and religious activities in the village life. Here are the names of the [Jolo matrīka debi] ষোলমাতৃকাদেবী (1) Purneshwariপূর্ণেশ্বরী(2) Kaleshwari কলেশ্বরী(3) Khageshwariখগেশ্বরী(4)Joleshwari জলেশ্বরী(5) Dharmeshwariধর্মেশ্বরী(6) Duyareshwariদুয়ারেশ্বরী (7) Jakeshwariযকেশ্বরী(8)Sajeshwariসাজেশ্বরী(9) Surjeshwariসুরেশ্বরী(10) Bishakhaবিশাখা(11) Akaliyaআকালিয়া (12) Buraburiবুড়াবুড়ি (13) Gouriগৌরি(14) Mahamaya মহামায়া(15) Phulmatiফুলমতী(16) Panchajoni পঞ্চযোনি. Mashan god as a village deity is often framed by physical and social surroundings well known to the narrators and their audience. Mashan is a highly localized, historicized narrative of past events. Being in the matrilineal community, Mashan might be considered as a revolutionary figure who revolted against the existing matriarchal system. The birth of Mashan can be seen as an onset of the

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<sup>16c</sup>....ভিন্ন ভিন্ন প্রকৃতি অনুসারে মাশান বিভিন্ন নামে অভিহিত হইয়াছেন এবং সেগুলি আর কিছু নহে বিশেষ রোগেরই ছদ্মনাম মাত্র বলা যায়। ডাক্তার ও আধুনিক ঔষধপত্রের বিশেষ কোন সুযোগ সুবিধা যখন ছিল না তখন গ্রামাঞ্চলের সাধারণ লোক সম্ভবতঃ এবম্পকারেই ব্যাধি ও তাহার কারন নির্ণয় করিতেন তথা যথায়োগ্য ব্যবস্থা গ্রহণ করিতেন বলিয়া মনে করা যাইতে পারে।”Girija Sankar Ray (1991:21).

patriarchal system. The explanation for the birth of Mashan can be associated with the matrilineal system of the Rajbanshi community as women held a very high position in the early traditional society.

- (g) From the perspective of the religious folklore, the counter narrative could be Mashan was a yogi who got self-realization or attained enlightenment and preached his people to adhere to their cultural roots and traditions. Mashan might have stood firm against the domination of the outsiders. The local folks after his demise must have started narrating his heroic deeds and the sagas continued and it lives in the hearts of the local folks. In the Aryan tradition, a strong distinction is made between god and demigods or spirits. The worshipping practice and offerings also differ. If one looks at the offerings and ingredients at the time worship of Mashan deity, one can undoubtedly claim that Mashan god is non-Aryan in origin, it is the indigenous god and powerful spirit worshipped by the Koch-Rajbanshis.

#### 4. Birth of Mashan deity

There are different myths and sayings are associated with the birth of Mashan. Sanyal (1965: 162) quotes one of the popular myths, “Masna is said to be the offspring of the union of Kali (mother) and Dharm (father).” Here is the story, one day goddess Kali was taking birth in a river along with her five sisters. All of a sudden, God Dharm (or Surya) appeared there. Dharm took Kali into the deep water of the river and they mated. Because of their union Mashan was born. It is called [*picila masan*] পিচিলামশান or it looked like the shape of fish ‘Tetraodon patoka’ or puffer fish (*Tyapa fish*<sup>17</sup> ট্যাপা মাছ). It is believed that the at the time of Mashan’s birth, the wet nurse had thrown out the umbilical cord into water where bindweed grew later. The people believe that bindweed (Kalmu কালমু/KalamiShak কলমী শাক) is the umbilical cord of the Mashan and they do not eat it in the month of Bhadra (August and September). Here is the saying—

4. (a) ভাদরমাসেরকালমুশাকজেবেজানখাইমাসানেরনাড়িঅবশ্যইচোবাই

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<sup>17</sup>Puffer Fish (*patka machh/Tyapa mach*) a balloon-shaped fish of the family Tetradontidae, order Tetraodontiformes. The fish is able to inflate itself enormously with air like a balloon, and are found both in freshwater and marine environments. Seedetails--[https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Puffer\\_Fish](https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Puffer_Fish)

[b<sup>h</sup>aḍor maḥer kalmu ḥakḥebe ḥan k<sup>h</sup>aimaḥaner naḥi oboḥḥoi cobai]

“Those who eat bindweed plant in the month of Bhador (August and September), they certainly eat the umbilical cord of the Mashan and they will invite troubles.”

Many Rajbanshi folks of Coochbehar believe that the Mashan god was born on Saturday in the month of Bhador (August and September). Masan is also believed to be the son of Jaka and Jaki.<sup>18</sup>

### **5. Mashan deity: beliefs and practices**

The Koch-Rajbanshi folks must have started worshipping Mashan as a village deity. It is believed that the Mashan deity saves the devotees from the present and impending danger and diseases. It also protects them from other evil spirits and nourishes them with mental peace. The fisherman community still pays tribute to Mashan god before getting into the water to catch fish. In many instances, the fishermen see fish are stuck in their fishing nets but before they bring the net in the land no fish is found or their net is stuck in the water body, they pray the Mashan god for immediate help. It is believed that the Mashan deity may shower wealth and gives them financial benefits. According to Hemanta Roy,

“Mashan is an evil god. Mashan stays in a desolate place, in water body stream, deep lake (KuRa). Different types of Mashan is found. But near my place, a Mashan named Tasha Mashan (mute) is there. Once, Tasha Mashan possessed one of our uncles who used to work at our home. The uncle could not hear anything. Then we consulted the ojha (Tantrik) who told us that the Mashan near the whole has possessed our uncle. When we asked Ojha what shall we do for his treatment, the ojha told us we need to pray and worship the Mashan. We asked him, what are the ingredients for puja (worship)? The ojha replied, the ingredients are; curd, flattened rice, plantain and a pig has to be sacrificed. Following the Ojha, we did it as it is advised by him. Thirty or thirty years have passed by since it happened. Now, our uncle is doing well. In every year, Tasha Mashan is worshiped in pomp and grandeur but pig sacrifice is not done. In special occasion, if

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<sup>18</sup>Jaka and Jaki are said to be the god and goddess among the Rajbanshis. They are worshiped in the house premise. It is believed that Mashan god is the son of Jaka and Jaki.



someone promises Mashan, then a pig sacrificed. Otherwise, curd, flattened rice, plantain are given at the worship of Tasha Mashan”.<sup>19</sup>

#### **6. Is Mashan agod or a demi-god or an evil spirit or an Aryan god?**

Can we consider Mashan a god, semi god, evil spirit, sub god, demi god, angel or a legend? In the ritualistic Hindu tradition, there is a distinction made among the God, gods, semi-god, demi-god, ogresses etc. The gods usually dwell in heaven and they are benevolent. They are worshipped by the people of earth. On the other hand, the demi god or semi god or the evil spirit has to try hard to get their share in the human world. They punish people, threaten people, instill fear amongst the people so that people worship the spirits or semi gods. The Mashan is also considered to be *deo* (demi god or the evil spirit) not a *debota* (god). The similar word for *deo* is *bhut* i.e. it is male spirit (ghost). When a man dies of unnatural death his soul becomes a *bhut* and the soul of a woman becomes *petni*. However, in recently Mashan god is a symbol of cultural transmission and people started worshipping it as a god (*debota*) and it is associated with Aryan gods as for example Shiva, Kubera, Yaksha etc.

Mashan is also thought to be Yaksha. In another myth, Jaka and Jaki have two children. They have their son- Mashan and daughter Matri. The Rajbanshis worshipped Jaka and Jakini as their household god and goddess. The Aryan myth gives equivalent names Yaksha and Yakshini. After the Aryanization, Mashan is also thought to be Kubera. As the myth suggests that Mashan is believed to be the son of God Dharam and goddess Kali. Even during Mashan worship, Kali is worshipped. It is believed that Mashan is a companion of goddess Kali. Mashan takes shelter in water. In the Aryan mythology, Varuna is the water god. There is often a link found between Varuna and Mashan. There is also a link found between [tʃʌ buri]তিস্বা বুড়ী and the [maʃan tʃakur]মাশান ঠাকুর. [tʃʌ buri]তিস্বা বুড়ী is a water deity and is worshipped in the bank of Tista. The fisherman community also offers puffed rice, curd, sugar ball, big plantain which contain seeds to [tʃʌ buri]তিস্বা বুড়ী.

There are other names for ghost as for example *bhut*, *pishachi*, *jokha*, *pettani*, *pori*, *brommodoitto* etc. and they are considered as *deo* not *debota*.

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<sup>19</sup> Hemanta Roy is one of the informants who responded on my Facebook page and provided some information on Mashan deity. See Appendix 3 for more information.

These different evil spirits punish humans in different pretext and demand puja (worship) from the humans. According to Green (1997:771), there is a pool of spirits somewhere that, from time to time, become incorporated in new bodies. At birth (or during the rituals associated with the new-born), it is important that an appropriate spirit enters the new body and that inappropriate ones be warded off; at death, it is vital that the old spirit successfully makes its way out of the body. She adds, spirits may manifest themselves in dreams, in mirrors, in water; or in the figures seen in tea leaves or coffee grounds, which can be interpreted by someone familiar with the ways of spirits. Mental imagery, induced through a variety of methods—sensory deprivation, hallucinogenic drugs, fasting, meditation, repetitive sounds—is often taken for a manifestation of the spirit world (Green 1997:771-772). Sanyal (1965:160) opines that the Rajbanshis believe in the existence of the evil spirits and they are capable of doing harm and annoy human beings. It has been observed in different areas of North Bengal that many people resort to magico-religious rituals to appease or drive away the evil spirits. It is assumed that the evil spirit Masan that inhabited in the Cemetery used to visit and torture humans in various pretext in order to get worship (Puja). Gradually it became famous and its popularity expanded, and the place of Mashan is elevated from the evil spirit to the powerful god.<sup>20</sup>

In the Vedic literature, there is no direct mention of Mashan god. But in the later period specially after Aryanisation of the Rajbanshi community, Mashan is believed to be the domesticated form of Shiva, Jaka, and Kuber etc. It is also assumed that he is the attendant of Kali and Shiva or Ganga. The Rajbanshi gods and goddesses are pre-Aryan. They were the worshippers of the Nature. They worshipped god of the forest (Mahakal), water deity (Mashan), snake god (bishohori) etc. They also believe in transmigration of souls. They make offerings to the ghosts or evil spirits in order to appease them. The Rajbanshis also believe in witchcraft. Though the Rajbanshis are mainly Saivas, the influence of Saktism, Buddhism, Vaishnavism, Tantrism and Aryanised culture have produced an admixture in their religious belief and practices.

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<sup>20</sup>“মনে হয় শ্মশানকারী উপদেবতা মাশান লোকালয়ের মইধ্যে আসিয়া অত্যাচার করিয়া পূজা আদায় করিতেন। ক্রমশঃ ইহার খ্যাতি প্রতিপত্তি বাড়িতে থাকিলে পরবর্তীকালে মাশানকে দেবতার পর্যায়ে উন্নীত করা হইয়াছে।” (Girija Shankar Ray 1991:22)

There are no details of Mashans and its worship recorded in the Rigvedic literature and Purans. Mashan is not an Aryan god, it is a powerful male deity of the Rajbanshis, the indigenous people of the erstwhile Kamtapur. They had their own god and goddesses and but in the Kshatriyization processes many gods and goddesses of the Rajbanshis were given Aryan names. The rituals and practices also started to change after the Brahmin priests were introduced in the rituals. According to Fuller (1992:36), “There is a certain distance in Hinduism between the great gods with powers over the cosmos on the one hand and ordinary people on the other hand, whose problems seem too mundane to bring them to the attention of the supreme deities”. The position of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva in Brahmanic theology is much more prominent than in folk narratives that express people’s affection for local deities who guard their villages.

Mashan is associated with other gods and goddesses as it can be seen in the following Madan Kam Thakur Songs and following the prevailing belief of Coochbehar, there are one hundred twenty types (choy kuri) of Mashan;

**Bengali Script-**প্রথমখাইলভাংআনন্দধরম, ধরমখাইলকরমখাইলবসুমতী,  
 তারসাথেখাইলভাংলক্ষ্মীসরস্বতী, দেবীরপুত্রখাইলভাংকার্তিকআরগণেশ,  
 কালীরবেটিখাইলভাংডাকিনীযখিনি, যথারপুত্রখাইলভাংশ্মশানআরমাশান,  
 ঠেঙ্গারনাতিখাইলভাংছয়কুড়িমাশান.

**IPA-** [pɔt̪t̪om kʰail bʰaŋ]<sup>21</sup> anonɔ̃ dʰɔrom], [d̪ʰɔrom kʰail kərom kʰail bɔfʊmɔ̃t̪i], [t̪ar ʃaʰe kʰail bʰaŋ lɔkkʰi ʃɔroʃɔt̪i], [d̪ebir puʈt̪oro kʰail bʰaŋ karʈik ar ɡɔneʃ], [kalir beʈi kʰail bʰaŋ ɔakiniʃɔkʰini], [ʃɔkʰar puʈt̪oro kʰail bʰaŋ ʃɔʃan ar maʃan], [t̪eŋgar naʈi kʰail bʰaŋ t̪ɔe kuʈi maʃan].

**Literal translation:** “Dharam has eaten *bhang* at first, Dharam has eaten, Karam has eaten and Basumati has also eaten, Along with them, Lakshmi and Saraswati have eaten *bhang*, The sons of the Durga, Kartik and Ganesh have also eaten *bhang*, The daughters of Kali, Dakini and Jakhini have eaten *bhang*, The sons of the Jakha, Sashan and Mashan have also eaten *bhang*, The grandsons of the Thenga, 120 Mashan have also eaten *bhang*”.

In the Mantra, there is a hierarchy and social order and, in this order, Mashan gets its share very late. Many people believe that Mashan is

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<sup>21</sup> It is an edible preparation of marijuana made by soaking and grinding the young leaves and stems of the Cannabis sativa plant to create a paste usually mixed with milk or water in traditional Indian beverages, and known for its mild hallucinogenic effects.

another form of Lord Shiva. In the cemetery, Mashan inhabits. It is the lord Shiva which inhabits in the cemetery. There are strong similarities between Shiva and Mashan. If we look at the idol of Shiva and Mashan; Shiva has a Trident, Mashan has a cudgel, the carrier is a bull and Mashan has various carriers- pig, fish, horse, elephant. In attire very little clothes worn, mostly half naked, they take bhang (marijuana) and they are very powerful. Shiva has many myths, stories and narratives which are properly documented but the narratives of Mashan is hardly documented and it only continued in the oral traditions.

### **7. Mashan deity: a symbol of cultural transformation**

Mashan or Mashan god is a strong cultural symbol of transformation. It is a symbol of power, courage and strength which exists in political, social and cultural and hegemonic relations. If we look at the line propagated by Mahesh Roy, [mui maʃan, tui maʃan, jai maʃan]মুই মাশান, তুই মাশান, জয় মাশান ‘I am Mashan, you are Mashan, hail to the Mashan god (powerful spirit), we can notice the spirit of the Rajbanshi youths for their ongoing struggle for survival and to sustain in the hegemonic relations through their indigenous cultural forms, and in this case, it is the strong cultural symbol of their own god, the powerful Mashan. Though there was a fear among the Rajbanshis that many gods and goddess and its form of worships, their own cultural tradition will be extinct because of the globalization and monopoly of dominant cultures, the Mashan god and its worshipping traditions will not be extinct in the distant future as the Rajbanshis have realized the importance of their indigenous culture. The Mashan inhabits everywhere excepting human habitats (Sanyal 1965) but it is seen that the Mashan god has expanded its territory from village or Samshan (cemetery) to household premises<sup>22</sup> and also in a larger community context.<sup>23</sup> If we look at the following line posted on Facebook page by Pritam Roy, it is clear that Mashan deity is introduced in the household premise.

**7.(a)**আমারবাড়িরমাশানঠাকুরেরফটোআপলোডকরলুং,প্রতিবছরেরনাকানএইবারেও  
আইসাআষাঢ়মাসেতমাশানপূজাধুমধামকরাইবে<sup>24</sup>[amar baʃir maʃan tʰakurer

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<sup>22</sup>See Appendix 5 (f)

<sup>23</sup>See Appendix 5 (k)

<sup>24</sup> See Appendix 5 (f)

ṛḥṭo aplodḥ kṛluṅ, ṛṭṛ bṛḥorer nakan eibareṇ aifa ṛṣarḥ maṣoḥḥ maṣan ṛṛḥa  
ḡḥum ḡḥam kṛra ḥṛibe]

“I am uploading the picture of the Mashan god which is worshipped at our home. Like every year, in the coming month of Asadh, the Mashan god will be worshipped in pomp and grandeur”.<sup>25</sup>

One of the informants Mr. Dipak Barmaninforms,

“The Mashan god, we worship, it is actually traditional and it is a century old tradition. It is a medium to promote religious and other symbols of the Rajbanshis. To say it clearly, seventy to eighty years ago, it rained 180 days in average in a year at our place. The cultivation of rice in the monsoon season is one of the main factors. People used to plant paddy sapling in the knee high watery land. To work in the field full of knee high water, one needs much energy. People used to eat flattened rice, big seeded plantain and curd so that they get more energy. It is better than eating rice. Eating flattened rice, big seeded plantain and curd is associated with energy, strength and much power. That is why to continue and sustain the energetic tradition Mashan god is worshipped. It is mandatory to offer curd and flattened rice to the Mashan deity at the time of worship. Let me say, it is one of the ingredients and there are different articles to offer to various Mashan deity. There are different types of Mashan as for example a mashan which has eyes on his chest, gor kata, mundiya (bald headed)...”<sup>26</sup>

The word Mashan is a symbol of cultural transformation and changes. The people now strongly affirm their Kshtriyahood identity. The symbol Mashan is a slogan ‘mui mashan tui mashan, joy Mashan’ (I am Mashan, you are Mashan, hail to Mashan). Mashan is our God, and we are no doubt tribes (Mahesh Roy), We are not tribes but we are Mashan. We cannot see the tribalization of Hindu culture, it is other way around. There is a belief among the Rajbanshis that if we go on challenging or disrespecting the Mashan god or other deities it will harm the people. There is no proof as such that the deities really harm the people but it is the fear of seeing the unseen, fear of the upcoming danger, disease or death that the people

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<sup>25</sup>See Appendix 5 (f)

<sup>26</sup> See Appendix -1 (iii) and Appendix 5 (a), (b), (c), (d), (e) for more details

imagine the existence of their beings, the existence of the Mashan god-their frightening forms, dreadful appearance!

The history of Hinduism in India has been dominated by such powerful pan-Indian gods as Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, who figure in religious texts in Sanskrit and are controlled and mediated by Brahmins, the religious elite of the society. The narratives of the other indigenous traditions like the Rajbanshis lacked any editorial or Brahminical control in earlier times. It is seen that the temple priests are not the main authorities who control traditional beliefs and stories relating to village deities that appear in different genres. The believers, they themselves worship their gods and goddess without priestly interventions. The Hinduism of the scriptures is different from the vernacular forms of the religion that are expressed, practiced and narrated by ordinary people and majority of them live in the countryside. The position of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva in Brahmanic theology is much more prominent than in folk narratives that express people's affection for local deities who guard their villages.

Many indigenous people were brought to the traditional caste system of the Hindu religion. Their original rituals, gods and goddesses and oral traditions were either improvised or neglected by the people who have accepted Aryanised culture and customs. As a result they were digressed from their roots. This tendency is also noticeable in the Mashan god and its worshipping traditions. There is an admixture of Hindu Aryan elements along with indigenous Non-Aryan elements. Except one or two mantras, most of the mantras and incantations used by the exorcists are in the local Rajbanshi language. The Aryans continued their strong prescriptivism in language as well as in cultural practices. They refined the cultural practices of the non-Aryans, the indigenous people of the land- they introduced Sanskrit in their ritual practices, in mantras and in incantations. The Brahmin priests were given the authority to dominate the cultural annihilation of the others. Whenever they found something powerful, a symbol of strong cultural domination, they tried to relate it to their Aryan myth and gave alternate name and justified the cultural symbol as part of the larger Aryan Hindu myth.

#### **8. Observation and Analysis**

It is not only the Rajbanshis who worship Mashan deity now-a-days, the other communities also take part in this. According to Kanu (2014), "In a post-modern condition of society, the little narratives like Masan is working as a means to form a coherent class for getting into power. It is helping to draw people together, stretches its sense of community across class and beyond." Kanu (2014) adds, "It has created a kind of hegemony

in the dominant society with sense of pride and ethnicity and thus this little narrative Masan has got a coherence in incoherence to getting a meaning of celebration”.Dipak Barman informs that the worship and rituals of Mashan deity have changed and now-a-days one needs “to invite a Brahmin to worship Mashan” which were earlier performed by the local priests Adhikary and elder members of the family.<sup>27</sup>

Mashan is believed to be very strong, awakening, violent, most dreadful and dangerous of all spirits. After the Aryanization, Mashan god is not only restricted to the Rajbanshis or Koch Rajbanshis of North Bengal and Assam, it also became a powerful cultural symbol of transformation for the community and some non-Rajbanshis also started taking part in the much wider community celebration. Recently, Mashan god also got its sacred shrine from outskirts of the village to inside the house premise {See Appendix 5 (f)}, and it also became a prestigious cultural symbol for the self and the community. It is believed that Mashan will protect the fellow Rajbanshis from the impending cultural annihilation in the age of globalization {See Appendix 5 (h), (i), (j), (k)}. The prevailing belief of the Rajbanshis is manifested in the following line;

(i) যদিমনতথাকেশাশানপূরণহইবেসবমুশকিলআসান<sup>28</sup> [ɔɔɔi monoɔ tʰake maʃan puron hoibe job muʃkil aʃan]

“If you keep Mashan god in heart, all the problems and difficulties will become easier”

(ii) (a) [ɔɔe maʃan] জয়শাশান ‘hail to Mashan’; (b) [ɔɔe maʃan baba] জয়শাশানবাবা ‘hail to Mashan god’ (c) [ɔɔe maʃan d̪eɔ] জয়শাশানদেও ‘hail to the powerful spirit’

Some Rajbanshi folks now proudly address one another as Mashan, See example (i), they do not hesitate to proclaim themselves as members of Mashan Gang or Mashan Associations, See examples (ii), (iii) and they keep one another updated and encourage to be strong and powerful like the Mashan, See examples (iv), (v), (vi), (vii);

(iii) সবরাজবংশীশাশানগিলাকজানাংমোরহিয়াভরাভালোবাসা, জলুয়ামাশানআরটশামা শানহওয়াছাড়াআরকাহোবোধায়কোনোউপায়নাই<sup>29</sup> [ɔɔb rajbɔŋɔi maʃan gilak janɔ]

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<sup>27</sup>See Appendix 1 (i)

<sup>28</sup>See Appendix 5 (d)

<sup>29</sup>Kamalendu Barman, Mashan Association, 20<sup>th</sup> July 2012

mor hia b<sup>h</sup>ora b<sup>h</sup>alobafa, ꠆lua ma꠆an ar ꠆꠆a ma꠆an hooa c<sup>h</sup>a꠆a ar kaho bo꠆<sup>h</sup>ay kono upae nai]

“I would like to give my respect and love from the bottom of heart to all the Rajbanshi Mashans. There are no ways except to be deaf and burnt in the present society!”

(iv) (a) [ma꠆an gæŋ] মাশানগ্যাং ‘We are gangs of Mashan’(b) Mashan Associations (Facebook page)

(v)[mui ma꠆an ꠆ui ma꠆an ꠆æ ma꠆an]মুইমাশানতুইমাশানজয়মাশান‘ I am Mashan, You are Mashan, hail to Mashan!’”

(vi) [mafane꠆ nak<sup>h</sup>an b<sup>h</sup>oyoŋkər ar ꠆ək꠆꠆ali hoo]মাশানেরনাখানভয়ঙ্করআরশক্তিশালীহও ‘You need to be dreadful and strong like Mashan’

(vii) [꠆ago ma꠆an ꠆ago]জাগোমাশানজাগো‘be awake and get up from your slumber (Mashan).<sup>30</sup>

Can it be said that Mashan is the local folk deity of the tribal community of Indo-mongoloid origin? The affirmative answer to the question may hurt the sentiments of many Rajbanshis who consider themselves as Kshatriyas following Kshtriyasation movements led by the Raysaheb Panchanan Barma in the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Rajbanshis of North Bengal will vouch for their Kshatriya Identity and many of them already Aryanised Mashan idol, its worshipping traditions and articles for worships. According to Kanu (2014), “The subculture of Masan has a continuum value. The Masan devotee perform rituals traditionally without any break in continuity. The structure of it though transmitted from one generation to the next and every generation adds, subtracts and change what it inherits originally. It is constructed according to the time and place and accordingly it gets a kind of socialization within the periphery”. He continues to add that “Masan does not have any kind of fixed grand narrative so it gets its position outside of the class and consequently believer and performer of the Masan rituals are fallen under the discourse of subculture.”

It is clear from the above examples (i-vii) and discussion that how the young generation motivate and encourage one another by addressing them as Mashan. They have also formed various groups as for example Mashan Gang or Mashan Associations. By invoking the powerful Mashan they

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<sup>30</sup>Samarjit Barman, Mashan Association 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2020



want to generate a strong powerful feeling and courage among the community youths to address various social and cultural problems. In many places, the Rajbanshi folks realized the significance of their indigenous culture and cultural symbol, and in order to save and protect it, they built concrete temples of Mashan god in various places of North Bengal, and they started worshipping it which widely became a matter of much needed community celebration (See Appendix 5 (h), (i), (j), (k), (l) (m).

## **9. Conclusion**

We cannot reach out to a conclusion regarding the genesis of the powerful Mashan deity or Mashan Thakur or Mashan Deo. We cannot also candidly claim that Mashan is a water deity or an evil spirit or a forest deity. Since the Rajbanshis did not have a written tradition and as we all know oral tradition varies from one place to another. The Mashan god also varies from one place to another and depending on the socio-historical and geographical and local conditions it also developed its own forms and appearances. In some places, it is regarded as powerful benevolent god and in other places, it still remains as an spirit or a demon who tortures people for various pretext in order get its puja (worship).

As the indigenous Koch-Rajbanshis are displaced from their mainland, they are scattered in different parts of North Bengal, Assam, Bihar, Bangladesh and Nepal likewise the Mashan god is also displaced from their homelands. There are several reasons; advancement of communication system, increase of population density, destruction of forest; and use of infertile and lowland areas into human habitats, introduction of electrical pyre and advancement of modern technology and medicines etc, the belief in the socalled Mashan god/deity has reduced among the Rajbanshis. However, the Rajbanshis found their strength in their cultural symbols and in order to revive and protect it, they have started worshipping Mashan god with pomp and grandeur. It is a very strong powerful cultural symbol among the Rajbanshis and Time will tell us how this symbol unfolds in the future either through cultural assimilation or through cultural annihilation!

### **Acknowledgements:**

I would like to thank all the people who directly and indirectly helped me to collect information for this study. Without mentioning a few names, this work would be incomplete; they are Hemanta Roy, Dipak Barman, Prosenjit Barman, M. C. Roy, Rajen Barman, Dibyendhu Adhikary, Pritam Roy, Mahesh Roy, Sankar Koch Rajbanshi, Shyamal Roy and Subhash

Ray, Chiranjit Dakua. Shyamal Roy, Prashant Prosun, Dilip Barma, Amitabh Ranjan Kanu and a few others.

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## Appendices

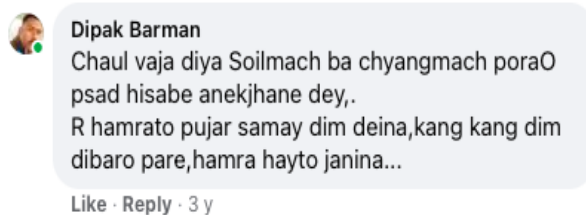
### Appendix 1 (i) Comments of Dipak Barman, Facebook Page Hari Madhab Ray, 9<sup>th</sup> September 2018 <https://www.facebook.com/harimadhab.ray/> Dipak Barman

Mui kayta Mashan thakurer nam janong-ketaora mashan, galakata mashan, jaleya mashan, muriya mashan, garkata. Mashan,uttarbanger nam kra mashan gosanimarir jhanjhani mashan,Pujat nage -aatiya kla,pach dhongol doichira r nage dhak,sanai,ful,tulsi,dhupdhuna ,4ta maroya,ghat pachta,guyapan,chailon,sendurrer puriya,saluk, mala,belpat sadasuta, r deoya khay pata, koitor R bamon aani puja khay...

(I know some names of the Mashan God; kyataora Mashan, Galakata Mashan, Jaleya Mashan, Muriya Mashan, Garkata Mashan. The very popular and strongest among them is the Jhanjhani Mashan of Gosanimari. It is very famous in North Bengal. The ingredients and articles for worship are- are big seeded Plantain, five plates of curd and flattened rice, drum, Sahnai, flower, basil leaves, incense and incense sticks, four pieces banana sapling, five pieces of small pitcher, nut-betel, a

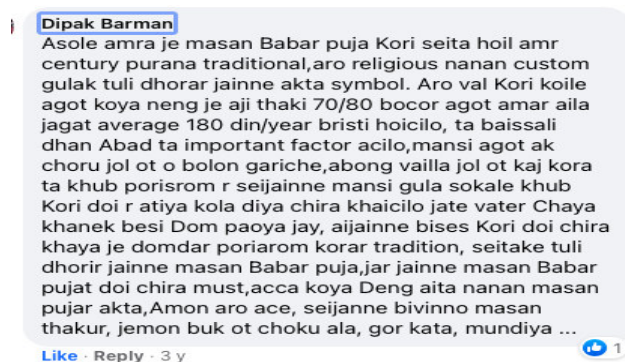
small bamboo plate for worship, a packet of vermilion, a piece of red clothes (napkin), garland, wood apple leaves, white cotton. In addition, one may sacrifice a he-goat or a pigeon and a Brahmin has to be called to worship Mashan.)

**Appendix 1 (ii), Comments of Dipak Barman, Facebook Page Hari Madhab Ray, 9<sup>th</sup> September 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/harimadhab.ray/>**



Many people offer roasted rice along with half burnt Jogar fish (big headed snake fish) or small headed black snake fish as offerings to Mashan god. We do not offer egg during the Puja. Some people may offer it but it is not known to us.

**Appendix 1 (iii)Comments of Dipak Barman, Facebook Page Hari Madhab Ray, 9<sup>th</sup> September 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/harimadhab.ray/>**



The Mashan god, we worship, it is actually old traditional and century old . It is a medium to promote religious and other symbols of the Rajbanshis. To say it clearly, seventy to eighty years ago, it rained more 180 days in average in a year at our place. The cultivation of rice in the monsoon season is one of the main factors. People used to plant paddy sapling in the knee high watery land. To work in the field full of knee high water, one needs much energy. People used to eat flattened rice, big seeded plantain and curd so that they get more energy. It is better than eating rice. Eating flattened rice, big seeded plantain and curd is associated with energy, strength and much power. That is why to continue and sustain the energetic tradition Mashan god is worshipped. It is mandatory to

offer curd and flattened rice to the Mashan deity at the time of worship. Let me say, it is one of the ingredients and there are different articles to offer to various Mashan deity. There are different types of Mashan as for example a mashan which has eyes on his chest, gor kata, mundiya (bald headed)...

**Appendix 2, Comments of M.C. Roy, Facebook Page Hari Madhab Ray, 9<sup>th</sup> September 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/harimadhab.ray/>**

M.c. Roy Mui jeta janong Haser dimao kintu masan pujor ekena mul upadan.

(What I know, even duck egg is one of the main ingredients of Mashan worship)—  
M.C. Roy

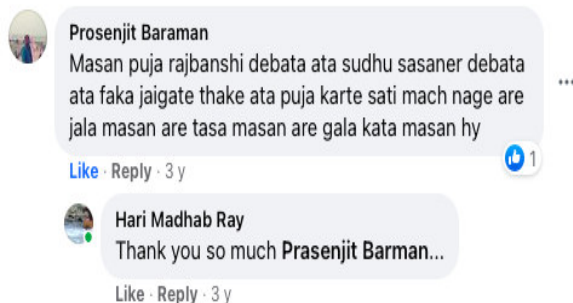
**Appendix 3, Comments of Hemanta Roy, Facebook page Hari Madhab Ray, 9<sup>th</sup> September 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/harimadhab.ray/>**

Hemanta Roy:  
মাশান অনেকটা অপদেবতা মাশানের স্থান ফাঁকাজাগাত কুরার পারত অনেক জাগাত অনেকনা মেরমাশান আছে। তবে মোরবাড়ির বগলোত যে মাশান আছে উয়ার নাম টা মাশান। একবার হামারবাড়িত কাজ করাকাকাটা কধরিছিল কাকাটা তখন কিছুই শুনে না। তখন বৈদ্য ও ঝাধরি যাজানিলোং কাকাক কুরার পারের মাশান ধরিছে। তা বৈদ্য ও ঝাক পুছিলোং এলাকি করাখাইবে। ও ঝাক ইলেক মাশানোক মানত করিয়া পূজাদিবার নাগিবে। হামরা পুছিলোং পূজাতকি কিনা গিবে, ও ঝাক ইলেক দই চিঁড়া আটিকলাদিয়া পূজাদিবার নাগিবে, আর একটা শূর বলিদিবার নাগিবে। ঐভাবেই পূজাদিলোং এটা তাতা ও ত্রিশবত্রিশ বছর আগেকার কথা। এলাকাকাভালে আছে, এলা প্রত্যেক বছর বছর টা মাশানের পূজা হয়। কিন্তু শূর বলি হয় না কাং মানত করিলে সেইবার শূর বলি হয়। নাহইলে দই চিঁড়া মিঠাই আটিকলাদিয়া প্রত্যেক বছর বছর টা মাশানের পূজা হয়।

(Mashan is an evil God. Mashan stays in a desolate place, in water body stream, deep lake (KuRa). Different types of Mashan is found. But near my place, a Mashan named Tasha Mashan (mute) is there. Once, Tasha Mashan possessed one of our uncles who used to work at our home. The uncle could not hear anything. Then we consulted the ojha (Tantrik) who told us that the Mashan near the whole has possessed our uncle. When we asked Ojha what shall we do for his treatment, the ojha told us we need to pray and worship the Mashan. We asked him, what are the ingredients for puja (worship)? The ojha replied, the ingredients are; curd, flattened rice, plantain and a pig has to be sacrificed. Following the Ojha, we did it as it is advised by him. Thirty or thirty years have passed by since it happened. Now, our uncle is doing well. In every year, Tasha Mashan is worshiped in pomp and grandeur but pig sacrifice is not done. In special occasion, if someone promises

Mashan, then a pig sacrificed. Otherwise, curd, flattened rice, plantain are given at the worship of Tasha Mashan)

**Appendix-4, Comments of Prosenjit Barman, Facebook page Hari Madhab Ray, 9<sup>th</sup> September 2018 <https://www.facebook.com/harimadhab.ray/>**



The Rajbanshis worship Mashan. It is a god of cemetery. It dwells in a desolate place. To worship Mashan god one needs [ʃaʃi macʰ] শাটিমাছ 'a medium snake headed fish'. There are different types of Mashan as for example [ʃola maʃan] জলামাশান, [tɔʃa maʃan] টসামাশান, [gala kaʃa maʃan] গলাকাটা মাশান.

**Appendix-5: Types of Mashan, pictures and sources**

**Mashan types**

(a)  
Machuya  
Mashan

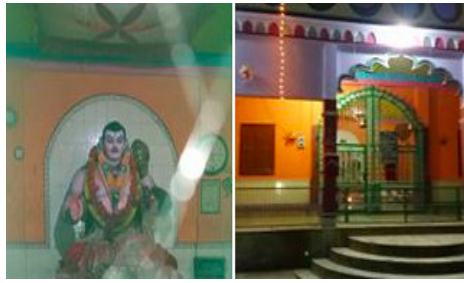
**Pictures**



**Source**

Dibyendu  
Adhikary,  
Mashan  
Association, 4<sup>th</sup>  
February, 2015,  
Toshi Kata Power  
house

(b)  
Garh  
Kata  
Mashan



Dilip Barma,  
Alokjhari,  
Dinhata, 5<sup>th</sup>  
November, 2017

(c)  
Godeya  
Mashan



Rajen Barman,  
Mashan  
Association, 10<sup>th</sup>  
August 2015

(d)  
Muriya  
Mashan



Mahesh Roy,  
Mashan  
Association, 4<sup>th</sup>  
May 2012,  
Tufanganj

Muriya  
Mashan

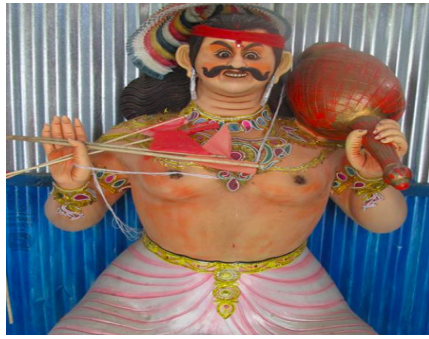


Sankar Koch  
Rajbanshi, 7<sup>th</sup>  
February 2019 in  
Mashan  
Association

Kamakhyaguri,  
Nayarhat  
Chiranjit Dakua,  
27<sup>th</sup> June 2017



(e)Sadh  
aron  
Mashan  
;  
Dhaola  
Mashan



Mahesh Roy,  
Mashan  
Association, 11<sup>th</sup>  
May 2012

(f)  
Mashan  
worshi  
pped in  
house  
premise



Pritam Roy,  
Gorufela,  
Gossaingaon,  
Kokrajhar,  
Assam, 1<sup>st</sup> July  
2017

(g)  
Mashan  
and  
Coconu  
t(ghot)



Rajen Barman,  
12<sup>th</sup> May, 2017 in  
Mashan  
Association





Rajen Barman,  
12<sup>th</sup> May, 2017 in  
Mashan  
Association

(h)  
Mashan  
and  
Comm  
unity  
celebrat  
ion



Shyamal Roy, 13<sup>th</sup>  
November 2019  
in Mashan  
Association

(i)

Concrete temple of Mashaan God



Uttarbanga Sambad 15<sup>th</sup> January 2022

(j) Local News channel - hamar khabar coverage on Mashaan



Hamar Khabar, 21<sup>st</sup> December 2019 in Mashaan Association

(k) Mashan puja, community celebration



Shyamal Roy, 1<sup>st</sup> February 2020—  
Ex MP Partha Pratim Ray in inaugural ceremony

(l) Mashan puja for the well-being of Mr. Atul Ray



Dotora-sarinda, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2021—In Mashan Associations

(m) Discussion on Mashan as a tribal deity

MASAN HOIL ADIBASI GHARER DEBOTA... AMRALA KI ADIBASI...

[Spandan Anuraag Barman](#) kay koil tomak mashan adibashir ghorer debota?

[Mahesh Roy](#) mui mashan ,tui mashan . JOY MASHAN.

[Spandan Anuraag Barman](#) prasanta bahe. Mashan ta amar loukik devota.. [Mahesh Roy](#) MASHAN HAMARE DBOTA .HAMRA NISCHOY ADIBASI NAHOY

Prasanta Prosun, 20<sup>th</sup> April, 2012, Mashan Associations