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**Dr. Karuna Kanta Kakati**



विद्ये वेद्ये परापरे

**ANUNDORAM BOROOAH INSTITUTE OF  
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## *Words from the Desk of the Director.....*

विद्या नाम नरस्य रूपमधिकं प्रच्छन्नगुप्तं घनम्।

विद्या भोगकरी यशःसुखकरी विद्या गुरुणां गुरुः॥

(नीतिशतकम्)

It is a matter of great pleasure and privilege that Anundoram Borooah Institute of Language, Art and Culture ( ABILAC), Assam is going to publish the fifteenth volume of its UGC - CARE annual research journal Anandam on the auspices 176th birthday of the great Sanskrit Scholar of Assam Anundoram Borooah . This volume, as per the mandate of the Institute has been dedicated to highlight various dimensions of culture in general and the culture of the North East India in particular. It is known to all that Purvottar Bharat, with its typical geographical configuration, constitutes a vibrant cultural landscape showcasing linguistic variations, varied ecological wisdom, vivid performative customs, iconic medicinal practices and a unique kind of religious beliefs. It is a landmass with a deep confluence of history, language, art and culture. The life in this area still vibrates its close connection with the nature and its grave principles that evoke the muse of the famous Vedic axiom माता भूमिः पुत्रोऽहं पृथिव्याः। Thus the theme of the present volume of Anandam has been conceived with an idea of projecting the multidimensional intellectual parameters of the society and culture of the North East part of Bharat. This way the present volume has also been trying to relocate the intensive Indian traditional coherence that binds the bases together. Thus the research in this area remains effective for excavating the sparks of Indian Knowledge System anyway. Moreover, the study all over may unearth the areas that needs immediate protection and preservation in the archival trajectories.

Thus, the present volume of Anandam with its bilingual representation is surely going to etch an additional mosaic in the existing cognitive repository and I believe, it will help the researchers to explore deeper in their concerned fields. The present volume comprises thirty research articles of multifaceted thematic representation mostly written in English and a very view furnished in Assamese. My words fall short to express my gratitude to Dr. Karuna Kanta

Kakati, Associate Professor, Deptt. of Culture, Art and Music, ABILAC, who as the Editor of this volume, ran from pillar to the post for materialising ABILAC's practice of releasing its annual journal on the birthday of Anundoram Borooah every year. Even after meeting with a severe accident a couple of days before that broke his right shoulder and left elbow, Dr. Kakati showed his courage to complete the academic task with zeal and expertise. The entire ABILAC family will remain grateful to him in this regard. ABILAC believes in team work. So, the present volume is going to see the light of the day because each and every member of the Institute has discharged their respective duties with passion and perseverance. I take this opportunity to convey my note of thanks and gratitude to all of them. I offer special thanks to the members of the Editorial board of the Anandam. My sincere gratitude is being conveyed through my words to all the reviewers who took pain in examining the research articles adjusting time within their busy schedule. The contributors are the backbone of any academic venture. So, it is needless to say that the present volume is the result of their endeavour and enthusiasm. I will remain grateful to all the contributors and hope to see the practical use of each and every write up someday or other. My sincere gratitude is also due to the proprietor and the associates of Bhabani press for undertaking the pain of printing this issue within a very short period.

Let me conclude with the invocation of the Vedic prayer”

“सं वो मनांसि जानताम्”।

*Sudeshna Bhattacharya*

सुदेशा भट्टाचार्य

Director, ABILAC

18.05.2026

## Editorial

The Journal “*Anandam, Journal of Anundaram Borooh Institute of Language, Art and Culture*” has been published by the *Anundaram Borooh Institute of Language, Art and Culture (ABILAC)*, Assam, since 1992. This is the 15<sup>th</sup> Vol of this journal, and 14 issues have been published successfully with high academic repute. The research journal *Anandam*, by nature, is multidisciplinary, so it focuses on research results in the humanities and social sciences. Humanities and social sciences are interconnected academic disciplines focused on human culture, society and behaviour. While the humanities study the human experience using analytical, critical and speculative methods, the social sciences rely more heavily on empirical and statistical research to examine societal structures and interactions. Humanities include academic disciplines such as history, literature and languages, philosophy, religion/theology, visual and performing arts, etc. Likewise, the social sciences include folklore, sociology, psychology, political science, economics, anthropology, and human geography, etc.

The journal *Anandam* focuses on the indigenous language, art and culture of North-East India, in particular, and of other parts of the country in general. North-East India is a milieu of distinct ethnic groups with their own languages, folklore, art, and culture. The journal primarily focuses on the above-mentioned issues by conducting research, publishing, validating, and disseminating knowledge, and by achieving high-quality, original scholarly findings.

The journal *Anandam* is a bilingual research journal published in both Assamese and English. This is a peer-reviewed UGC Care Index journal; the selection procedure for research articles must adhere to certain rules and regulations. Accordingly, we have to review the articles from external reviewers (experts) and seek their approval regarding the article’s eligibility for publication in the journal. We have received more than 70 research articles from scholars

across the country, but the experts have selected only 30 for publication. Among them, only 2 articles are in Assamese.

The Earlier volumes of the journal have been warmly accepted by the scholars within India and abroad. We hope, this volume will also get the same response from the readers and scholars in their respective field of academia. The scholars who have contributed to this volume of the journal deserve our gratitude for painstakingly preparing their papers. I, on behalf of editorial board of this journal would like to extend my gratitude to our reviewers for their part of valuable contribution to bringing out this issue of the journal. I am also grateful to the editorial team for their valuable assistance to bringing out the journal. I am also thankful to all the members of the office staff of ABILAC as well as members of the Bhabani Offset & Imaging Systems Pvt. Ltd for their help. Last but not the least, I offer my extreme gratefulness to the Director of ABILAC, Prof. Sudeshna Bhattacharjya without her positive and constant support, it will not be possible to bringing out this volume of journal on time. Once again, I am grateful to you. I am also thankful to all persons who directly or indirectly involve in this issue of the journal.

With Regards



(Karuna Kanta Kakati)

Editor, *Anandam*

18.05.2026

## Contents

1. Vernacular Objects: Assamese and Khasi Material Culture in Two Novels from Northeast India  
|| *Akash Borchetia, Meena Sharma* || 1
2. Gendered Archetypes and Cultural Worldview in the Santal Folk Narratives  
|| *Latika Das, Professor Anil Kumar Boro* || 11
3. Languages as Repositories of Traditional Knowledge Systems of North-East India with Special Reference to Arunachal Pradesh  
|| *Amarjyoti Doley* || 23
4. An Ethnolinguistic Study of Weaving and Textile Imagery as Reflected in Bihu Songs  
|| *Rijushna Gogoi* || 36
5. Festivals and Ceremonies in North-East India: A Bibliometric Analysis of Scholarly Trends (1990–2025)  
|| *Nishant Kashyap Ghatowar, Jitumoni Das* || 47
6. Folk beliefs and practices among the Mishing community of Assam  
|| *Anup Hazarika* || 71
7. Exploring The Traditional Religious Festivals and Ceremonies of The Tai-Buddhist Communities of North East India  
|| *Ripunjoy Sonowal* || 77
8. Folk Culture And The Rāmāyaṇa Tradition In Assam  
|| *Champak Deka* || 89
9. Costume, Community, and Continuity: A Historical Reading of Koch Rajbongshi Attire  
|| *Tapesh Doley, Mousumi Rajbangshi* || 99

10. Culinary Practices of Assam's Subaltern Culture in Assamese Novels: A Subaltern Historiographical Analysis (With Special Reference to the Novels of Arupa Patangia Kalita and Dhruva Jyoti Borah)  
|| *Kriparekha Gogoi, Arabinda Rajkhowa* || 107
11. Ethnolinguistic Study of Mog  
|| *Niloy Chakraborty, S. Indrakumar Singh* || 118
12. Assam Sadri As An Industry Vernacular: Understanding Unity, Identity and Network Through Language Use  
|| *Suranjana Barua, Porixita Kakoty* || 134
13. The Devadasi dance Tradition of Assam : Tracing Its Historical Roots, Cultural Significance and Ritual-Sacred Dimensions  
|| *Suman Bhuyan, Preetima Gogoi* || 148
14. Foodways and Cultural Identity: Traditional Culinary Practices of the Tai Ahom Community of Assam  
|| *Ananya Saikia* || 159
15. Reclaiming The Royal Dragon: Symbol, Cultural Constrction and Ethnic Identity Among The Tai-Ahoms of Assam  
|| *Anupal Saikia* || 174
16. Transformation of Folk Culture of Tai-Ahom in New Media: An Analysis  
|| *Sehnaz Begum* || 184
17. Changing Patterns of *Khring Khring Baitho Puja* Among the Sonowal Kacharis of Assam: A Comparative Study in Rural and Urban Contexts  
|| *Saepha Swamma* || 192
18. A Study of the Symbolism in the Selected Poems of Anju  
|| *Jewsnrang Basumatary, Pranab Jyoti Narzary* || 202
19. Beliefs and Practices of Tiwa Community of North East India and the Influencing Factors: An Overview  
|| *Amrita Mishra, Sujay Kumar Mandal* || 219
20. Lyrical Lamentation Song: A Comparative Analysis of Assamese Zari with Islamic Elegiac Poems or Songs  
|| *Rakibur Rohman* || 226
21. Coalfields as "Contact Zones": Language, Migration and Miner Solidarity in Margherita and Ledo  
|| *Kaushik Dutta* || 236

22. Analysing Assamese Historical Ballads (*Nahoror Geet and Maniram Dewanor Geet*) for the Construction and Comparison of Folk Culture Across Two Time Periods  
|| *Runjun Devi* || 246
23. Myth and Memory as Cultural Archive: Rewriting Indigenous Folklore in Contemporary North-East Indian English Literature  
|| *Mridusmita Boro* || 258
24. Folklore and Ethnic Assertion in Colonial Assam: Bihu Song in the Construction of Assamese Selfhood and Othering  
|| *Leenasri Gogoi* || 269
25. Performers at the Interstices: Liminal Social Status and Ritual Authority among the Kamrupia Dhulia Communities  
|| *Shantanu Parashar* || 282
26. Influence of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata on the Life of the Gorkha Community with Special Reference to North-East India  
|| *Dr. Lalit Shrestha* || 289
27. Sacred Speech and Devotional Identity: Linguistic Practices in the *Satra* Tradition of Assam  
|| *Chayanika Dutta* || 301
28. Print Nationalism and Civic Activism in Colonial Tezpur Town of Assam in the Early Twentieth Century  
|| *Koustabh Jyoti Goswami, Parasmoni Dutta* || 310
29. টোকাৰী গীত আৰু উমাকান্ত বৈৰাগী  
|| *হীৰকজ্যোতি শৰ্মা* || 319
30. বংবং তেৰাঙৰ 'জাক হেৰোৱা পক্ষী'ত প্ৰতিফলিত গোস্বামী সংঘৰ্ষ  
|| *বৰষা ডেকা* || 326



# Vernacular Objects: Assamese and Khasi Material Culture In Two Novels from Northeast India

Akash Borchetia<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Meena Sharma<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

This paper offers a critical reading of two novels from Northeast India namely *Funeral Nights* by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and *Noi Boi Jai* by Dr. Lila Gogoi to examine the rich material cultures of the Khasi and Assamese communities that the texts document. In indigenous societies, objects often carry deep social and cultural meanings, functioning not only as everyday tools but also as cultural symbols and repositories of memory and identity. The making and use of material artifacts reflect the skills, aesthetic sensibilities, and living conditions of a community, shaped by its land and ecological environment. Through material culture as a point of entry, the paper explores what the Khasi and Assamese communities have in common, while also drawing attention to differences in the ways objects are handled and valued in ordinary life and in festive contexts.

**Keywords:** Material Culture, Indigenous, Objects, Northeast India

## Introduction

In his book *Understanding Material Culture*, Ian Woodward mentions that “the term ‘material culture’ emphasizes how apparently inanimate things within the environment act on people, and are acted upon by people, for the purposes of carrying out social functions, regulating social relations and giving symbolic

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meaning to human activity” (Woodward, 2007, p. 3). Woodward’s definition underscores how human culture is lived through material objects. Material culture names the embeddedness of human beings in a world of material stuff, which not only gives meaning to, but makes possible our social existence. The study of material culture has gained momentum in recent years in different branches of humanities and social sciences. The material turn<sup>1</sup> in humanities, invigorated by approaches such as posthumanism and new materialism, has made the term “materiality” a frequent referent in academic discourse. When applied to material culture, these approaches have called forth a terminological openness, which suggests that material culture can be inclusive of materialities that we as living beings are affected and surrounded by: bodily matters, ecosystems and technological structures etc.

Material culture, or human beings’ cultural association with material objects, has been a persistent element of human society since ancient times. Unlike ideas or norms, material culture is physical and enduring. In indigenous societies, objects bear important symbolic meaning alongside their pragmatic social importance. Indigeneity and material culture are interconnected terms. Tools, art, clothing and housing etc embody the unique identities, knowledge systems and relationships of indigenous communities with their environmental locations. Indigenous crafts, clothing and food practices give an insight into a community’s belief systems, their survival strategies and lifestyle, all of which contribute to the formation of its *habitus*.<sup>2</sup>

Northeast India has a rich and diverse cultural spectrum that comprises multiple tribal and indigenous cultural expressions. The region is widely recognized for the richness and diversity of its material traditions, shaped by the presence of numerous communities and societies, each with its own historical practices, social structures and cultural aesthetics. Material culture in the region cannot be understood as a single unified tradition but rather as a complex field of lived cultural expression rooted in community life. Eminent folklorist of Assam Dr. Birendranath Datta observes that Northeast India has “great diversity in terms of physical features, such as natural scenery, flora and fauna, soil quality, weather conditions and so on, making for corresponding

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1 The ‘material turn’ refers to the renewed emphasis in the humanities and social sciences on matter, objects and material practices as active components of social and cultural life, rather than treating them as passive background. See Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics* (2010), and Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (2010).

2 Pierre Bourdieu uses the term *habitus* to describe the system of durable and transposable dispositions through which individuals perceive, judge and act in the social world. Formed through lived experience and social conditions, *habitus* links embodied practices to broader structures of class and culture. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

diversity in the material culture of the inhabitants” (Datta, 2012, p. 3). Cultural production develops in direct conversation with environmental contexts due to which material practices often reflect adaptation, sustainability and intimate knowledge of local ecology.

This paper attempts a critical reading of two novels from Northeast India namely, *Funeral Nights* (2021) by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, and *Noi Boi Jai* (1983) by Dr. Lila Gogoi, aiming at an analysis of the rich material culture of Assamese and Khasi people that the two novels represent. Both the novels operate almost like documentaries of their respective indigenous cultures that they depict. The novel *Funeral Nights* by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, is a story of the journey of a group of friends from Shillong to a remote location in the West Khasi Hills of Meghalaya, with an intention to witness a six-day-long funeral ceremony called *Ka Phor Sorat* which is practiced by a Khasi sub-tribe known as the Lyngngams. The novel mimics the narrative structure of Giovanni Boccaccio’s *The Decameron* and *The Arabian Nights* to tell stories that reflect the Khasi community, in and out—their history, myths, culture, contemporary politics, society and outsiders’ perspectives on them. *Funeral Nights* is an honest attempt by Nongkynrih to encapsulate the past and present of a community which occupies a marginal position in the mainstream narratives of history. The novel *Noi Boi Jai* by Dr. Lila Gogoi also offers a vivid portrayal of Assamese cultural life. The novel describes the story of a man named Bhagirath Phukan, his family and its generational transformations unfolding amidst the rubric of Assamese ethnic life, with its colorful traditions and customs, highlighting their impact on the characters and their relationships. The language of the novel is Assamese and the translations of the quoted lines are my own.

Material culture functions as the backbone of indigenous cultures as it is connected to the questions of livelihood, sustenance and strategies of survival in their ethnic environment. The two novels selected for this study describe both the “everyday” and the festive modes of living in two different regions of Northeast India. The everyday and the festive are two different but interrelated conditions of life that a community experiences. In the first volume of his *Critique of Everyday Life*, Henry Lefebvre compared rural French festivals with the idea of the everyday. He mentioned that the “festival differed from everyday life only in the explosion of forces which had been slowly accumulated in and via everyday life itself. (Lefebvre, 1990, p. 202). Festivals are specific outbursts of energies culturally produced in a community over time as they navigate the course of everyday life. In studying Northeast Indian cultural life, the relationship between the two conditions is immensely helpful as it brings out an overall picture of the lifestyle of an ethnic community, covering the idiosyncrasies of both the peculiar and the quotidian. This paper will make use of the conceptual leverage that these two conditions provide which the novels selected rightly exemplify. From a methodological point of view, this paper draws on the academic field

of material culture studies<sup>3</sup>. It also makes use of the ideas of Henry Lefebvre in contrasting the notions of “everyday” and the “festive” which he discussed in his work *Critique of Everyday Life, Vol 1*. Moreover, the phrase “vernacular objects” is being used to refer to the objects that belong to the everyday material world of a particular local community and arise from its own traditions, needs and cultural practices rather than from formal, elite or industrial design.

### **Material Culture in Everyday Life**

The everyday in traditional ethnic societies is a dense, meaningful field of life where work, community, nature and culture are closely intertwined. Objects have a vital role in this context as the everyday is lived through things. The production method of indigenous artifacts and their politics of usage also represent the skills, aesthetic senses, and societal norms that a community possesses. In the novel *Noi Boi Jai*, we see elaborate descriptions of material objects that are intrinsic to Assamese cultural life. The novel is set in a fictional Assamese village called Senduripam and portrays the folk culture and everyday life of its inhabitants. It attempts to record the cultural history of an entire century in an Assamese village through the life-story of the central character Bhagirath, tracing his journey from childhood to old age. The narrative shows how he navigates his life amidst the cultural politics of Assamese society, which shapes each stage of his existence through its moral codes, values and expectations. Alongside Bhagirath, other major characters include his mother and his wives, Suwagi and Naduki, whose lives are also deeply formed by traditional customs, rituals and social standards. The novel foregrounds the powerful role of material objects in indigenous societies, showing how they are deeply entangled with discourses of social class, gender and aesthetics. For instance, one particular scene of the novel depicts a moment in which the narrator’s mother, a widow, hesitates over whether to gift her daughter-in-law the jewelry she no longer wears. The scene is narrated by the son, who observes this tense atmosphere between his mother and his newly wedded wife, Suwagi, who comes from a poor family:

Suwagi comes from an impoverished household. How could she possibly have owned so many ornaments? Now she is the daughter-in-law of the Boro Phukan family. It does not suit her to remain empty-necked and bare-eared. Mother stood silently by her trunk, touching and examining the gold jewelry inside. The Gejera, the Junbiri, the Dugdugi—she took each piece out, checked them once or twice, and then placed them back again. Perhaps in that moment, she could not bring herself to offer them. (Gogoi, 2022, p. 116)

3 Material Culture studies is an interdisciplinary field concerned with the social and cultural meanings of objects, emphasizing how material things are not merely passive items of use but are deeply involved in shaping everyday life, identity, memory and social relations. See Daniel Miller, *Why Some Things Matter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) and Ian Woodward, *Understanding Material Culture* (London: Sage Publications, 2007)

The scene shows how material objects such as jewelry are deeply tied to gender politics and social identity in Assamese cultural life. Gendered expectations often dictate the aesthetics of personal appearance and human relations with material objects. Veronica Strang mentions: “everyday objects carry gendered associations and are often influenced by homologous ideas about gender” (Strang, 2022, p. 332). In the novel, the widow-mother’s hesitation reveals how women’s access to ornaments is shaped by patriarchal customs. Jewelry becomes a form of femininity which is passed down through rituals and obligation rather than personal freedom. Apart from the gender polemics, however, the scene also stresses the value and symbolic respect that the mentioned ornaments carry in Assamese cultural tradition. *Gejera*, *Junbiri*, and *Dugdugi* are traditional ornaments or “vernacular objects” worn by Assamese women, which are gradually disappearing under the impact of modernity.

The novel *Noi Boi Jai* presents a portrait of some of the major aspects of Assamese cultural life. It shows how Assamese people’s religious, economic, and social activities are mediated through the traditional interactions with materiality. Material objects such as ornaments, textiles and food items play a central role in shaping Assamese life. The practice of clothing is deeply embedded in Assamese society, where the preparation and wearing of traditional dress form an important part of both daily life and festive occasions. The novel often records the character Suwagi’s inner emotional states through scenes of her weaving at the loom. At one point, she becomes deeply anxious about the possibility of her husband taking a second wife, and her worry makes her unable to concentrate on her work. She observes: “A set of warp and weft was ready on the loom. Yet I don’t feel like taking the *Mako* (shuttle) in my hand. The thread breaks, it snags while being tied together. The shuttle just keeps falling down<sup>4</sup>.” (Gogoi, 2022, p. 46). The scene shows the relation of materiality with the emotional states of human beings. Suwagi’s identity and emotional state in the novel are affected by the material-cultural environment in which she is involved. In the work *Material Feminisms*, Stacy Alaimo imagines human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world (Alaimo, 2008). The materiality of the handloom in this scene becomes a medium that makes palpable Suwagi’s emotional states and fashions her as an embodied, gendered subject.

The novel *Funeral Nights* by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih also provides a vibrant picture of Khasi woman’s association with textiles and the aesthetics of attire. The novel is a rich tapestry of Khasi folklore, history, culture, myths and identity undergoing transformation. The novel narrates the story of its central character Ap Jutang and his friends taking part in a festival called *Ka Phor Sorat* (Feast of the Dead) held in a remote part of Meghalaya. *Funeral Nights* offers a vivid insight into both the everyday and the ceremonial dimensions of Khasi

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4 All translations from *Noi Boi Jai* are my own.

community life. While the novel is structured around the grand ritual of *Ka Phor Sorat*, it simultaneously captures the ordinary moments of existence in Khasi tribal society. It also familiarizes the readers with the rich material culture of the Khasi world. Traditional instruments, food practices, garments, and other quotidian and ritualized objects are described in the novel in detail, showing the inseparability of material practices and indigenous belief systems. The novel incorporates stories within a story, which are based on diverse topics related to the past and present of the land and its people, alluding to what can be called a *sthalapurana*<sup>5</sup>—a saga of the formation of a place’s identity. In the novel a description of Khasi women’s traditional attire is given :

Traditionally, Khasi women wore, as a kind of undergarment, a cloth called *jympien*, which was wound around the body and tied to the waist with a strip of fabric. The *jympien* usually reaches up to the knees or a little below. Above this, they wore *ka sopti-kti*, a kind of blouse, and over this, a pair of *jaiñsems*. (A *jaiñsem*, if you recall, is a long cloth draped over the shoulder and worn as an outer garment.) On top of all of that, they also wore a *tapmoh khlieh*, a shawl, either thrown loosely across the shoulders or wrapped around the head and then tied at the neck. (Nongkynrih, 2021, p. 223).

In Meghalaya the Khasi tribe possesses a particularly rich tradition of clothing that is closely tied to its cultural world view. Khasi attire reflects both aesthetic sensibility and social meaning. Assamese and Khasi textile traditions share several similarities rooted in the material histories of the region’s indigenous cultures. Both communities have long standing handloom practices. Weaving forms an essential part of ethnic and cultural life in Assam. For generations, Assamese women have woven textiles as a part of everyday life, that carry social, ritualistic and symbolic significance within the community. The textile tradition of the Khasi people has gained formal recognition through the Geographical Indication (GI) tag awarded to *Ryndia*, the local *Eri* Silk used in making *Jainsem* garments in the year 2015. Assam’s *Muga* silk or the ‘golden silk’ was also granted the GI tag in 2006 for its exquisite color, quality and durability. Traditional dresses in the Northeast India are known for vibrant, handwoven textiles, with iconic garments like Assam’s silk *Chadar Mekhela*, Meghalaya’s *jaiñsems*, Manipur’s *phanek*, and Naga tribal shawls. Birendranath Datta mentions that “weaving exquisitely colored and designed textiles by womanfolk on their indigenous looms is a distinctive feature common to the lives of all communities of the region, including the Sanskritized” (Datta, 2012, p.12).

Apart from clothing and textiles, Assamese and Khasi communities share notable similarities in everyday food practices, which form an important part

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5 Used by Raja Rao in his preface to the novel *Kanthapura*, the term “sthalapurana” refers to the legendary history or traditional story of a specific place.

of their lived culture. Food practices of Northeast India embody the ecological richness and cultural heritage of the region. In many parts of the region, everyday food habits are distinct from the foods prepared for festive or ceremonial occasions. On the other hand, the meaning of the same food item can change depending on the context. A good example of this phenomenon is the dietary and ritualistic usage of the betel nut. In both novels, betel nut is shown as an integral part of the everyday life in the Assamese and Khasi societies. According to Mrinmoyee Baruah “in Northeast India chewing of raw betel nut, betel leaf with lime and raw tobacco is practiced very widely mainly in the states of Assam and Meghalaya” (Baruah, 2016, p. 329). In the novel *Noi Boi Jai, tamul paan* (betel nut and betel leaf) is depicted as a part of normal dietary habit of Assamese people while its usage also holds significance for ritualistic purposes. *Funeral Nights* underscores the significance of *kwai* (betel nut) for the Khasi community:

Because betel nut is supposed to be God-given, it occupies a special place in Khasi culture. When you visit a neighbor, it is the first and the last thing he will offer you. In a courtship, when many are courting the same woman, she will show her preference by giving the man of her choice the first piece of betel nut (Nongkynrih, 2021, p. 243)

In Northeast India, betel nut is commonly consumed in ordinary life as a part of everyday social interaction, offered casually in homes or shared during conversation. However, it also appears in ritual settings, where it becomes formalized as an offering, a symbol of respect, or an element of ceremonial exchange. This shows that a food item, an element of material culture, is not only meant for eating. It works as a carrier of social and cultural meaning expressing relationships, identity and the different ways everyday life and ritual practices change its significance.

### **Material Culture and the Festive Condition**

Festivals express energies accumulated over time through the routine flow of everyday life. The festive condition is both an exception to everyday life and a continuation of it. It contributes to the renewal of social bonds, reaffirmation of cultural identity and intensification of what is otherwise familiar. The novel *Funeral Nights* centers on *Ka Phor Sorat*, or the feast of the dead, the traditional six-day-long funeral ceremony of the *Lyngngam*, a Khasi sub-tribe. During the “funeral nights”, participants gather to drink, gossip and exchange numerous stories. On festive occasions, food habits and everyday objects often take on new meanings, far removed from their routine roles. The novel *Funeral Nights* makes this clear in its descriptions of different Khasi rituals and ceremonies such as *Ka Dwai Khaw*, or prayer with rice grains, which is “the simplest of rituals in Khasi religion” (Nongkynrih, 2021, pp. 333). Items such as rice grains, betel nut and traditional drinks bear sacred meanings in Khasi rituals.

The festival of *Ka Phor Sorat* is a rare six-day-long funeral ceremony

in which the corpse of the deceased person is cremated, sometimes after being preserved for months. The festival represents a unique dimension of Khasi material culture where the human body becomes a sacred object around which music, prayers, processions, offerings and communal participation are arranged. The novel mentions a scene where the body is transformed from a biological presence into a ritual and symbolic object:

Once the body was on the ground and placed in a bamboo bier, the shaman went forward to sprinkle a few rice grains and water and mumble a few words over it. Then he asked the men to carry it home. The bier was covered with a white cotton cloth, unlike the one that would be used for the cremation ( Nongkynrih, 2021 p. 664).

The scene depicts the body as a sacred presence situated among ritual objects that carry symbolic meaning. The shaman acts as a guide, performing customary rites that prepare the body for its final passage. The ceremony reflects the richness of Khasi material culture, which ritualizes the journey from life to death through carefully designed practices, objects and the act of cremation itself. According to archaeologist Joanna R. Sofaer “the body, can be regarded as a form of material culture” (Sofaer, 2006, p xv). The bodies are not merely biological but material phenomena, constantly altered through processes like growth, modification and cultural habits. The novel *Funeral Nights* adds substance to the perception of body as a form of material culture through its representation of the unique Khasi traditions where the body is not just an acting subject, but an object of cultural practices.

*Funeral Nights* comprises several stories that show how the life of the Khasi people is shaped by the belief systems and indigenous knowledges which are enmeshed in a web of customs and rituals and how those rituals are celebrated. Indigenous ceremonies of Northeast Indian people are often accompanied by music. Music guides processions, marks important ritual moments, and connects a community emotionally to the events. The novel describes a scene where some of the traditional musical instruments are mentioned:

The pipers had brought with them the *tangmuri* wind instrument, shaped like a trumpet. It has seven openings and is made from the wood of a tree called *lum palam*. By blowing on its mouthpiece, made from a bamboo species called *japung*, and playing on the openings with deft fingers, a musician can produce the most rousing melodies ever heard in traditional Khasi music (Nongkynrih, 2021, p. 332).

The scene reminds us that Northeast India has a rich and diverse tradition of folk music shaped by the region’s many indigenous communities, languages, sound instruments and the ecological life. Folk music in the region is more than a form of entertainment—it is a living cultural practice through which communities preserve identity, sustain memory and social bonds across generations. The novel *Noi Boi Jai* too presents a vibrant picture of the Assam’s major cultural

festival Bihu. It refers to several traditional music instruments such as the *Dhol*, *Pepa* and *Gogona*, which form the heart of Bihu celebrations. In one memorable scene, the protagonist Bhogirath plays the *Pepa*, made from buffalo horn, with such ease and sweetness that it captivates his beloved, Suwagi. As she dances to the rhythm of his music, the sound of the *Pepa* creates a moment of deep charm and emotional connection between them. In *Folklore of Assam*, writer Jogesh Das mentions the significance of musical instruments in Bihu festival:

The Bihu dance is accompanied by appropriate songs and playing of instruments. Bihu songs have a wide range of folk tunes to which dancers make their body-movements at the same time keeping time with the *dhol* (drum), the *pepa* (horn pipe) and the *taka* (a split bamboo instrument) (Das, 1972, p. 127).

In Assamese and Khasi material culture, musical instruments occupy a place of special importance mainly due to their relevance in festivals and rituals. Musical instruments become an expressive medium for the rhythms of everyday life while also releasing emotional intensity during festive occasions. For both the communities, the handcrafted musical tools, born of horn, skin, wood and metal—transform music into a living thread of heritage, sustaining identity and change. Preparation of musical instruments is also an example of the skills in arts and craft of the two communities

## Conclusion

Material culture refers to the relationship human beings share with objects that shape and give meaning to their world. In indigenous societies, material culture reflects the distinctive ways in which a community engages with objects, offering valuable insights into its lifestyle, belief systems and socio-economic conditions. Objects, artifacts, tools and forms of craftsmanship are not merely utilitarian or decorative; they are closely tied to the way communities understand themselves, preserve collective memory and express belonging. The identity of a community is often tied to its material practices involving everyday objects such as dress, food, musical instruments and other cultural forms. The study of material culture can also reveal similarities between different indigenous communities. Assamese and Khasi communities as shown in the two novels, show several similarities along material lines despite differences in language and historical experience. In both cultures, dress, food habits and locally crafted musical instruments play an important role in expressing community identity and cultural continuity. The two novels discussed in this paper describe these aspects as they appear in both the quotidian and festive lives of the people.

Material culture also records transformations within society. The gradual replacement of indigenous objects with modern ones is often among the first signs of socio-cultural change. Both the Assamese and Khasi cultures face transformations as modern goods replace vernacular objects, signaling broader socio-cultural changes. The novels *Funeral Nights* and *Noi Boi Jai* however,

attempt to preserve the indigenous cultures from cultural amnesia and erasure under modernity by documenting both the ordinary and the spectacular dimensions of the cultures. They also display the power, agency and meaning that material objects hold in a community, which contribute to the formation of its unique identity.

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# Gendered Archetypes and Cultural Worldview in the Santal Folk Narratives

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## Abstract

Folktales as worldview narratives emphasise that they are not merely entertainment; they express how a tribe views kinship, justice, nature, and cosmology. The folk narratives of the Santal tribe are deeply intertwined with everyday practices transmitted across generations, and Dundes argues that folklore functions as a “mirror” of culture. To study character archetypes and cultural worldview in Santal folktales, this study reveals how storytelling often reflects the cultural agency through which traditional norms are nurtured. This study is based on two selected folktales- ‘A Stepmother’ and ‘The Snake Flower’ that have been collected from the field; both are popular in Charivella village, Baksa District of Assam. Firstly, this study delves into the Archetypal analysis of selected Santal folktales, and secondly, it reveals how the archetypal representation contributes to the understanding of the cultural worldview of the Santal community

**Keywords:** Folktales, worldview, culture, Santals, archetype, gender etc.

## Introduction

Various studies on oral narratives have widely focused on socio-cultural symbolism, narrative techniques, political, and the identical importance of these narratives. It also offers insights into the shared daily-life experiences, gender

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norms, and belief systems of the indigenous community. In the Santal social context, storytelling often reveals the cultural agency through which traditional norms are nurtured. However, the specific attention to gendered voices in Santal folktales remains to be thoroughly analysed. Primarily, this study delves into the Archetypal analysis of selected Santal folktales and analyzes how these archetypal patterns reflect cultural notions of masculinity and femininity. Secondly, it reveals how the archetypal representation contributes to the understanding of cultural worldview, particularly in relation to kinship structure, moral values, social power, gendered behaviour, and ecological ethics.

Santals are one of the largest tribes of India, concentrated in the Indian states of Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Tripura, and Meghalaya. Various research specifies that the origin of this nomadic tribe is the Champa Kingdom of northern Cambodia before migrating to India. (Sengupta, 2019, p. 733). This community worshipped nature and presently follows Sarna, Sari dharam, Christianity, and Hinduism. They have their own language, Santhali, a part of the Austro-Asiatic language family, and its script is called 'OI Chiki' (Soren, 2019). This tribe has a rich cultural heritage that reflects shared memories.

In many Santal stories, women are portrayed as caregivers, nurturers, and sometimes passive victims of social conditions, while men often appear in roles of decision makers, rulers, fighters, and wise persons. (Das, 2025 p.178). However, these social binaries indicate patriarchal agency within a limited framework. Santal folktales are not just a reflection of social reality- they are also agencies through which alternative potentialities are explored. It postulates fundamental questions: How do folktales assign gendered roles in the Santal community? What cultural purposes do masculine and feminine voices serve within these folktales? How do gendered roles reflect broader social relations? To study character archetypes and cultural worldview in Santal folktales, the researchers have collected two folktales- 'A Stepmother' and 'The Snake Flower' from the field; both are popular in Charivella village, Baksa District of Assam. The folktales are transcribed and translated by the researchers.

Alan Dundes defines worldview as collective behaviour in which a group of people or a community perceives and interprets reality, which may include the structure of the universe, human nature, beliefs, life-death, gender roles, etc and so on. Dundes argues that folklore functions as a "mirror" of culture, reflecting how a community organises meaning. Hence, by interpreting recurring motifs, symbols, narrative structures, and oppositions, scholars can reconstruct the worldview embedded within Santal tradition (Dundes, 1965). This analysis is useful, especially in understanding tribal, regional, caste-based, or gendered folklore traditions. Therefore, we can say that folklore allows us access to the "deep structure" of culture, comparable to linguistic grammar (Dundes, 1980).

Folktales as worldview narratives emphasise that they are not merely entertainment; they express how a tribe views kinship, justice, nature, and

cosmology. For this study, a specific approach has been used to identify and analyse archetypal characters in the Santal tales. These approaches include Carl Jung's universal archetypes (the hero, the shadow, the mother, the trickster, the innocent victim, and the wise elder) (Jung, 1968). The archetypal figures commonly found in literature, history, psychology, and others are: 'the hero', 'the outcast', 'the scapegoat', 'the star-crossed lovers', 'femme fatale', 'the spiritual woman', 'the bully', 'the damsel in distress', 'the devil figure', 'the innocent', 'the villain', and so on (Fyre, 1957). The characters, symbols, and concepts shown may have more than one archetypal function in one culture, while in another, they may have more limited functions (Sugiyama, 2001; Bedell & Bush, 1985).

This criticism focuses on the relationships that exist in a literary work with other works, which can be myths, allusions, imageries, symbols, characters, etc., that are archetypal. Therefore, there might arise some common research questions whose answers would offer us a glimpse of what we wish to know. Does the protagonist go through a change, from innocence to experience? Are the archetypal events in the story? Are the characters the archetypal mother, seductive woman, the femme fatale? The answers for these questions would be usable only once we shuffle through at least two oral narratives, looking for the character archetypes that would offer the answers to what we seek. The two folktales we have taken up for study are "The Step Mother" and "The Snake Flower"; these two folktales reflect two vastly different outlooks on the world, and yet, the archetypal analysis reveals some startlingly familiar insights.

### **Tale 1: 'A Stepmother' ( Chhutki Ayo)**

This story focuses on the assumption that stepmothers have no good intentions or are always of an ill nature. The story revolves around a family consisting of a man, wife, and a son who were industrious and successful in whatever work they tried. But unfortunately, the wife died one day, and the man's luck started going down. The following year, the man remarried, thinking he could get his luck back like before, but for one thing or another, and there were often altercations between the man and his second wife. She also announces that either she or her son will live. She manipulates the man to kill his only son, saying if it were her, she would have easily killed him, but since he is the man's son, he is to kill him himself. The wife plots for the man on how he should approach to stab his son with the sharpened beam of the plough while ploughing. The man had failed to execute his wife's plan for many days, so his wife grew impatient and asked him when he was really planning to execute the plan. The wife cunningly directs them to plough in the field where millets were shown, with the underlying motive of stabbing the son. Upon reaching the field of crops, the man tells his son that that day they would be ploughing the field of millet and would sow sunflowers later in that place. The son objected to his father's idea of

ploughing the field full of almost ripe millets to sow another crop by mentioning that the millets were almost ripe and if they were to destroy this good harvest and plant another crop, there is no guarantee that the next crop would be as fruitful. Having understood the reliability of the son's words, the man decides not to kill his son, whether it annoys his second wife or not, because, according to him, the first child and the first crop were the same. The husband revealed the vicious motive of his wife in front of everyone. (tale narrated by:Kamalina Tudu, personal interview, date: 9/11/23)

'A Stepmother' is a cautionary Santal folktale but morally revitalising that critiques violence within domestic space, validates ancestral continuity, and warns against disrupting blood bonds.

#### **Character**

- a. The Stepmother
- b. The Father
- c. The Son
- d. The First Wife

#### **Archetype Role**

Malevolence, Jealous, Evil  
Feeble Patriarch  
Innocent victim but Rational  
Absent Nurturer

### **The Stepmother: The Shadow Feminine**

The character of the stepmother in this tale contains the shadow feminine archetype, a woman driven by jealousy, dissatisfaction, and violence. She represents the archetype of Devouring Mother, not caring or nurturing, but possessive and destructive (Neumann, 1955). Likewise, other maternal figures who nurtured their child, she wants to kill her stepson, not through direct attack, but through manipulation, which marks the Marina Warners' concept of the femme fatale figure in folklore (Warner, 1994). Her strategy is to fortify domestic work, such as food and farming, and shows how corrupted female power becomes a domestic threat.

### **The father: The Flawed Patriarch**

This character mirrors the Flawed Patriarch archetype: a man unable to make decisions on his own or who does not have moral clarity in his own household. He is emotionally broken after the death of his first wife and wants recovery through remarriage. Yet his weakness turns into moral susceptibility as he pays attention to his second wife's demands and is even supposed to murder his own son. But his moral clarity is inspired by his son's wisdom, which results in the coming to duties of ethical fatherhood, situating with the symbolic journey from delusion to moral restoration. It is aligned with those folklore patterns in which male authority is temporarily destabilised but ultimately restored through rational judgment (Degh, 1995).

### **The Son: Voice of Reason**

This character acts as both the innocent victim and the voice of reason. He

is unaware of the murderous plan of his Father and Stepmother. Ironically, he saves his life by giving his father an insightful comparison of the ripe millets and sunflower crops. This metaphor is “first crop and first child are irreplaceable”, which directs him as a bearer of folk knowledge and ancestral wisdom, inheritance, and morality. He awakens his father’s sense of value and shifts the narrative of death with a vision of continuity and abundance.

### **The First Wife: The Absent Nurturer**

Though this character is absent from the narrative, her memory of the first wife remains as a binary to the second wife. She represents the ideal woman archetype, who is productive, caring, and works for the prosperity of the family. Her presence is highly valued in her absence, defined as a moral compass against the second wife.

Archetypally, the characters progress from attack to saviour, from manipulation to moral clarity. Yet, the tale concludes with recognition, return, and giving importance to the first bond, whether wife, child, or harvest. The feminist analysis shows critical breakdowns in gender dynamics, where women suffer and maintain patriarchal norms.

### **Narrative voice in ‘A stepmother’ :**

The Santal tale, ‘A stepmother’, is told from the perspective of a father and son, depicting the stepmother as the antagonist. The narrative voice is an almost preaching tone about the stepmother’s character, stating upfront that the story “focuses on the assumption that stepmothers have no good intentions or are always of an ill nature.” Thus, the feminine voice in this tale is portrayed as inherently malicious and deceptive, while the voices of the father and child are portrayed as rational and truthful. Stepmother culture is a classic theme in traditional narratives, and as a female image that differs from biological mothers, “stepmother” is often portrayed as a negative and malicious image in cultural narratives of different countries and regions (Wu,2023). The viewpoint of the son and the father eventually dominates the narrative, engaging the audience with the stepmother’s treachery. The narrative setup highlights the classic folktale convention of the *wicked stepmother* whose words cannot be trusted, a trope widespread in many cultures (Behrooz,2016). The story explicitly depicts the stepmother as a counter to the innocent son. Her actions are described with a bias that breeds mistrust of her at every turn. At this point, the voice of the stepmother is entirely silent; no expression of regret or rationale is anticipated, and her voice is completely lost upon her expulsion, highlighting how the narrative privileges patriarchal authority while diminishing the transgressive feminine voice. This narrative attitude exemplifies how folktales usually reduce ‘bad’ women to linear villains with no voice, while validating the voices of the patriarch and the inheritor.

## **Tale 2: ‘The Snake Flower’ (Karinangingbingbaha)**

A king unknowingly killed a snake that was his queen’s secret lover and brought the snake to eat its meat. The queen recognised her secret lover, and when they were eating the meat, she asked for the belly part of the snake. She hid the snake’s belly and later buried it in their garden. From that meat, a plant with beautiful flowers grew. The queen hid her grief at the loss of her lover and planned revenge against her husband. The queen conspired and challenged the King to a game. She bet the king that he would not be able to name all the flowers in their garden. If he couldn’t, he would be killed, and if he could name all the flowers, then he could have the queen’s life. She then challenged the king to name all the flowers in the garden, wagering his life against hers. When he couldn’t name the snake flower, he was condemned to death. However, his sister, travelling to see him, overheard birds discussing the story and learned the flower’s name: ‘Karinangingbingbaha’. The king’s sister, who was hearing from under the tree, jumped up at the name and immediately rushed to her brother’s home. She whispered the name to the king, and the king was saved. The Queen lost the bet and was killed. The sister saved

her brother’s life, and this is why, during the ‘sohrai’ festival, the brothers invite their sisters. (tale narrated by: Chandamoni Hazda, personal interview, date: 20/03/24)

The tale reflects a deep familial bond, universal wisdom, and a mythical view of justice rather than the contrast between male and female roles.

### **Character**

- a. The Queen
- b. The King
- c. The King’s Sister
- d. Birds

### **Archetype Role**

- Avenging Female
- Fallen Patriarch
- Rescuer
- Messenger of Justice

## **The Queen: Femme Fatale**

In this story, the character of Queen fits the Dangerous Feminine archetype, who is a powerful, deceptive woman, and her desire contradicts the royal and ethical order. Her sexual felony (having a snake lover) placed her with folkloric femme fatale figures. After the snake’s death, she mourns silently but meticulously plans revenge, plots a deadly flower naming game. Her intelligence, grief, and desire are all directed into a symbolic trial, marking her as an archetype of revengeful eroticism and disguised power.

## **The King: The Fallen Patriarch**

The King signifies the Fallen Patriarch or Unwitting Slayer archetype. His masculine power is displayed through hunting. By killing the snake unknowingly, he brings familial transgression, killing his wife’s secret lover and triggering a cycle of punishment. His inability to decode the flower’s name represents the

failure of knowledge, especially in the feminine domain (symbolic gardens, flower names, and secrets). His life is revived only through the wisdom of his sister, not by his own power.

### **The King's Sister: The Rescuer Hero**

This character is the main protagonist of the tale, aligning with the archetype of the Wise Sister or Ritual Mediator. She acts out of loyalty and care. Her passive presence under the tree and her active listening to the birds put her as a figure of natural harmony and feminine intuition. Her naming of "Karinangingbingbaha" revives her brother's life and truth. Her intervention leads to the origin of the Sohrai celebration, making her a mythic cultural founder.

### **The Birds: Messenger of justice**

The mother bird and baby birds function as animal guides, a common archetype in narratives. They carry liminal knowledge, the truths hidden from human society but available in the natural world. Their conversation, tapped by the King's sister, strengthens the importance of listening to non-human voices in indigenous epistemologies.

'The Snake Flower' is a multi-layered Santal tale that dramatises the dangerous consequences of a dirty secret, feminine revival power, and the mythic origins of ritual kinship. Through symbolic floral imagery, animal voice, and sacred naming, the tale establishes female wisdom over royal command and acts as the ultimate saviour of the moral order. It reflects Jungian archetypal symbolism emerging as a shared psychological behaviour common to all human societies. (Jung, 1968).

The flower's name, *Karinangingbingbaha*, becomes a life-preserving expression which reinforcing the belief that language holds ritual power. As Datta argues, in indigenous folktales, naming often functions as an ethical and cosmological performance (Datta, 1999). It is a very common ecological structure that aligns with Proppian narrative functions of interdiction, violation, testing, and resolution (Propp, 1968).

### **Narrative voice in 'The Snake Flower':**

This tale, 'The Snake Flower', unfolds like a myth; the actions are framed to explain a cultural tradition. But within the story itself, there are two different female voices that stand out: firstly, the Queen and secondly, the King's Sister. The Queen is portrayed as cunning, emotional, and vengeful, who secretly asks for the belly part of a snake that was killed by her husband (the King), who was unaware that the snake was actually the lover of his wife. Her actions reveal her hidden voice of malicious revenge. On the other hand, the King's voice is almost silent. The characters in this tale reveal deep gendered meanings through their actions. The Queen's affair with a snake is not only an act of adultery, but it constitutes

a violation of both marital loyalty and the natural order, aligning her with the archetype of the “dangerous woman” whose sexuality defies containment. When the King unknowingly kills the snake during a hunt, the Queen’s mourns silently and performs hidden rituals: she requests the snake’s belly under a false pretence and buries it in the royal garden secretly. This act functions as a covert funeral rite—a private ceremony for her lover, expressing mourning through silence and secrecy (Cixous,1976). This private act of care subverts traditional expectations of feminine grief, transforming it from passive mourning into ritual devotion. Instead of crying for her husband, the Queen expresses a transgressive love, which she channels into nurturing the snake-flower, a symbolic continuation of her forbidden passion (Kristeva, 1982). In her next move, she challenges the King to name all the flowers in the garden. Seen in the context of her life at stake, this is both a strategic gamble and a symbolic confrontation that asserts a woman’s power and intelligence. The challenge becomes a form of hidden protest into a powerful, performative act of agency. The Queen’s open challenge to the King is a bold performative act. Framed as a harmless game, her game masks revenge behind cleverness - an unusual move for a woman in a patriarchal setting. King’s failure to name the snake-flower(a plant born from her secret mourning) marks his defeat, that a king is not able to name his own garden’s flowers (symbolically as ruler and husband). Another performance follows is the execution of the king, which is arranged like a public ritual. But it is his sister’s intervention that saves his life by overhearing a story told by a bird, which is a feminine-coded act of listening. Instead of publicly humiliating the King, she murmurs the name to him, preserving his dignity. This act of soft, loyal intervention stands in contrary to the Queen’s dramatic rebellion. Ultimately, every act in the tale is symbolic, mourning through gardening, revenge through games, loyalty through blood ties, and justice through execution.

### **Cultural Worldview:**

In the Santal folktales, there are many female characters portrayed as cruel and manipulative. The stepmother character in the tale ‘A Stepmother’ is similar to the stepmother archetype, which reflects the widespread fairy-tale archetype of the persecuting stepmother who mistreats or attempts to eliminate her stepchildren (Warner, 1995). On the other hand, the sister character in the tale ‘The Snake Flower’ personifies the idealised woman, who saves her brother with the help of a cosmic helper (mother bird) which aligns with Propp’s concept of the narrative function of a tale and the ‘magical agent/helper’- which may be sibling, animal, magical being or supernatural power (Propp,1968). Here, we have seen that women are represented both as moral and mortal threats, and as rescuers and spiritual helpers. This depiction of women shows a Santal worldview where gender treatment is based on binary opposition. It also conveys a cautionary message to the listener about women’s agency within the

family, warning men off feminine wiles. The archetype of Father in the story ‘A Stepmother’ represents the moral weakness of a man, who is supposed to kill his son under the manipulation of his wife. In ‘A Stepmother’, the deep structure reveals one central contradiction: The father chooses between bloodline (first son) and marital loyalty (second wife) and between continuity and disruption. This conflict is not about a character; it’s a symbolic representation of anxiety that occurs if actions like remarriage, step-relationships are entered into a traditional kinship system. In the tale ‘The Snake Flower’, it is a woman, the sister of the King, who learns the secret name of the flower and rescues the king from execution. This uncertainty points to a deeper tension within the Santal worldview that women may be ritually powerful, but only under exceptional circumstances.

The composite gender worldview in Santal folktales gives distinct indigenous beliefs about power, morality, and familial bonds, and prioritises reconciliation, female resilience, and supernatural help. Meanwhile, Santal tales also expose domestic hierarchies, female rivalry, and moral breakdown, which are shown through twisted actions. Ultimately, these folktales not only entertain us but also convey traditional values and norms about gender; they shape how communities achieve their own identity, authority, and belongingness in broader socio-cultural worlds. In Santal culture, clan and family reputation matter deeply—the whole family is responsible for correcting wrong behaviour. Each mytheme in this tale is not just an act in the plot but also holds symbolic meaning about family, loyalty, and social order. Together, they reflect:

- The importance of first children as heirs.
- Suspicion towards stepmothers.
- The holiness of the crop is a metaphor for life and continuity.
- The moral order must be restored through correct judgment.

The central tension in the story ‘The Snake Flower’ lies in loyalty within intimate relationships, like between a husband and wife, and between a brother and sister. The Queen betrays her husband, the King, by maintaining a secret relationship with her lover. It is out of the social moral code. Even the plots for the King’s exile reveal a hidden motive of adultery. The sister, who protects the brother, the King, represents that sibling bonds are morally stronger than a fake marital relationship. The sister acts as the moral mediator (from death sentence to redemption), and it strengthens the position of women for transforming destruction into salvation.

The deep structure determines the contradiction between the dangerous woman (the Queen) and the protective Woman (the sister) by reinstalling order through symbolic actions. This theme closely aligns with Blackburn’s analysis of South Indian folktales about Female duality, where women emerge as both breakers of social order (deceit, secrecy, or sexuality) and as preservers of moral and kinship values. Symbolic speech and actions by women can restore balance

to a disrupted family (Blackburn, 1997). This aligns directly with the structuralist setting of the tale: the sister's symbolic wisdom (the flower's name), delivered through whisper and acted through kinship loyalty, balances the Queen's unseen threat and reaffirms social order. In Santal folktales, gender is a space of conflict and treachery within a domestic sphere. The tale

'A Stepmother' and 'The Snake Flower' portray the affinal relationship as unstable and deceitful. These anxieties show the status of women in patriarchal systems, where rivalry among women (e.g., between wives and sisters-in-law) is culturally structured. Both tales, 'A Stepmother' and 'The Snake Flower', articulate a shared Santal worldview in which social code depends on continuity, patience, and ethical foresight. Nature (mother bird, for example) associates with moral kinship to correct the imbalance. Patriarchy is aligned with ethical wisdom. The folktale 'The Snake Flower' highlights the symbolic weight of a Santal custom of inviting sisters home during the Sohrai festival. It associates this tradition with a brave act of a sister for saving her brother's life, making it more than a social expression; it becomes a sacred account of loyalty and kinship. As Mircea Eliade writes, myth gives meaning to rituals by rooting them in sacred history (Eliade, 1963). Altogether, such archetypes connect to the social patterns, reinforcing cautionary lessons about trust, kinship, and power. Thus, folktales often function as social regulators, teaching a community about behaviours perceived as dangerous to collective stability (Degh, 1995).

### **Conclusion:**

Folktales emanate from the thinking, perceptions, and experiences of individuals or a community. These storytelling traditions of the Santal tribe express the gender relations of the community, which are orally passed down. It is symbolically represented through the character archetypes, family structures, and ritual performances, and by analysing the selected folktales of the tribe, it offers a composite understanding of their gendered worldview and traditional beliefs and norms that are discussed. Santal folktales articulate gender behaviour within a framework of kinship responsibilities, emphasising the holiness of brother-sister bonds. As in the tale 'The Snake Flower', the hero's rescue of her brother and their reunion are symbolic, highlighting a belief that sibling bonds are superior to marital relationships. This kinship dynamic offers a stance to the women characters as vital to both familial value and spiritual wellbeing. Across the culture, women characters fit the archetypes common in the Jungian concept of nurturing sister, jealous wife, sacred mother, stepmother, and temptress, etc. These characters are often oppressed, but they reclaim their dignity through continuity, wisdom, spiritual enlightenment, and communal recognition (Jung, 1968 & Warner 1995). Hence, we see these types of folktales serve as agents to reimpose moral order through ritual customs or kinship ties. The tales serve both as entertainment and a moral lesson, implanting the values of paternal

duty and maternal kindness. In essence, the cultural implication of Santal society is clear in the sense that one must be vigilant and ready to act decisively to uphold familial love and loyalty. Men in Santal tales are usually flawed or absent, passive, and morally ineffectual. In the tale ‘A Stepmother’, the father’s voice is passive; he is unable to protect his child or maintain familial harmony as a father and husband in the domestic sphere. The King falls into the trap of his wife in ‘The Snake Flower’. Here, masculine voices are ineffective, a repeating trope that highlights Santal society’s apprehension with male authority as it is divided by domestic conflict. Thus, these selected folktales of the Santal Tribe serve as a folkloric mechanism for understanding the worldview in the transmission of oral continuity.

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# **Languages as Repositories of Traditional Knowledge Systems of North-East India with Special Reference to Arunachal Pradesh**

**Amarjyoti Doley**

## **Abstract**

This paper explores the role of languages as repositories of traditional knowledge systems (TKS) of North-East India, with a special focus on Arunachal Pradesh. The region's linguistic diversity encapsulates rich cultural knowledge, oral traditions, ecological understanding, social norms, and indigenous wisdom vital for sustainable living and cultural identity preservation. Through a multidisciplinary approach involving ethnolinguistics, anthropology, and cultural studies, this research highlights the significance of language preservation as a medium for safeguarding traditional knowledge, proposes strategies for documenting endangered languages, and analyzes the challenges faced by tribal communities in maintaining their linguistic heritage.

**Keywords:** Traditional Knowledge Systems, Linguistic Diversity, Arunachal Pradesh, North-East India, Indigenous Languages, Ethnolinguistics, Language Preservation.

## **Introduction**

North-East India, a region renowned for its extraordinary cultural and linguistic diversity, serves as a critical repository of traditional knowledge systems (TKS) deeply embedded within the myriad languages spoken by its indigenous communities. Arunachal Pradesh, the northeasternmost state of India, exhibits one of the highest concentrations of indigenous languages, many of which are

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undocumented or under threat of extinction. This linguistic plurality not only shapes the unique identity of the communities but also conserves centuries-old ecological, medicinal, and cultural wisdom fundamental to their survival and environmental harmony.

This research paper aims to examine the role played by the various languages of Arunachal Pradesh as custodians of traditional knowledge systems. It underscores the inseparable link between language and culture, emphasizing how endangered languages carry with them a wealth of indigenous knowledge that is at risk of being lost alongside language extinction. Through ethnographic inquiry and analysis of selected linguistic communities, this paper highlights the urgent need for documentation, preservation, and revitalization of languages to sustain the cherished traditional knowledge embedded within.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To investigate how indigenous languages of Arunachal Pradesh function as repositories of traditional ecological, medicinal, and cultural knowledge.
2. To analyze the impact of language endangerment on the preservation and transmission of traditional knowledge systems among tribal communities.
3. To document specific linguistic features and oral traditions that encapsulate traditional knowledge in selected tribes of Arunachal Pradesh.
4. To recommend strategies for the documentation, preservation, and revitalization of endangered languages and their associated traditional knowledge in the region.

## **2. Background and Context**

### **2.1 North-East India: Geographical and Cultural Overview**

The North-Eastern region of India consists of eight states, collectively called the “Seven Sisters” and Sikkim, although the cultural and ecological landscapes vary extensively. Characterized by hilly terrain, dense forests, and numerous river systems, the region is home to over 200 ethnic groups speaking more than 220 different languages and dialects (Nath, 2012). The indigenous communities have developed diverse traditional knowledge systems adapted to their specific environment, including agricultural techniques, medicinal plant use, and customary governance.

### **2.2 Arunachal Pradesh: Socio-cultural and Linguistic Landscape**

Arunachal Pradesh occupies a strategic position at the northeastern tip of India, sharing international borders with Bhutan, China, and Myanmar. The state

hosts over 25 scheduled tribes, each with distinct languages that fall within the Sino-Tibetan language family predominantly, alongside Tibeto-Burman and other language families (Post et al., 2013). The traditional knowledge systems of these tribes are transmitted orally through their languages, encompassing rituals, genealogies, myths, ecological knowledge, and medicinal practices.

### **3. Literature Review**

#### **3.1 Traditional Knowledge Systems and Language**

Traditional knowledge systems refer to the indigenous and local knowledge developed over time through interaction with the environment and passed down within communities by means of oral or symbolic language (Berkes, 1993). Language is the primary means through which knowledge about ecology, spirituality, social organization, and practical skills are preserved (Nettle & Romaine, 2000). Scholars have noted a direct correlation between language vitality and the safeguarding of TKS, asserting that language loss leads to an irreversible decline in cultural heritage (Harrison, 2007).

#### **3.2 Languages of Arunachal Pradesh: Classification and Status**

Arunachal Pradesh is recognized for its extraordinary linguistic diversity with languages grouped into multiple families and isolated clusters (Abbi, 2006). Most languages in Arunachal Pradesh have not been adequately documented, and many are endangered, spoken by only a few thousand or fewer individuals (Megu, 2017). There is a lack of comprehensive linguistic surveys, and most knowledge remains within oral transmission systems.

#### **3.3 Previous Studies on TKS in North-East India**

Research in the region has focused on ethnobotanical knowledge (Sharma et al., 2014), oral literature (Tadar, 2015), and the role of indigenous institutions (Dey, 2010). However, there is a gap in integrated studies linking linguistic diversity directly to the preservation of TKS. Recent attention has focused on participatory documentation and the use of digital media in language preservation (Choudhury & Goswami, 2018).

### **4. Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research methodology designed to capture the complex relationship between languages and traditional knowledge systems in Arunachal Pradesh. Due to the inherently contextual and culturally embedded nature of traditional knowledge, a qualitative approach allows for a nuanced exploration of how language functions as a repository for such knowledge among indigenous communities.

#### **4.1 Ethnographic Fieldwork**

Central to this study is ethnographic fieldwork, which involves immersive and participatory engagement within the communities under study. Fieldwork was conducted over multiple phases across selected districts of Arunachal Pradesh, including East Siang, Lower Subansiri, and Papum Pare, regions known for linguistic and cultural heterogeneity. Ethnographic methods enabled a first-hand understanding of the social contexts in which languages are used to transmit traditional knowledge.

Researchers lived within the communities for extended periods, participating in daily activities, ceremonies, and cultural events. This immersion facilitated the observation of natural language use in varied settings — from agricultural practices, healing rituals, storytelling sessions to communal decision-making fora. Such contextualized data provided rich insights into how language use is interwoven with indigenous knowledge live practices rather than merely as isolated lexical items.

#### **4.2 Participant Observation**

Participant observation was a key qualitative tool through which researchers could unobtrusively record behaviors, interactions, and language usage patterns. By actively engaging with community members as they recounted folktales or demonstrated traditional medicinal preparations, researchers documented the linguistic nuances, specialized vocabulary, and contextual meanings embedded in everyday discourse.

Observations were systematically recorded through field notes, audio recordings, and photographs (with community consent) to capture non-verbal cues and environmental contexts that influence the transmission of knowledge. For example, the role of performance arts such as ritual dances and oral poetry in complementing verbal transmission was carefully documented, illustrating the multimodal nature of indigenous knowledge systems.

#### **4.3 Structured and Semi-Structured Interviews**

Structured and semi-structured interviews with community elders, language speakers, and cultural custodians formed another core component of data collection. Elders, often recognized as knowledge keepers, provided detailed accounts of traditional practices, language use, and cultural changes over time. Semi-structured interview guides allowed flexibility to explore emergent themes while ensuring core research questions on language and knowledge transmission were addressed.

Interviews were conducted in both local languages with the assistance of trained interpreters and in Hindi or English when applicable. The use of indigenous languages during interviews was crucial to grasp idiomatic expressions, metaphors, and conceptual vocabulary that are often lost in translation. Where

possible, elders were invited to share narratives or songs that encapsulated specific traditional knowledge, enabling audio documentation of oral literature.

#### **4.4 Case Studies of Selected Tribes**

The research focused on selected tribes — the Adi, Apatani, and Nyishi — chosen because they represent varied linguistic families and distinct traditional knowledge practices. These case studies allowed deeper comparative analysis of the mechanisms by which language encodes ecological, agricultural, medicinal, and social knowledge.

For instance, the Adi tribe's elaborate kinship and festival vocabulary provided rich linguistic materials illustrating the integral role of language in social organization and cultural continuity. The Apatani community's complex agro-ecological terms provided insights into the linguistic sophistication underpinning their sustainable farming methods. The Nyishi tribe's dense ethnobotanical lexicon revealed how language conserves critical knowledge in herbal medicine. Focusing on multiple tribes also highlighted patterns of language shift, maintenance strategies, and differing levels of vulnerability to language loss.

#### **4.5 Secondary Data and Literature Review**

Primary fieldwork data were supplemented with secondary sources to contextualize findings within broader socio-political and historical frameworks. These included governmental census figures on linguistic demographics, language vitality reports published by organizations such as UNESCO, and prior linguistic surveys conducted by academic institutions.

Additionally, an extensive review of ethnographic, linguistic, and anthropological literature on Northeast India enriched the theoretical underpinnings of the study, providing comparative perspectives and aiding in the triangulation of data. Archival materials such as regional folk tale collections, oral history transcripts, and cultural documentation by earlier scholars were also referenced to trace changes over time.

#### **4.6 Interdisciplinary Approach**

Recognizing the multifaceted nature of the subject, this study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that integrates methodologies and theoretical insights from linguistics, anthropology, and cultural studies. Linguistics provides tools for analyzing language structures, vocabularies, and patterns of language use critical for understanding how traditional knowledge is encoded and transmitted.

Anthropology contributes ethnographic methods and an emphasis on cultural context necessary to situate language use within social practices, belief systems, and power relations. Cultural studies offer critical frameworks to explore issues of identity, language politics, globalization impacts, and cultural resilience. This confluence allows for a holistic understanding not only of the

linguistic phenomena but also the sociopolitical dynamics shaping language and knowledge preservation.

#### **4.7 Ethical Considerations**

Given the sensitive nature of working with indigenous communities and their knowledge, the study was guided by a robust ethical framework emphasizing respect, informed consent, and reciprocity. Permission to conduct research was obtained from community councils and local administrative bodies, ensuring transparency regarding research goals and potential uses of the data collected.

Confidentiality and intellectual property rights of indigenous knowledge holders were honored, and all audio-visual materials were archived and shared with communities in accessible formats. Research outcomes were communicated back to the communities through workshops and culturally appropriate mediums to support local language and knowledge revitalization endeavors.

#### **4.8 Limitations**

While the research methodology was carefully designed to produce deep qualitative insights, certain limitations remain. Language barriers, despite interpreter assistance, pose risks of semantic nuances being overlooked. Seasonal accessibility and geopolitical sensitivities in some areas limited continuous field presence and necessitated adaptive data collection strategies.

Moreover, the diversity and number of languages in Arunachal Pradesh mean that not all linguistic groups could be comprehensively studied. Thus, while the selected case studies provide representative insights, they cannot fully capture the totality of linguistic and knowledge diversity in the region. Future research may expand on this foundation with wider linguistic coverage and longitudinal studies.

### **5. Languages as Repositories of Traditional Knowledge**

#### **5.1 Oral Traditions and Folklore**

Oral traditions, including myths, legends, folktales, and songs, preserve historical narratives, cosmologies, and values of the community. These narratives are often encoded in language-specific idioms and metaphors that require cultural contextual understanding (Zent, 2009). For example, in many Arunachali languages, specific terms describe local flora and fauna with nuanced ecological information vital for environmental management.

#### **5.2 Indigenous Ecological Knowledge**

The indigenous communities of Arunachal Pradesh possess deep knowledge of their local ecosystems, including plant taxonomy, animal behavior, and sustainable harvesting methods (Sharma et al., 2016). Such knowledge

is embedded in classificatory systems within languages which reflect the community's interaction with the environment.

### **5.3 Medicinal Knowledge and Language**

Traditional medicinal knowledge is transmitted primarily through oral instructions and specialized vocabulary related to plants, preparation methods, and healing practices. The loss of language limits access to these practices and threatens community health resilience.

### **5.4 Social Norms and Moral Codes in Language**

Languages carry proverbs, norms, and social codes that govern behavior and community relations. These moral frameworks are expressed through idiomatic expressions that reinforce traditional governance structures and social cohesion.

## **6. Case Study: Selected Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh**

### **6.1 The Adi Language and Its Knowledge Traditions**

The Adi community uses their language to pass down rich agricultural knowledge, including traditional sowing cycles and weather prediction techniques encoded in seasonal lexicons and folk songs (Nandita, 2019).

### **6.2 The Apatani Community and Their Linguistic Heritage**

The Apatani language is instrumental in preserving unique terrace farming techniques and water management systems, expressed through terminology linked to land use and ritual practices (Brahma, 2017).

### **6.3 The Nyishi Language and Ethnobotanical Knowledge**

Nyishi language speakers maintain extensive knowledge of medicinal plants, transmitted through specific terms and oral instruction, which is critical to the community's health and survival (Tiwari, 2020).

## **7. Challenges in Preserving Linguistic and Traditional Knowledge**

### **7.1 Language Endangerment and Shift**

With increasing influence of dominant languages like Hindi, English, and Assamese, many indigenous languages are endangered, leading to erosion of the cultural knowledge encoded in them.

### **7.2 Impact of Modernization and Globalization**

Education systems, urban migration, and media consumption introduce external cultural influences, often devaluing local languages and associated knowledge.

### **7.3 Educational and Policy Challenges**

Lack of formal recognition, inadequate educational materials in indigenous languages, and insufficient governmental support hamper efforts to maintain linguistic diversity.

## **8. Strategies for Documentation and Preservation**

### **8.1 Community-based Language Revitalization Programs**

Empowering local communities to document and teach their languages enhances motivation and ownership over knowledge preservation.

### **8.2 Use of Digital Media and Technology**

Audio-visual recordings, mobile apps, and online databases can aid in archiving languages and making traditional knowledge accessible to younger generations.

### **8.3 Integration into Formal Education**

Incorporating indigenous languages into school curricula fosters respect and practical use among youth, ensuring transmission of TKS.

## **9. Discussion**

The relationship between languages and traditional knowledge systems (TKS) in Arunachal Pradesh is intricate, multilayered, and profoundly interdependent. This complexity stems from the reality that language functions not merely as a system of communication but as a dynamic vessel preserving the epistemologies, cultural practices, environmental knowledge, and social structures of indigenous communities. In Arunachal Pradesh, where more than 30 major tribes speak over 50 distinct languages and dialects, the linguistic diversity mirrors an equally rich diversity of ecological wisdom and cultural heritage. Understanding this relationship requires a comprehensive discussion of several interrelated themes: the role of language in encoding traditional knowledge, the challenges of language and knowledge loss, and the strategies essential for safeguarding both.

### **9.1 Language as a Cultural and Cognitive Repository**

Languages of Arunachal Pradesh are deeply embedded repositories that encode uniquely complex bodies of knowledge developed over centuries of interaction between indigenous communities and their natural surroundings. Unlike written languages prevalent in many parts of the world, most tribal languages in Arunachal Pradesh rely on oral transmission. This oral tradition ensures the continuity of myths, rituals, ecological wisdom, and social norms that are transmitted through storytelling, songs, proverbs, and daily conversations.

These genres of oral literature serve as mnemonic devices for transmitting ecological knowledge such as plant classification, medicinal properties, sustainable harvesting methods, seasonal calendars, and animal behavior observation.

For example, in the Adi community, oral folk songs narrate the nuances of agricultural cycles, weather prediction, and rituals that align human activity with ecological rhythms (Nandita, 2019). Similarly, the Apatani people's water management and terrace farming knowledge is interwoven into their language through specialized terminologies and ritualistic expressions (Brahma, 2017). The Nyishi language preserves detailed ethnobotanical knowledge indispensable for healthcare, with specific nomenclature distinguishing plants and preparation techniques (Tiwari, 2020). Therefore, language is not neutral but is ideologically and socially loaded, shaping how communities perceive and interact with their environment.

## **9.2 Threats to Linguistic and Traditional Knowledge Systems**

Despite the critical role indigenous languages play, many are facing the imminent threat of extinction. This is particularly acute in Arunachal Pradesh due to several converging factors.

### **9.2.1 Language Endangerment**

Language endangerment results largely from the dominance of regional, national, and global languages such as Hindi, English, and Assamese within education, administration, and media. Younger generations often prioritize learning these languages to access broader economic and educational opportunities. Consequently, indigenous languages experience reduced intergenerational transmission, the primary mode of preserving traditional knowledge. UNESCO (2010) categorizes many languages of Arunachal Pradesh as vulnerable, endangered, or critically endangered.

The loss of language inevitably leads to the erosion of associated traditional knowledge. When a language dies, the unique worldview and ecological insights encapsulated therein also vanish, leaving a significant gap in humanity's shared intellectual heritage.

### **9.2.2 Impact of Modernization and Globalization**

Globalization introduces rapid social changes through urbanization, technological penetration, and new value systems that often disregard traditional lifestyles. Education systems frequently marginalize indigenous languages by emphasizing dominant languages at the expense of mother tongues. Similarly, modernization introduces new livelihood systems that reduce reliance on traditional ecological knowledge, creating a disconnect between language use and knowledge practice.

Media consumption further alienates youth from their cultural roots, accelerating language shift and devaluing the indigenous linguistic identity. This cultural disjunction threatens the continuity of traditional knowledge, as language loss disrupts the intergenerational transfer mechanisms fundamental to its survival.

### ***9.2.3 Policy and Institutional Barriers***

Government policies often focus on mainstream languages for administrative efficiency and nation-building. In Arunachal Pradesh, though the state recognizes multiple indigenous groups, there is limited institutional support for endangered language documentation and revitalization. Educational curricula lack inclusion of indigenous languages or traditional knowledge, and financial investments in linguistic research remain inadequate.

Moreover, the absence of language-specific legislation restricts community-driven initiatives for language renewal, while intellectual property rights concerning traditional knowledge are poorly defined, raising ethical and legal concerns about knowledge extraction and benefit sharing.

## **9.3 Opportunities and the Importance of Multilingualism for Knowledge Preservation**

While linguistic diversity presents challenges in terms of standardization and policy implementation, it also provides immense opportunities to safeguard environmental wisdom and cultural heritage through embracing multilingualism. Multilingualism, understood as the coexistence and active use of multiple languages, can promote positive identity affirmation and facilitate the maintenance of rich traditional knowledge systems.

### ***9.3.1 Community Empowerment through Language Vitality***

Active use and societal recognition of indigenous languages bolster community pride and cultural continuity. Language vitality correlates strongly with the health of traditional knowledge systems because the act of speaking creates the conditions for continual knowledge generation and adaptation. Communities that maintain strong linguistic identities are better equipped to negotiate changes without losing the essence of their cultural and ecological wisdom.

### ***9.3.2 Educational Integration and Intercultural Dialogue***

Implementing multilingual education that includes indigenous languages enhances learning by making children's cultural knowledge relevant and valued. Teaching in mother tongues helps preserve language structures and associated cognitive frameworks relevant to TKS. Additionally, multilingual platforms foster intercultural dialogue, enabling indigenous knowledge holders to engage

with modern sciences and policymakers on equal footing, potentially benefiting sustainable development and conservation efforts.

### ***9.3.3 Technological Innovations as Instruments of Preservation***

Advancements in digital recording, database creation, and mobile applications enable scalable documentation and dissemination of endangered languages and traditional knowledge. Multimedia resources such as audio-visual archives, interactive storytelling, and virtual reality-based cultural experiences offer innovative avenues for engaging younger generations, thereby revitalizing interest.

In Arunachal Pradesh, digitization of oral histories and ecological knowledge has the potential to store vast arrays of cultural information that are otherwise vulnerable to loss. The combination of traditional custodianship and technology can lead to a new renaissance in indigenous knowledge preservation.

## **9.4 Towards a Holistic Approach: Documentation, Revitalization, and Policy Support**

To safeguard the invaluable traditional knowledge systems preserved within indigenous languages, a multifaceted and holistic approach is imperative.

### ***9.4.1 Comprehensive Documentation Initiatives***

Documenting endangered languages through phonological, grammatical, and lexicographic analysis, alongside ethnographic recording of traditional knowledge, forms the foundation for preservation. Collaborative research involving linguists, anthropologists, and local communities ensures that documentation is both scientifically rigorous and culturally sensitive.

Community involvement is paramount; indigenous people must not only be informants but active agents in deciding what, how, and why knowledge should be documented. Participatory methodologies and respectful data ownership protocols enhance the ethical quality and sustainability of documentation.

### ***9.4.2 Community-Based Revitalization Programs***

Revitalization efforts rooted in community aspirations tend to be more successful. Initiatives such as language nests (early childhood immersion programs), adult language classes, cultural festivals, and storytelling workshops can revitalize language use and traditional knowledge transmission. Capacity building among local teachers and cultural activists empowers communities to carry forward these efforts with less dependency on external actors.

Further, creating spaces for the active daily use of indigenous languages in social, spiritual, and economic life strengthens the connection between language and knowledge practice.

### **9.4.3 Policy Reforms and Institutional Support**

At the policy level, strengthening legal recognition of indigenous languages and traditional knowledge rights within national frameworks and decentralised governance is critical. State governments can enact supportive policies for bilingual education, allocate funding for research and revitalization projects, and incorporate traditional knowledge in environmental and cultural heritage programs.

Encouraging partnerships between governmental bodies, NGOs, academic institutions, and indigenous councils fosters synergistic efforts to mainstream traditional knowledge within development agendas.

## **10. Conclusion**

This research has highlighted the profound and indispensable role languages play as living repositories of traditional knowledge systems in Arunachal Pradesh and the broader North-East Indian context. The region's exceptional linguistic diversity carries an immense wealth of ecological understanding, health practices, moral frameworks, and customary governance that remains largely unrecognized and under threat.

Protecting linguistic diversity is not merely an exercise in cultural preservation; it is a crucial pathway to sustaining the indigenous knowledge essential for biodiversity conservation, sustainable livelihoods, and social resilience. The loss of any language in Arunachal Pradesh represents an irreplaceable loss of unique knowledge systems honed through generations in intimate relationship with nature.

The challenges to language and traditional knowledge preservation are significant, including language endangerment due to sociopolitical marginalization, modernization pressures, and inadequate institutional support. However, these challenges also present opportunities for innovation and partnership. Embracing multilingualism, harnessing technology, and enforcing supportive policy frameworks can create environments conducive to revitalizing both language and knowledge.

Concerted efforts by indigenous communities, researchers, policymakers, and civil society are necessary to document, safeguard, and promote the living heritage of Arunachal Pradesh's languages and the traditional knowledge they embody. Only through such collaborative and respectful engagement can the invaluable wisdom embedded in these languages continue to inform and enrich future generations, contributing meaningfully to global cultural and environmental stewardship.

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# An Ethnolinguistic Study of Weaving and Textile Imagery as Reflected in Bihu Songs

Rijushna Gogoi

## Abstract

Weaving and textiles have always held an unparalleled position in the cultural and socio-economic life of Assam, particularly among the indigenous and rural people of Assam. Assamese traditional textiles such as *mekhela-sador*, *gamusa*, *riha*, and *tongali* are not merely materials but powerful cultural symbols that hold the identity, seasonal rhythms, and collective memory. Bihu songs, often known as Bihunaam or Bihugeet, are a core element of Bihu that reflect its cultural practices, identity, and experiences of day-to-day experiences. This study aims to explore the Assamese weaving tradition and textile imagery as represented in bihu songs. Bihu songs not only talk about nature, agricultural social relationships, but also about the handlooms, threads, unique motifs, textiles, and the weavers (often women) and show how weaving is an essential part of their culture and tradition. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this study tries to unfold the cultural and ethnolinguistic significance of the weaving tradition through the analysis of selected Bihu songs. Findings show that weaving tradition holds the cultural and linguistic identity. A large amount of the Assamese vocabulary would become extinct if the weaving practice were to end.

**Keywords:** *Assamese; bihu songs; weaving tradition; textile imagery; ethnolinguistic study*

## Introduction

Weaving tradition holds an integral part of the cultural, social, and economic fabric of Assam, particularly within rural and indigenous communities. Weaving is not merely a household craft but a deeply embedded cultural practice that reflects identity, gender roles, seasonal cycles, and community values. Almost every Assamese household traditionally has a handloom. Weaving was considered an essential skill for women from a very early age. Handloom products such as the *mekhela-sador*, *gamusa*, *riha*, etc., are central to Assamese cultural expression and are closely associated with rituals, festivals, and life-cycle events.

“The festivals were initiated by Austroasiatic people who were the earliest inhabitants of Assam. They lived in this state during 3000 BC to 1000 BC (Dr Pradip Neog, 2020). According to some other believers, Bihu festivals were initiated by Tibeto-Burman people” (Sarmah & Goswami, 2023, p.173). As per Barua (2005, p. 163). Bihu is the national festival of Assam. There are three types of Bihus celebrated at three different times of the year. *Bohag* or *Rongali* Bihu is celebrated when the spring season arrives (mid-April). As *Bohag* is the first month of the Assamese new year, this bihu is deeply associated with the start of agricultural life and fertility, which lasts for the first seven days of the month, but the celebration lasts the whole month. This is the season of rain, the season to celebrate and start a new agricultural cycle. *Kati* or *Kongali* Bihu is celebrated during the fall (mid-October), in which people pray for a good harvest. *Magh* or *Bhogali* Bihu is celebrated in the winter following the harvest season (mid-January). Bihu songs, locally known as *Bihugeet* or *Bihunaam*, are traditional folk songs performed during Bohag Bihu, which constitute a vibrant form of Assamese oral literature. Bohag bihu involves feasting, social gatherings, traditional Bihu dances, music, songs and cultural unity. These songs articulate everyday life experiences, bind people with emotions, courtship, labour, and social relations using simple yet powerful imagery. Borgohain (2025) classifies bihu into two types: “The first and the oldest one is of erotic nature, often sung and danced to in private, and the second one is non-erotic, sometimes spiritual in nature, to be performed in public” (Borgohain, 2025, p.15).

Among the most recurrent themes in Bihu songs is weaving, which appears not only as a way of earning, but also expresses metaphorical and symbolic representations of the rural life of the people and their day-to-day life activities. Bihu songs also connect nature to the people and always connect the people to the earth. Assamese life is based on agricultural activities. Their roots are connected to nature; as such, the folklore also represents their deep connection to nature, simple life activities, and rural lifestyle. This study is an attempt to analyse and find out how weaving and textile traditions have been an essential part of the life of people and how they are reflected in the bihu songs. Weaving and textiles are represented in Bihu songs, which contribute to the preservation and transmission of cultural memory, ethnolinguistic identity, and indigenous

knowledge. Bihu songs represent a cultural archive that holds the rhythms of rural life, agricultural cycles, and collective values of the community. How material culture is perceived and represented within society is also reflected in bihu songs. The appearance of weaving tradition reflects the centrality of textile production in Assamese life. Weaving related vocabulary, metaphors, and narratives in bihu songs not only reflects the textile imagery but also ethnolinguistic assets. The frequent appearance of weaving-related vocabulary, metaphors, and narratives in Bihu songs reflects the centrality of textile production in Assamese life. Textile and weaving traditions become audible, visible, and emotionally resonant through these songs. It also highlights the importance of Bihu songs as a source for understanding indigenous knowledge systems, intangible cultural heritage, and linguistic practices.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach. Primary data, which consists of selected traditional and contemporary Bihu songs, where secondary data has been collected from various sources and used whenever needed. Primary data has been collected from the local inhabitants of the Sivasagar district of Assam. Those participants who are closely associated with bihu were selected. Data has been gathered through formal and informal interactive sessions. Participants are mostly from the age group of 40-50. The reason behind selecting this age group is that they have the grounding knowledge of bihu songs, dances, and practices. Besides these, the data about the textile and weaving tradition has been collected from five women weavers(*xipini*). Secondary data has been gathered through existing literature and several social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Instagram. Secondary sources also include ethnographic studies on Assamese textiles, folklore, and cultural history. Textual and primary data have been used to identify weaving-related lexicon, metaphors, and themes, which are interpreted within a socio-cultural framework.

These techniques have made it possible to collect comprehensive information about weaving tradition and the indigenous knowledge system hidden in bihu songs. Interaction sessions with the participants have helped in clarifying the meanings, to know about the roots of textile, ethnocultural and ethnolinguistic values and the importance of documenting bihu songs. Therefore, a descriptive qualitative framework is found to be best fitted to examine the ethnolinguistic subtleties of Bihu songs in addition to the waving tradition as it is expressed.

### **Representation of Textile and Weaving Tradition in Bihu Songs**

The Assamese weaving tradition is associated with domestic activity. The loom traditionally known as *tātxāl* is an integral part of day-to-day life. Indigenous communities of Assam, such as the Mising, Bodo, Rabha, Karbi, Deori, Tiwa and others have distinct weaving patterns, motifs, and indigenous

techniques, often passed down through generations. Similarly, the Assamese community has their own weaving patterns, unique designs and motifs woven onto different types of silk and cotton. Weaving is traditionally associated with women in the domestic space. ‘*Mekhela-sador*’, the traditional dress of Assamese women, represents Assamese womanhood, dignity and exquisite artistry, as reflected in various Bihu lyrics. *Gamusa*, a piece of white cloth with red borders and flowers, serves as a marker of respect, hospitality, and cultural identity. The *riha*, often worn by women during rituals, marriages, and festivals, symbolises grace and cultural continuity. These textiles are not merely utilitarian objects, but they also express the social meanings related to status, gender, class, ethnicity, and ritual life. Weaving thus contributes significantly to household economies and reinforces the role of women.

Traditional Bihu clothing is typically made by women in handlooms. Their weaving instruments and tools are unique to them. Females wear a two-piece cloth known as mekhela-sador, which is distinct to Assamese culture. For the bihu dance, the outfit is typically chosen for its vibrant colours and ease of movement, made of *muga silk*.

#### **Bihu attire of females:**

**Mekhela:** A wide, cylindrical cloth draped from the waist down, folded into pleats and tucked in

**Muga Riha:** A not-too-wide but a long piece of cloth made of *muga silk*, where one end is tucked into the Mekhela and the rest is wrapped around the upper body.

**Blouse:** A fitted garment, mostly red and golden in colour worn underneath the *riha*

#### **Bihu attire of males:**

**Phulam Gamusa/Bihuwan:** “This variant, also termed as *Dui Hotiya* (two hand measurement), is gifted by the *Xipinie* (weavers) to her loved ones during *Bohag Bihu*” (Kalita et.al., 2024, p. 78).

**Tongali:** A piece of red coloured cloth smaller than gamusa in width but longer in size, usually worn by the *bihuwa* (male bihu dancer) around the waist

**Muga Sula:** A jersey-type shirt made of *muga silk* paired with *suriya*, which has traditional red motifs on it

**Suriya:** A long, thin piece of cloth usually made of either *muga silk* or white cotton wrapped around the waist and covering the lower body. It is often white in colour with a golden or red border (made of cotton) or purely golden in colour (made of *muga*).

These textile materials not only symbolizes the hard work, patience, and devotion a woman puts into creating something beautiful for her partner, equating the time spent weaving with the depth of her feelings. Assamese women play a

vital role in preserving and transmitting their distinctive traditions. Their deep affection for looms and textiles is evident in Bihu songs:

*“Otikoi senehor mugare mohura  
tatakoi senehor maku  
tatakoi senehor bohagor bihuti  
napati kenekoi thaku”*

*(Gogoi 1992, p. 167-168)*

It reads, ‘Muga rilk reel (mugare mohura) is very close to me, but my favorite is the *maku* (shuttle).’ However, Bohag bihu is my favorite; how come I do not dance!’ The instruments and tools used for weaving are just as significant to weavers as the weaving practice itself. Like bihu, they also love and admire their loom.

Not only the materials, but nature is also praised through bihu songs. *Nahor phul* (Indian rose chestnut), which blooms during the Bohag bihu season (April-May), is closely associated with their emotions. When the Nahor phul blossoms, it signifies that the Bihu is very near and that they should get themselves prepared for the celebration. Women try to complete their weaving before bihu begins as the season approaches. Moreover, bihu songs also feature the very familiar fragrance of the Nahor Phul, the loom, and the sound of the Dhul (musical instrument), which symbolises youth, fertility and the arrival of the spring season. It is described in bihu songs that:

*“Aji Bihu Bihu, kali Bihu Bihu  
nahar phul fulibar batar  
phulpani sigate dholar mat hunilu  
ujutit bhangi jaw jatar”*

*(Gogoi, 1992, p. 168)*

*Nahor phul phulibor botor  
nahor phulor gundhe pai nasoni gaat tote nai  
gosokot bhangi jai jatar*

‘The nasoni loses her composure when she gets the very familiar fragrance of *nahor phul*, and she unintentionally kicks and breaks the *jatar* (spinning machine) because she wants to dance’. This also symbolises the recklessness of the youth; the female dancer is so distracted by the smell of *nahor phul* and the sound of dhul that she becomes clumsy.

### **Textile Imagery as Metaphor**

Beyond literal representation, weaving imagery in Bihu songs also functions metaphorically. The interlacing of threads is frequently associated with love,

relationships, and social bonds. Just as threads are woven together to create cloth, human relationships are formed through care, patience, and emotional labour.

Textiles are also used as symbols of fertility and prosperity. Silk signifies purity, abundance, and the celebration of bihu. By embedding these metaphors in song, Bihu geet transform everyday labour into a rich symbolic language that communicates collective cultural and ethnographic values.

*Girip garap kori nasa hera nasoni  
Takuri ghura ni ghura hera nasoni  
Pokhila ura di ura hera nasoni  
Tehenu dekhiloloi bhal*

The lyrics say, ‘Dance with rhythm, spin like the spinning tool, dance like a flying butterfly, then only it looks good.’ As mentioned in the lyrics above, ‘*Takuri*’ is a spinning instrument designed to turn cotton made of Eri silk. Bihu dance is incredibly vivacious and very energetic. This song compares the spinning tool to the female dancer’s fast-paced, rhythmic motions alongside the male dancer.

### **Weaving as a symbol of ‘Love’**

“To express the feelings of love from the bottom of the heart, the poet uses many symbols in Bihusongs” (Sarma, 2024, p. 103). The lyrics of Bihu songs often use metaphors involving textiles to speak about relationships. “The range of Bihu songs is so wide that the literary characteristics, metaphors, ornaments, etc., as well as the sweetness of the melody create a unique feeling in the minds of the singers and listeners” (Hazarika, 2025, p.181). Assamese *xipini* (weavers) are very much experts in weaving. From ancient times, they didn’t buy clothes from the market. Instead, they spun the threads in spinning wheels by themselves. They collect different types of threads such as *eri silk* (Endi silk), *muga silk* (Golden silk), *paat silk* (mulberry silk), and *nuni silk* from different types of silkworms by applying indigenous techniques. It needs a lot of practice, patience, and experience to produce the perfect thread. A traditional, simple loom known as *tātxāl* is often used in villages for daily, non-commercial weaving, which is deeply embedded in Assamese life and household activities. Women are quite skilled at taking care of the home. They used to weave clothes in their spare time. The loom is made of bamboo and wood, and each component of the loom should be precisely cut into the right size and shape. The man of the house or the husband is usually the one who makes the loom for their spouse. They make the loom for their wives by cutting bamboo and wood into various sections. This represents the bond and love between a husband and wife, which is also reflected in bihu songs. The *Bihuwan* or *gamusa* is the most significant textile mentioned in Bihu folklore. As mentioned above, this traditional piece of

cloth is characterized by its white fabric and vibrant red, embroidered borders and motifs on it. It is not just a piece of cloth; it is a semiotic tool. *Gamusa* functions as a communication tool without words.

*“Tumi kari jaba, Rowani Dawani  
moinu bai jam Hal  
tumi lagai laba Bihure Gamosa  
moinu pati dim Hal”  
(Hazarika, 2025, p. 181)*

‘You will sow the seeds and do harvesting, I will do ploughing; you will weave gamusa for bihu, and I will make you the loom,’ asserts the husband in this Bihu song, speaking to his wife. This not only symbolizes love but also the division of work between a man and a woman. Earlier, people did agriculture, but not jobs or business-related work. Therefore, cultivation and textiles were their primary source of livelihood.

Bihu songs symbolizes not only love but also the spontaneous, romance and often playful lyrical exchanges among lovers which shows desire, longing, affection and intense emotion. During the Bohag season, unmarried girls weave *bihuwan* for their lovers, which is often considered the most crucial and intimate gift. Bihu songs also describe a young woman weaving gamusa on a handloom with her beloved in mind, hiding it from their parents and family members. Traditionally, Bihu songs served as a platform for young, unmarried people to express affection for their loved ones, often with witty, flirty, or satirical lyrics.

*Pasphalor sutalot duporia nizanot  
phulgamusa boisilu bohi nu tator patot  
xeikhoni oi gamusa nilikhile kopalot  
o senaimua o dhulor mate bolia kore*

In these particular lyrics, the *bihuwoti* (young female bihu dancer) is expressing her sorrow when she heard the beat of the *dhul* (musical instrument) of her lover by saying that ‘I was weaving *phulgamusa* (Gamusa with flowers) on the backyard loom in the middle of the day while no one else was around, so I could gift it to you in this bihu, but I could not’. The *dhul* beat serves as a communication tool for young lovers as well as a rhythm for dancing. The male *dhulia* (who plays dhul) frequently engages the female dancers directly or indirectly through their playing, which creates a silent but interconnecting conversation of rhythm and movement. Through Bihu songs, the male Bihu dancers often expressed their love, emotions, and sometimes disappointment that they did not receive the Bihu gamusa from their beloved.

*Aaiye diya bihuan murote Marilu  
tongali bandhilu oi aati  
dime dime buli bihuwanu nidili  
kaloinu rakhili xasi*

In the lyrics, the male *bihuwa* (bihu dancer) expresses his offence to his girlfriend by saying, ‘I tied the *tongali* tightly and the *bihuwan* that my mother gave me in my head. You promised to give me a *bihuwan*, but you never did. Whom have you saved it for?’ As stated above, a *tongali* is a piece of fabric, red in colour, which young men often wear like a traditional waistbelt during the bihu dance. This song describes the male Bihu dancer’s appearance. The way the woman knots or admires the *tongali* is a theme in romantic Bihu songs.

Bihu songs not only show the love and bondage between lovers, but it also shows the artistry of the loom and the process of weaving. The most striking metaphor in the following verse is the use of weaving terminology to describe emotional bonds:

*Maramar dīghe di chenehar bānī lai  
hepāhar āchore bovā,  
saponar phulere hiyār bihuvān  
manedi ebeli lowa.  
(Sarma, 2024, p. 102)*

The male bihu dancer admires the dance of the female bihu dancer and says:

*No noi saporit bohagoor baa lagi kohuabon halise  
bihure tolite amar nasoni ulahote nasise  
moromor dighere senehor banire  
oi nasoni  
boisone toi phul gamusa muke nu pindhahole buli*

This, in literal terms, means, ‘The grass beside the bank is swaying with the breeze, and the nasoni is dancing with joy in the bihu; are you weaving gamusa with the warp and the weft of love for me?’. These linguistic terms *Digh* (warp) and *Bani* (weft) are often used to symbolize the interconnectedness of two lives. *Digh* (warp) is considered love, and *Bani* (weft) is considered affection. Therefore, *Bihuwan* is not just a piece of cloth; it is made with love and affection. If the wrap or weft is loosened, it might imply a lack of commitment or a thinning of affection between two lovers.

In the past, young females would spend their leisure time weaving *gamusa*, *riha*, and other bihu dance-related textiles, particularly during and before Bohag bihu. The female lover leaves the loom as soon as she hears the sound and beat of *dhul* and *pepa* (a specific type of musical instrument made from buffalo horn).

Once she heard *dhul* and *pepa*, she was unable to contain her desire to go to the *bihuas* portrayed in the bihu songs:

*Agphalor sutalot tate boi asilu  
xunu senair dhulore maat  
dhule gume gumai pepar maate ringiai  
toroni herale gaat.*

The lyrics say, ‘I was weaving a loom in the front yard when I heard my lover’s *dhul* beat. I lost my composure.’

*Khiti khiti kori maku mari mari  
bohi boi asilu oi tat  
dhulor maate xuni o bihuloi ahilu o  
eri jau petore bhat*

The nasoni narrates, ‘I was weaving the loom with a shuttle, and I immediately left for Bihu and did not even eat my meal when I heard the beat of the *dhul*’. An instrument called a *maku* (shuttle) is used to weave the threads in the loom. The *maku*’s quick back-and-forth motion creates a very familiar rhythmic beat *khiti khiti* which is used to express the ephemeral quality of youth or a lover’s heartbeat.

### Representation of Womanhood

Some bihu songs celebrate the weaving abilities of the woman. Weaving serves as a means of preserving and protecting cultural history. Women are not just the labourers but the main stewards of weaving customs, preserving handcrafted, sustainable methods, cultural identity, and generational knowledge.

The traditional *mekhela sador* made of *muga* silk, worn by the women during the bihu festival, is often highlighted in songs to describe the beauty and grace. In the ethnolinguistic hierarchy of Assamese *Muga Riha*, a piece of golden cloth with red or marron borders (borders are often made with natural dyed colors) draped by women which is made of golden *muga* thread holds a position of unparalleled prestige. The shimmering quality of *muga* silk often symbolizes the bright, joyous, and precious nature of a budding romance. *Riha*, it is almost always used as a metonym for the woman herself or her social standing.

*Bihuloi ulalu gamkharu pindhilu  
asuri bandhilu khupa  
duyukhon hatote jetuka bulalu  
gaate merialu riha*

‘I am getting ready for bihu, wore gamkharu (a type of bangle worn by female bihu dancers), meticulously tied my bun, put mehendi on both of my hands, and draped the riha.’ These specific lyrics paint the picture of a woman getting ready for the bihu dance.

*Muga Riha* is forever associated with the Bihu dance. To prepare the thread, which is gathered from the Muga cocoon using a variety of indigenous techniques, the women begin weaving textiles prior to the bihu. The woman sits at the *tātxāl* after the loom is set. Sometimes, weaving a *Muga Riha* or a *bihuwan* in a single night is a test for the woman, her character, and efficiency in household chores.

### **Ethnolinguistic Significance**

Many technical terminologies are related to handloom and textile. Bihu songs act as a repository for this technical weaving vocabulary that might otherwise be lost to industrialization. By singing about the *Muga Riha*, *gamusa* or *bihuwan*, *mekhela-sador* and *tongali*, the community preserves the Ethno-taxonomy of their craft.

A large amount of the Assamese vocabulary would become extinct if the weaving practice were to end. These words are now even vanishing from the Assamese vocabulary. Because the physical processes are disappearing, the younger generation is becoming less familiar with these textile traditions, which is causing lexical attrition. Despite becoming commercialised and industrialised, people no longer weave clothing at home, and handlooms are no longer found in most households. Several tools, as mentioned in the bihu songs like *maku*, *takuri* and *mohura*, etc., are unique to this craft. These tools are not used in factory settings. The motifs are viewed as pictograms or ideograms in bihu songs as they speak without sounds or words. The flower motifs are identity markers. Vocabulary related to Weaving Tradition and loom: *tātxāl*, *zōtōr*, *mako*, *mōhura*, *Sereki*, *xu:ta*, *tulut<sup>h</sup>a*, *ra:s*, *xōlok<sup>h</sup>a*, *ug<sup>h</sup>a*, *bo k<sup>h</sup>uti*, *kat<sup>h</sup>i*, *nasoni zōri*, *putōl*, *sal bari*, *gari*, *gōrōka*, etc.

Not only the nouns but several verbs like *bua* (to weave), *bota* (to twist), and *phul-bosa* (to design flowers), *bo-tula*, *ras-tona*, etc., are extremely unique to handloom, which can't be replaced by verbs like 'make' or 'do'. These words are disappearing from the lexicon.

The rhythm of the Bihu song often matches the rhythm of the *khiti khiti* sound of the loom. This onomatopoeia helps the weaver maintain a steady pace. Some bihu songs specifically describe the whole weaving procedure, from boiling the cocoons to weaving the cloth, showing the technical knowledge that is retained in the collective memory of women, even if they don't have any formal education.

## Conclusion

Weaving is not just a domestic chore, but it is the identity of the Assamese people. Through the lens of textile imagery, these songs are essential for preserving technical precision, values, and knowledge from one generation to another. Bihu songs are a living repository of tradition, culture and ethnographic practices. Several tools and techniques used in weaving continue to be part of the active language of young Assamese people because weaving is primarily transmitted from one generation to another, and from mother to daughter, through hands-on practice. The corporal body provided by weaving has ethnolinguistic importance in retaining the language and richness of the vocabulary. Even when modernization has commercialized the textile sector, this oral tradition makes sure that the indigenous taste and ideas still there. The songs will lose their imagery when the loom is not there, and vice versa; the loom loses its cultural significance when the songs are not there.

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# **Festivals and Ceremonies in North-East India: A Bibliometric Analysis of Scholarly Trends (1990–2025)**

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## **Abstract**

This study presents a bibliometric analysis of scholarly literature on festivals and ceremonies in North-East India published between 1990 and 2025. Data were retrieved from the Scopus database using relevant keywords related to festivals, rituals, and cultural celebrations in the region. A total of 321 publications were identified and analysed using descriptive statistical methods. The dataset received approximately 1,808 citations during the study period, indicating the growing scholarly impact of research in this field. The results show a noticeable increase in publications after 2015, reflecting rising academic interest in the cultural and religious traditions of the region. Among the contributors, Kalzang Dorjee Bhutia and Svetlana Ryzhakova emerged as leading authors, while Gauhati University was the most productive institution. Geographically, India dominates the research output. Frequently occurring keywords include India, Assam, Northeast India, religion, culture, and ritual, highlighting the major thematic focus of the literature.

**Keywords:** Festivals, Ceremonies, North-East India, Bibliometrics, Cultural Heritage, Ethnicity, Ritual Studies

## **Introduction**

Festivals and ceremonies form an integral part of the socio-cultural life of communities in North-East India. The region, consisting of eight states—

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Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura—is widely recognized for its rich cultural diversity, indigenous traditions, and vibrant ritual practices. These cultural expressions are closely linked to religious beliefs, agricultural cycles, ecological relationships, and the social life of numerous ethnic communities. Festivals such as Bihu, Hornbill Festival, Losar, and Lai Haraoba illustrate the unique cultural identities and long-standing traditions of the region.

Over the past few decades, academic interest in festivals and ceremonial traditions of North-East India has increased significantly. Scholars from disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, folklore studies, and environmental studies have examined themes including ritual practices, indigenous knowledge systems, cultural identity, and socio-economic transformations. Growing attention to issues such as cultural heritage preservation, sustainable tourism, and biodiversity conservation has also contributed to expanding research in this area.

Despite this growing body of literature, research on festivals and ceremonies in North-East India remains dispersed across different disciplines and publication sources. As a result, identifying overall research trends, influential contributors, and thematic patterns becomes challenging. Bibliometric analysis offers a systematic and quantitative approach to examine scholarly output by analysing publication trends, citation impact, authorship patterns, and institutional contributions.

Against this backdrop, the present study conducts a bibliometric analysis of publications on festivals and ceremonies in North-East India indexed in the Scopus database between 1990 and 2025. The study analyses publication growth, authorship trends, subject distribution, leading institutions, country contributions, keywords, funding sources, and citation impact. By mapping the development of research in this domain, the study aims to provide insights into the scholarly landscape and identify potential directions for future research on the cultural traditions of the region.

## **Literature Review**

Scholarly interest in festivals and ceremonies in North-East India has expanded considerably, reflecting the region's rich cultural diversity and complex ethnic composition. Early studies by Deb Burman, Cajee, and Laloo (2007) emphasized the role of festivals, crafts, and tribal traditions in promoting eco-tourism and sustainable development, highlighting cultural heritage as a vital resource for regional growth. These studies primarily adopted descriptive and ethnographic approaches, focusing on documenting indigenous knowledge systems and cultural practices.

Subsequent research explored the cultural and philosophical dimensions of festivals. Sonowal (2016) examined the belief systems underlying festivals

in Meghalaya, demonstrating how myths, legends, and indigenous traditions reinforce social cohesion and matrilineal structures. Similarly, Thanglen and Thanglen (2017) analyzed festivals of the Chiru tribe, showing how ritual practices, agricultural cycles, and customary traditions contribute to the preservation of ethnic identity and community values. These studies emphasize the symbolic and functional roles of rituals in maintaining cultural continuity.

Later contributions shifted toward socio-political interpretations of festivals. Mawon (2020) argued that festivals in Manipur, such as Mera Houchongba and Lui-Ngai-Ni, serve as platforms for asserting ethnic identity, indigeneity, and political representation. Mene (2023) further examined ceremonial exchanges during the Reh Festival, demonstrating how ritualized gift exchange reinforces social cohesion and strengthens community bonds. These perspectives highlight the dynamic role of festivals as instruments of both cultural expression and socio-political negotiation.

Recent research has also incorporated perspectives on cultural heritage and environmental sustainability. Boruah and Srivastava (2024) emphasized the richness of Assam's cultural heritage through festivals such as Bihu, while Mondal and Pandey (2024) demonstrated how indigenous festivals like Sarhul and Baha embed ecological knowledge and promote sustainable environmental practices. Collectively, these studies establish that festivals and ceremonies function as key mechanisms for cultural transmission, identity formation, and ecological awareness.

Despite these valuable contributions, existing studies remain largely qualitative, localized, and descriptive, with limited attention to the broader structure and evolution of scholarly research in this domain. In contrast, the application of bibliometric methods in related fields has demonstrated significant potential for systematically analysing research trends. Bibliometric analysis, originally conceptualized by Alan Pritchard (1969), enables the quantitative evaluation of scientific literature through indicators such as publication growth, citation impact, authorship patterns, and collaboration networks. It also incorporates advanced knowledge mapping techniques, including co-authorship analysis, co-citation networks, and keyword co-occurrence mapping, to visualize the intellectual structure of a research field.

In the context of ritual and religion studies, Ronald Fischer (2021) conducted a large-scale bibliometric analysis of 16,600 publications, identifying major research clusters such as evolutionary, clinical, and neuroscience-based ritual studies, and highlighting increasing specialization and fragmentation over time. Similarly, Leilei Peng and Ke Chen (2024) analyzed the top 100 most-cited articles in religion, revealing publication trends, citation patterns, leading authors, institutional contributions, and the growing influence of altmetrics in research evaluation. These studies clearly demonstrate how bibliometric approaches can uncover the development, impact, and thematic evolution of scholarly fields.

However, despite the growing adoption of bibliometric techniques globally, there is a notable absence of such systematic analysis in the study of festivals and ceremonies in North-East India. Existing literature does not adequately examine publication growth trends over time, citation patterns indicating research impact, authorship and institutional collaboration networks, or thematic evolution through keyword analysis. This lack of methodological integration limits a comprehensive understanding of how research on festivals and ceremonies in this region has developed, diversified, and gained scholarly prominence.

Therefore, the present study seeks to address this gap by applying bibliometric methods to analyse scholarly publications on festivals and ceremonies in North-East India from 1990 to 2025. The study aims to examine publication growth trends, citation impact, authorship patterns, institutional and geographical contributions, and major research themes using knowledge mapping techniques. By integrating cultural insights with quantitative analysis, the study provides a systematic and comprehensive overview of scholarly trends in this field.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To examine the annual growth and publication trends of research on festivals and ceremonies in North-East India during the period 1990–2025.
2. To analyse the authorship pattern and collaboration trends among researchers contributing to this field.
3. To identify the most productive authors, institutions, and source titles contributing to the scholarly literature on festivals and ceremonies in North-East India.
4. To determine the geographical distribution of publications and country-wise research contributions in this area of study.
5. To examine the most frequently used keywords, subject areas, and highly cited publications to understand the major research themes and scholarly impact in the field.

### **Research Methodology**

#### ***Data Source***

The present study is based on bibliometric data retrieved from the Scopus database, one of the largest multidisciplinary abstract and citation databases of peer-reviewed literature. Scopus was selected because of its extensive coverage of scholarly journals, books, and conference proceedings across various academic disciplines. It provides standardized bibliographic information such as author names, institutional affiliations, keywords, citations, publication sources, and funding details. These features make it a reliable source for conducting systematic bibliometric analysis and identifying scholarly trends.

### ***Search Strategy***

A structured search query was developed to retrieve publications related to festivals and ceremonies in North-East India. The search was conducted in the Title, Abstract, and Keywords (TITLE-ABS-KEY) fields to ensure the inclusion of publications where the topic forms a central focus of the study. The search expression combined keywords related to cultural practices such as festival, ceremony, ritual, and cultural celebration with geographical identifiers representing the North-Eastern states of India. The following search string was applied in the Scopus database: TITLE-ABS-KEY ((“festival\*” OR “ceremon\*” OR “ritual\*” OR “cultural celebration\*” OR “religious ceremony\*” OR “harvest festival\*”) AND (“North-East India” OR Assam OR Manipur OR Meghalaya OR Mizoram OR Nagaland OR Tripura OR “Arunachal Pradesh” OR Sikkim)). The search query used wildcard symbols (\*) to capture different variations of keywords. The final results were exported in CSV format for further analysis.

### ***Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria***

To ensure the relevance and quality of the dataset, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied. The study included publications related to festivals, ceremonies, rituals, and cultural celebrations in North-East India published between 1990 and 2025. All document types available in Scopus—such as articles, book chapters, reviews, conference papers, books, editorials, notes, and letters—were included to provide a comprehensive overview of scholarly communication in the field. Publications not directly related to the North-East Indian region, records with incomplete bibliographic information, and duplicate entries were excluded from the dataset.

### ***Data Preparation and Analysis***

After data retrieval, the records were carefully screened and organized to ensure accuracy. Bibliographic details such as authors, publication year, source titles, institutional affiliations, keywords, and citation counts were standardized and compiled. The cleaned dataset was analysed using Microsoft Excel to generate descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions, percentages, and publication trends. Tables and charts were created to illustrate the patterns of research productivity.

### ***Bibliometric Indicators***

Several bibliometric indicators were applied to examine the scholarly trends in the field. These include annual publication growth, authorship patterns, leading institutions, country contributions, subject distribution, funding sponsors, open access status, and citation impact. These indicators helped in identifying influential publications, major contributors, and the overall development of research on festivals and ceremonies in North-East India.

### ***Limitations of the study***

The study is limited to data retrieved from the Scopus database, which may exclude relevant regional, non-indexed, or non-English publications. The keyword-based search strategy may not capture all variations of relevant studies. The analysis relies on bibliographic metadata rather than full-text content, limiting qualitative insights. Citation indicators may be influenced by time lag and indexing inconsistencies. Thus, findings provide a quantitative overview rather than a complete representation of the field.

### **Data Analysis**

#### ***Period-wise Publication and Citation Distribution***

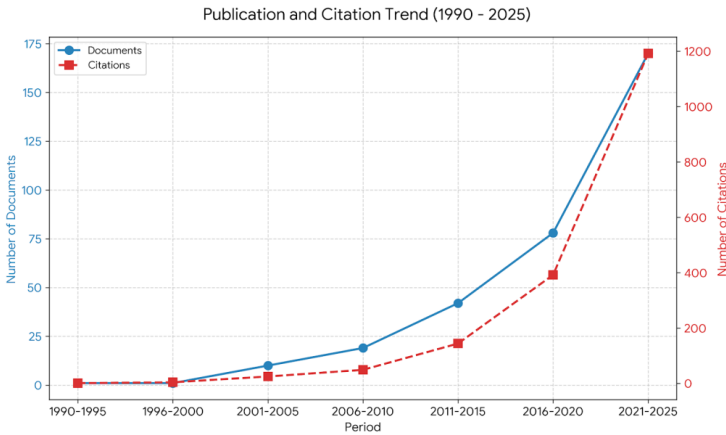
The period-wise distribution of publications reveals the evolving scholarly attention toward festivals and ceremonies in North-East India. As can be seen in Table 1, research output remained very limited between 1990 and 2000, with only a few publications and minimal citation impact. A gradual increase in publications is observed between 2001 and 2015, indicating emerging academic interest in cultural and ritual studies of the region. A significant surge in research productivity is evident after 2016, particularly during 2021–2025, which accounts for the highest number of publications (170) and citations (1192). This trend suggests increasing scholarly engagement and growing interdisciplinary interest in the cultural heritage and ritual practices of North-East India.

**Table 1- Publication and Citation Trends by Time Period on Festivals and Ceremonies in North-East India (1990–2025)**

<b>Period</b>	<b>Documents</b>	<b>Citations</b>
1990–1995	1	1
1996–2000	1	4
2001–2005	10	25
2006–2010	19	49
2011–2015	42	144
2016–2020	78	392
2021–2025	170	1192
<b>Total</b>	<b>321</b>	<b>1807</b>

The longitudinal trend indicates a consistent and exponential increase in both research output and scholarly impact from 1990 to 2025, with the most substantial growth occurring in the last decade (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1- Publication and Citation Trends from 1990 to 2025**



**Document Type Distribution**

As can be seen in Table 2, a total of 321 publications were identified on festivals and ceremonies in North-East India during the study period 1990-2025. Among the different document types, journal articles constitute the largest share with 196 publications (61.06%), indicating that scholarly communication in this field is predominantly disseminated through peer-reviewed journals. Book chapters represent the second largest category with 87 publications (27.10%), reflecting the importance of edited volumes in cultural and regional studies.

Review articles account for 22 publications (6.86%), suggesting a moderate level of synthesis of existing literature. Other document types such as conference papers (1.87%), books (1.25%), and editorials (0.93%) contribute relatively small proportions. Meanwhile, notes, letters, and conference reviews each account for 0.31%, indicating minimal representation.

Overall, the dominance of journal articles and book chapters highlights that research on festivals and ceremonies in North-East India is mainly communicated through academic journals and scholarly edited volumes, while other formats play only a limited role.

**Table 2- Distribution of Publications by Document Type (1990–2025)**

Rank	Document type	No of Articles	Percentage (%)
	Article	196	61.06
	Book Chapter	87	27.10
	Review	22	6.86
	Conference Paper	6	1.87

	Book	4	1.25
	Editorial	3	0.93
	Note	1	0.31
	Letter	1	0.31
	Conference review	1	0.31
	Total	321	100

### ***Subject Area Distribution***

As can be seen in Table 3, research on festivals and ceremonies in North-East India spans a wide range of academic disciplines. The highest number of publications falls under Social Sciences with 180 articles, indicating that the topic is primarily studied from sociological, anthropological, and cultural perspectives. Arts and Humanities rank second with 130 publications, highlighting the importance of historical, cultural, and literary approaches in examining regional traditions and rituals.

Agricultural and Biological Sciences (48 articles) and Environmental Science (43 articles) also show notable contributions, reflecting research related to traditional ecological knowledge, biodiversity, and environmental practices associated with festivals and rituals. Medicine (33 articles) and Engineering (31 articles) indicate interdisciplinary engagement, particularly in areas such as health practices, environmental impacts, and technological applications.

Other subject areas including Business, Management and Accounting (19), Biochemistry, Genetics and Molecular Biology (15), Health Professions (13), and Economics, Econometrics and Finance (13) demonstrate moderate scholarly interest. Meanwhile, Energy (11), Computer Science (11), Pharmacology, Toxicology and Pharmaceutics (9), Earth and Planetary Sciences (9), and Psychology (8) represent smaller yet emerging research contributions.

Overall, the distribution of subject areas indicates that the study of festivals and ceremonies in North-East India is highly interdisciplinary, though it remains predominantly rooted in the Social Sciences and Humanities.

**Table 3- Subject Area Classification of Publications on Festivals and Ceremonies in North-East India**

Rank	Subject Area	No of Articles
	Social Sciences	180
	Arts and Humanities	130
	Agricultural and Biological Sciences	48
	Environmental Science	43

	Medicine	33
	Engineering	31
	Business, Management and Accounting	19
	Biochemistry, Genetics and Molecular Biology	15
	Health Professions	13
	Economics, Econometrics and Finance	13
	Energy	11
	Computer Science	11
	Pharmacology, Toxicology and Pharmaceutics	9
	Earth and Planetary Sciences	9
	Psychology	8

### ***Most Productive Authors***

As can be seen in Table 4, the distribution of author productivity indicates that only a small number of researchers have contributed multiple publications to the field of festivals and ceremonies in North-East India. Among the authors, Bhutia, Kalzang Dorjee and Ryzhakova, S. rank first with four publications each, demonstrating their significant scholarly contribution to this research area.

They are followed by Bhutia, Kikee Doma; Borkataky-Varma, S.; Borthakur, S.K.; Urban, H.B.; Singh, H.B.; Nath, D.P.; Longkumer, A.; Kulshreshtha, S.K.; Khan, M.L.; Chaudhuri, S.K.; and Chakraborty, A.S., each contributing three publications. Additionally, Yumkham, S.D. and Tynsong, I. have two publications each.

Overall, the data suggest that research on festivals and ceremonies in North-East India is produced by a diverse group of scholars, with relatively few highly productive authors and a larger number of contributors with limited publications. This pattern indicates a dispersed authorship structure within the field.

**Table 4- Most Productive Authors in the Field (Top 15)**

Rank	Author's Name	No of Articles
	Bhutia, Kalzang Dorjee	4
	Ryzhakova, S.	4
	Bhutia, Kikee Doma	3
	Borkataky-Varma, S.	3
	Borthakur, S.K.	3
	Urban, H.B.	3

	Singh, H.B.	3
	Nath, D.P.	3
	Longkumer, A.	3
	Kulshreshtha, S.K.	3
	Khan, M.L.	3
	Chaudhuri, S.K.	3
	Chakraborty, A.S.	3
	Yumkham, S.D.	2
	Tynsong, I.	2

### *Authorship Pattern of Publications*

As can be seen in Table 5, single-authored publications dominate the research on festivals and ceremonies in North-East India, accounting for 166 papers (51.71%). This indicates that individual scholarly contributions play a major role in this research domain. Papers with two authors constitute 79 publications (24.61%), while three-authored papers account for 43 publications (13.40%).

The number of publications decreases as the number of authors increases. Multi-authored works involving four or more authors represent a relatively small proportion of the total output. This trend suggests that research in this field is largely driven by individual or small collaborative efforts rather than large research teams.

Overall, the findings reveal a strong prevalence of single-author contributions, reflecting the qualitative and humanities-oriented nature of research on cultural festivals and ceremonies in North-East India.

**Table 5- Authorship Pattern of Publications on Festivals and Ceremonies in North-East India (1990–2025)**

Number of Authors	Number of Papers	Percentage (%)	Rank
1	166	51.71	I
2	79	24.61	II
3	43	13.40	III
4	14	4.36	IV
5	8	2.49	V
6	4	1.25	VI
8	3	0.93	VII
9	1	0.31	VIII

10	1	0.31	IX
Above 10 authors	2	0.62	X
Total	321	100	
Note. Data extracted from the Scopus database.			

### ***Source Titles and Core Journals***

As can be seen in Table 6, research on festivals and ceremonies in North-East India is published across a variety of journals and edited volumes. The Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge ranks first with 10 publications, indicating its significant role in disseminating research related to indigenous knowledge, culture, and traditions. The book *Death and Dying in Northeast India: Indigeneity and Afterlife* occupies the second position with 9 publications.

Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities and Asian Ethnicity each contribute 8 publications, highlighting the importance of interdisciplinary and ethnic studies perspectives. South Asia: Journal of South Asia Studies ranks fifth with 7 publications, reflecting regional scholarly interest.

Other notable sources include *Oriental Anthropologist* (6 publications) and several journals and books such as *Space and Culture India*, *Religions*, *Reflections of Dance Along the Brahmaputra: Celebrating Dance in North East India*, *Man in India*, and *International Journal of Scientific and Technology Research*, each with 5 publications. Additionally, *Routledge Handbook of Tribe and Religions in India: Contemporary Readings on Spirituality, Belief and Identity*, *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics*, *International Journal of Advanced Science and Technology*, and *Environmental Intimacies from India's North East: Psycho-Social Implications for Pro-Environment Behaviour* each contribute 4 publications.

Overall, the distribution indicates that research outputs are scattered across multiple interdisciplinary journals and edited books, reflecting the diverse academic interest in cultural, anthropological, and social dimensions of festivals and ceremonies in North-East India.

**Table 6- Leading Source Titles Publishing Research on Festivals and Ceremonies in North-East India**

Rank	Source Title	No of Articles
	Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge	10
	<i>Death and Dying in Northeast India Indigeneity and Afterlife</i>	9
	Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities	8

	Asian Ethnicity	8
	South Asia Journal of South Asia Studies	7
	Oriental Anthropologist	6
	Space and Culture India	5
	Religions	5
	Reflections of Dance Along the Brahmaputra Celebrating Dance in North East India	5
	Man in India	5
	International Journal of Scientific and Technology Research	5
	Routledge Handbook of Tribe and Religions in India Contemporary Readings on Spirituality Belief and Identity	4
	Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics	4
	International Journal of Advanced Science and Technology	4
	Environmental Intimacies from Indias North East Psycho Social Implications for Pro Environment Behaviour	4

### ***Institutional Contributions***

As can be seen in Table 7, several universities and research institutions have contributed significantly to publications on festivals and ceremonies in North-East India. Gauhati University ranks first with 21 publications, indicating its leading role in research related to the culture and traditions of the region. North-Eastern Hill University follows with 15 publications, while Tezpur University and Rajiv Gandhi University, Doimukh each contribute 13 publications.

Mizoram University accounts for 8 publications, and Cotton University contributes 7 publications. Other notable institutions include the University of Delhi, Tartu Ülikool (University of Tartu), and the North Eastern Regional Institute of Science and Technology, each producing 6 publications.

Further contributions are made by the Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, Dibrugarh University, Manipur University, University of Calcutta, The University of Edinburgh, and Jawaharlal Nehru University, each with 4 publications.

Overall, the distribution shows that universities located in North-East India play a dominant role in producing research on regional festivals and ceremonies, while a number of national and international institutions also contribute to the scholarly literature.

**Table 7- Institutional Affiliation of Authors (Top 15 Institutions)**

Rank	Affiliation	No of Articles
	Gauhati University	21
	North-Eastern Hill University	15
	Tezpur University	13
	Rajiv Gandhi University, Doimukh	13
	Mizoram University	8
	Cotton University	7
	University of Delhi	6
	Tartu Ülikool (University of Tartu)	6
	North Eastern Regional Institute of Science and Technology	6
	Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati	4
	Dibrugarh University	4
	Manipur University	4
	University of Calcutta	4
	The University of Edinburgh	4
	Jawaharlal Nehru University	4

***Country-wise Contribution***

As can be seen in Table 8, the majority of publications on festivals and ceremonies in North-East India originate from India, accounting for 235 articles (67.14%). This indicates that research in this field is largely driven by scholars based within the country. The United States ranks second with 31 publications (8.86%), followed by the United Kingdom with 20 publications (5.71%), reflecting notable international scholarly interest.

A small proportion of publications are categorized as undefined (15; 4.29%). Other contributing countries include Estonia (6; 1.71%), the Netherlands and Germany (5; 1.43% each), and France (4; 1.14%). Meanwhile, the Russian Federation and Italy each contribute 3 publications (0.86%). Countries such as New Zealand, Japan, Austria, and Australia each account for 2 publications (0.57%), while the United Arab Emirates contributes 1 publication (0.29%).

Overall, the distribution highlights the dominant contribution of Indian scholars while also demonstrating moderate international participation in research on festivals and ceremonies in North-East India.

**Table 8- Country/Territory-Wise Distribution of Publications**

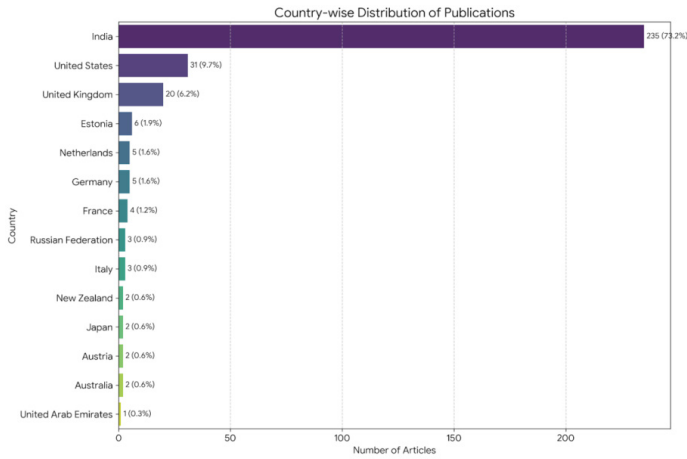
Rank	Country/territory	No. of Articles	Percentage
	India	235	67.14
	United States	31	8.86
	United Kingdom	20	5.71
	Undefined	15	4.29
	Estonia	6	1.71
	Netherlands	5	1.43
	Germany	5	1.43
	France	4	1.14
	Russian Federation	3	0.86
	Italy	3	0.86
	New Zealand	2	0.57
	Japan	2	0.57
	Austria	2	0.57
	Australia	2	0.57
	United Arab Emirates	1	0.29

Figure 2 provides a detailed breakdown of scholarly publications categorized by country or territory. Based on the data, there is a distinct and significant concentration of research output within a small number of geographical regions. India emerged as the leading contributor, accounting for 235 articles, which represents a substantial 67.14% of the total publication output. This suggests that the research topic is highly specialized or holds particular academic and regional relevance in India.

The United States ( $n = 31$ , 8.86%) and the United Kingdom ( $n = 20$ , 5.71%) followed as the second and third most prolific contributors, respectively. Together with India, these three nations represent over 80% of the entire dataset, indicating a centralized academic discourse. Other significant contributors include Estonia ( $n = 6$ ), the Netherlands ( $n = 5$ ), and Germany ( $n = 5$ ). Furthermore, a small percentage of publications (4.29%) were categorized as originating from undefined territories.

The widespread but sparse distribution among the remaining countries—including nations from Europe, Oceania, and Asia—illustrates a global, albeit secondary, interest in the field. This pattern indicates that while the core research activity is concentrated in South Asia and Western developed nations, the scholarly impact is beginning to permeate diverse international academic circles.

**Figure 2- Country-wise Distribution of Research Publications**



**Keyword Analysis**

As can be seen in Table 9, the most frequently occurring keyword is *India* with 44 occurrences, indicating the broader national context in which the research on festivals and ceremonies in North-East India is situated. This is followed by *Assam* (27) and *Northeast India* (21), highlighting the strong geographical focus of the studies within the region.

The keywords *Religion* and *Culture* each appear 18 times, reflecting the central role of religious practices and cultural traditions in the study of festivals and ceremonies. *Arunachal Pradesh* (16), *Ritual* (15), *Human* (14), and *Manipur* (13) also appear frequently, suggesting the importance of regional communities and ritual practices in scholarly discussions.

Other notable keywords include *Festival* (11), *Rituals* (10), and *Traditional Knowledge* (9), which emphasize the cultural and ethnographic dimensions of the research. Additionally, *Conservation* (9) and *Buddhism* (9) indicate interdisciplinary connections with environmental studies and religious studies.

Overall, the keyword distribution demonstrates that research on festivals and ceremonies in North-East India primarily focuses on cultural, religious, and regional aspects, while also integrating themes related to traditional knowledge and environmental conservation.

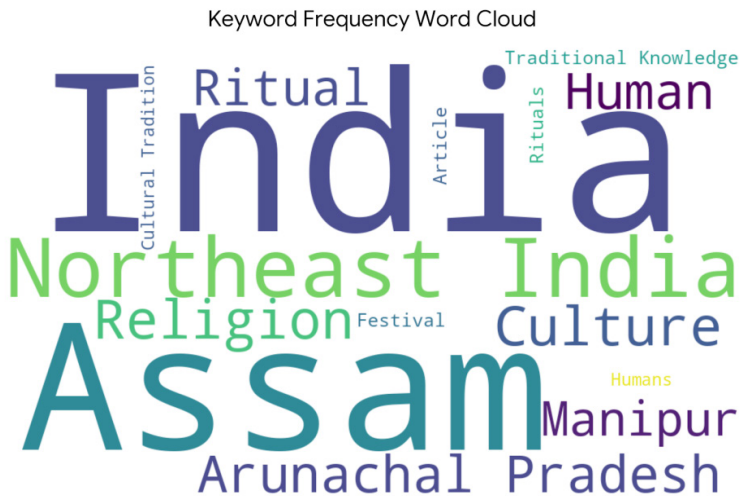
**Table 9- Most Frequent Author Keywords in the Dataset**

Rank	Keyword	No of Articles
	India	44
	Assam	27

	Northeast India	21
	Religion	18
	Culture	18
	Arunachal Pradesh	16
	Ritual	15
	Human	14
	Manipur	13
	Festival	11
	Rituals	10
	Article	10
	Traditional Knowledge	9
	Conservation	9
	Buddhism	9

Based on the keyword distribution, the research is predominantly localized within India, specifically focusing on Northeast India (Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Manipur), with a primary thematic concentration on religion, culture, and traditional rituals (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3- Word Cloud Visualization of Keyword Frequency**



Note. The word cloud represents the most frequent keywords extracted from the publication titles and abstracts. The size of each word is proportional to its frequency of occurrence, with “India,” “Assam,” and “Northeast India” being the most prominent terms.

### **Source Type and Language Distribution**

As can be seen in Table 10, the majority of publications on festivals and ceremonies in North-East India are published in journals, accounting for 218 articles (67.91%). This indicates that scholarly journals are the primary medium for disseminating research findings in this field. Books represent the second largest source type with 91 publications (28.35%), reflecting the importance of monographs and edited volumes in cultural and regional studies.

Book series contribute 10 publications (3.12%), while trade journals account for only 2 publications (0.62%). Overall, the distribution shows a strong dominance of journal publications, though books also play a significant role in documenting and analyzing cultural traditions and rituals in North-East India.

**Table 10- Distribution of Publications by Source Type**

Rank	Source Type	No of Articles	Percentage
	Journal	218	67.91
	Book	91	28.35
	Book Series	10	3.12
	Trade Journal	2	0.62

As can be seen in Table 11, the overwhelming majority of publications on festivals and ceremonies in North-East India are written in English, accounting for 315 articles (98.13%). This indicates that English serves as the primary language of scholarly communication in this research area.

A very small number of publications appear in other languages, including French and Russian with 2 articles each (0.62%), while Italian and Japanese contribute 1 article each (0.31%).

Overall, the findings highlight the strong dominance of English as the medium for academic dissemination, while publications in other languages remain minimal.

**Table 11- Language of Publication**

Rank	Language	No of Articles	Percentage
	English	315	98.13
	French	2	0.62
	Russian	2	0.62
	Italian	1	0.31
	Japanese	1	0.31

### ***Funding Sponsors***

As can be seen in Table 12, the University Grants Commission (UGC) emerges as the leading funding sponsor with 5 funded publications, highlighting its significant role in supporting research related to festivals and ceremonies in North-East India. The American Council of Learned Societies and the Department of Science and Technology, Ministry of Science and Technology, India each support 3 publications.

Several institutions such as the Science and Engineering Research Board, North-Eastern Hill University, North Eastern Regional Institute of Science and Technology, Ministry of Human Resource Development, and the European Regional Development Fund each contribute funding for 2 publications. Other organizations including the Wenner-Gren Foundation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Sihtasutus Archimedes, Russian Science Foundation, Russian Foundation for Fundamental Investigations, Russian Academy of Sciences, and the Rufford Foundation each support 1 publication.

Overall, the findings indicate that both national and international funding agencies contribute to research in this field, although the overall number of funded publications remains relatively limited.

**Table 12- Major Funding Sponsors Supporting Research in the Field**

Rank	Funding Sponsor	No of Articles
	University Grants Commission	5
	American Council of Learned Societies	3
	Department of Science and Technology, Ministry of Science and Technology, India	3
	Science and Engineering Research Board	2
	North-Eastern Hill University	2
	North Eastern Regional Institute of Science and Technology	2
	Ministry of Human Resource Development	2
	European Regional Development Fund	2
	Wenner-Gren Foundation	1
	University of Wisconsin-Madison	1
	Sihtasutus Archimedes	1
	Russian Science Foundation	1
	Russian Foundation for Fundamental Investigations	1
	Russian Academy of Sciences	1
	Rufford Foundation	1

### ***Open Access Trends***

As can be seen in Table 13, a significant proportion of publications on festivals and ceremonies in North-East India are available through open access. The category “All open access” accounts for the highest share with 80 articles (40.40%), indicating a substantial level of accessibility to research outputs.

Among the specific open access types, Gold open access contributes 59 articles (29.80%), followed by Green open access with 43 articles (21.72%). Bronze open access represents 10 articles (5.05%), while Hybrid gold accounts for 6 articles (3.03%).

Overall, the distribution shows that a considerable portion of the research in this field is accessible through open access platforms, thereby enhancing the visibility and dissemination of scholarly work.

**Table 13- Open Access Status of Publications**

Rank	Open Access	No of Articles	Percentage
	All open access	80	40.40
	Gold	59	29.80
	Green	43	21.72
	Bronze	10	5.05
	Hybrid gold	6	3.03

### ***Citation Impact***

As can be seen in Table 14, the most highly cited publication is by Aiyadurai et al. (2010) titled “Wildlife hunting by indigenous tribes,” published in ORYX, which has received 102 citations. This is followed by Khumbongmayum et al. (2005) on sacred groves of Manipur with 93 citations and Sharma and Pegu (2011) on ethnobotany of religious beliefs with 77 citations.

Most of the highly cited documents are research articles, indicating that empirical studies dominate influential scholarship in this field. The sources cover diverse themes such as indigenous practices, biodiversity conservation, ethnobotany, religion, environmental impact of festivals, and traditional food culture. Journals such as Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine, Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge, and Biodiversity and Conservation appear repeatedly, reflecting their importance in publishing impactful research related to festivals, rituals, and cultural practices in North-East India.

**Table 14- Most Cited Publications on Festivals and Ceremonies in North-East India (Top 20)**

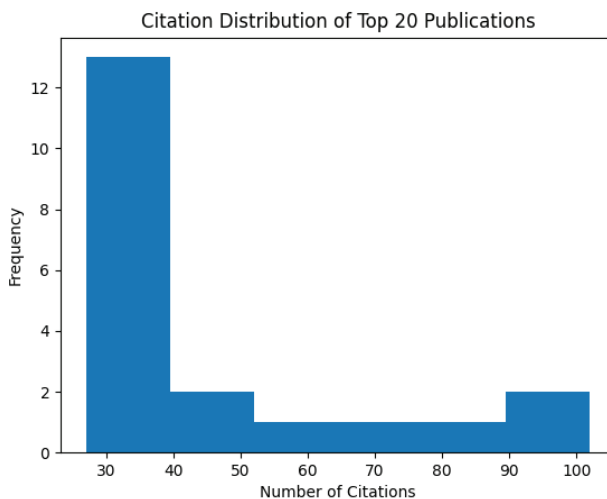
Rank	Author(s)	Year	Short Title	Source Title	Document Type	Citations
1	Aiyadurai et al.	2010	Wildlife hunting by indigenous tribes	ORYX	Article	102
2	Khum-bongma-yum et al.	2005	Sacred groves of Manipur	Biodiversity and Conservation	Article	93
3	Sharma & Pegu	2011	Ethnobotany of religious beliefs	Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine	Article	77
4	Barman & Dev Choudhury	2020	Hybrid GWO-SVM load forecasting	Sustainable Cities and Society	Article	70
5	Ormsby	2013	Attitudes toward sacred groves	Conservation and Society	Article	52
6	Saijo & Takeda	1999	HPLC analysis of catechins	Nippon Shokuhin Kagaku Kogaku Kaishi	Article	43
7	Urban	2001	Kingship and sacrifice in Assamese Tantra	Journal of the American Academy of Religion	Review	41
8	Das & Husain	2016	Ecotourism and economic welfare	Journal of Ecotourism	Article	36

9	Borborah et al.	2016	Musa balbisiana taxonomy	Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge	Article	35
10	Sharma et al.	2012	Medico-religious plants	Journal of Ethnopharmacology	Article	35
11	Nijhawan & Mihu	2020	Hunting taboos and wildlife conservation	Journal of Ethnobiology	Article	34
12	Bhupathy et al.	2013	Wildlife exploitation in Nagaland	Tropical Conservation Science	Article	34
13	Deka & Hoque	2014	Diwali fireworks and PM10	Aerosol and Air Quality Research	Article	33
14	Rawat et al.	2021	Alcoholic beverages by tribal communities	Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems	Review	31
15	Garaga & Kota	2018	PM10 and human health during Diwali	Journal of Health and Pollution	Article	30
16	Fuloria et al.	2022	Synbiotic effects of fermented rice	Frontiers in Microbiology	Review	29
17	Teegalapalli & Datta	2016	Shifting cultivation practices	Ambio	Article	29

18	Li et al.	2020	Ethno-botanical study of Monpa	Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine	Article	27
19	Devi & Paramasivam	2012	Traditional fermented foods of Manipur	Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge	Article	27
20	Blackburn	2007	Oral stories and culture areas	South Asia: Journal of South Asia Studies	Article	27

The citation distribution graph of the top 20 publications shows a right-skewed pattern (See Figure 4). Most articles fall within the 27–40 citation range, indicating a concentration of moderately cited works. Only a few publications have very high citation counts (above 70), demonstrating the presence of highly influential papers. This uneven distribution reflects typical bibliometric patterns, where a small number of publications contribute disproportionately to total citations, consistent with citation concentration trends in scholarly communication.

**Figure 4- Citation Distribution of Top 20 Publications**



## Conclusion

This bibliometric study examined the scholarly literature on festivals and ceremonies in North-East India published between 1990 and 2025 using data retrieved from the Scopus database. The findings reveal a steady growth in research output over the years, particularly after 2015, indicating increasing academic interest in the cultural, religious, and socio-environmental dimensions of festivals and ceremonial practices in the region. The analysis also shows that journal articles constitute the dominant form of scholarly communication, while English remains the primary language of publication, reflecting the international dissemination of research in this field.

The study further highlights that research contributions are largely concentrated in the disciplines of social sciences and arts and humanities, demonstrating the interdisciplinary nature of festival-related studies. Authorship analysis indicates that single-authored publications are the most common, suggesting that much of the research is driven by individual scholars rather than large collaborative teams. In terms of geographical contribution, India emerges as the leading contributor, followed by countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, indicating both regional focus and growing international academic engagement.

Institutional analysis reveals that universities located in North-East India, particularly Gauhati University, North-Eastern Hill University, and Tezpur University, play a significant role in advancing research on regional festivals and cultural traditions. Keyword analysis further indicates that themes such as culture, religion, ritual, traditional knowledge, and regional identities form the core focus of the existing literature.

Overall, the study provides a comprehensive overview of the development, structure, and thematic orientation of research on festivals and ceremonies in North-East India. The findings may serve as a valuable reference for scholars, policymakers, and cultural researchers seeking to understand existing research trends and identify future directions for interdisciplinary studies on cultural heritage, indigenous traditions, and community practices in the region. Future research may further expand this analysis by incorporating multiple databases and advanced bibliometric visualization techniques to explore collaboration networks and emerging research themes in greater depth.

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# **Folk beliefs and practices among the Mishing community of Assam**

**Anup Hazarika**

## **Abstract**

The Mishings are one of the largest indigenous tribes, mostly inhabiting the Brahmaputra valley. They possess a rich tradition of customs, rituals, and belief systems that have been transmitted from generation to generation. These beliefs are deeply rooted in nature, ancestral spirits, and community life. However, with the spread of modern education and globalisation, these traditional practices are gradually undergoing transformation. Therefore, scientific documentation and academic interest are crucial for preserving this precious intangible cultural heritage. The present research is based on an empirical field study conducted in Moinapara village of Dhemaji district, Assam. Primary data were collected through standard anthropological methods, including survey schedules, personal interviews, case studies, observation, and group discussions with elderly and knowledgeable members of the community. Secondary data were gathered from books, research articles, journals, and other relevant sources. The study aims to analyse the various folk beliefs embedded in everyday practices such as weaving, bamboo and wood crafts, terracotta usage, traditional house construction (Chang-ghar), etc.

**Keywords:** Mishing tribe, folk beliefs, indigenous knowledge, material culture, tradition.

## **Introduction**

India is a land of diverse tribal communities. There are more than four hundred tribal communities in India. The Constitution of India has given greater

recognition to these communities by officially listing them as tribal. Assam is a central state of Northeast India. There are various tribes inhabiting Assam, namely, Bodo, Kachari, Mishing, Dimasa, Khasia, Rabha, Garo, Hajong, etc. They are bound by their rituals and customs. There is always biological and socio-cultural cooperation between the populations of both tribal and non-tribal communities of Assam.

The Mishing, also known as *Miri*, represent an ethnic group of Indo-Mongoloid and East Asian descent that historically migrated from the eastern Himalayan regions of Tibet. They ultimately established themselves in the fertile Brahmaputra valley located in the Indian state of Assam. During their passage to Assam, the Mishing primarily followed the route of the Brahmaputra River. Over time, they expanded their settlements to various locations along the riverbanks, including the Dihing, Disang, Dikhow, Subansiri, Ranganadi, and Dikrong rivers. Presently, their communities are distributed across eight districts within the state, namely Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, and Sonitpur (Hazarika,2025).

Social norms and traditions are a significant component of folk culture, which includes folk beliefs. In human culture, customs, religious practices, rituals, traditional knowledge, and ceremonial activities have been passed down from one generation to the next. In the course of life, people are directly or indirectly associated with various events and activities. Throughout life, individuals encounter numerous incidents and the mysterious phenomena of nature. In earlier times, when people could not explain such events and natural occurrences, they developed questions, fears, doubts, and feelings of wonder. Humans gradually developed various customs, rituals, worship practices, and folk beliefs within society to explain and overcome their feelings of fear, uncertainty, and curiosity. In the Mishing community various folk beliefs are deeply rooted in their material culture and folk life. The production and use of objects crafted from metal, wood, and bamboo are all connected to certain beliefs and practices in Mishing society.

## **Objectives**

The purpose of the present paper is to discuss and analysis of the traditional folk beliefs and practices among the Mishing community of Assam.

## **Methodology**

The present study has been carried out on the basis of empirical fieldwork among the Mishings of Moinapara village, Dhemaji district, Assam. The studied village was one of the earliest settlements of the Mishing people. To have a total understanding of the problem, standard anthropological methods, viz., survey schedules, personal interviews, case studies, and observation methods, have been used to accumulate the essential primary data. Data on their traditional folk

culture and beliefs, etc., have been gathered in depth through interviews and in-depth group discussions with the elderly and knowledgeable people. But the secondary data had been collected from various relevant books, journal research papers, newspaper articles, and websites to enrich the paper.

### **Results and discussion:**

Folklorists, or scholars of folklore, try to study folk beliefs prevalent in society by classifying them into different categories. The folklorist Wayland D. Hand attempted to classify folk beliefs on the basis of the various stages and activities of human life. At a later stage, scholars like Pabitra Sarkar divided folk beliefs mainly into two broad categories—sacred and secular. Scholar Birinchi Kr. Baruah states that, on the basis of subject matter, folk beliefs are further classified into various subtypes, such as religious folk beliefs, beliefs related to animals, tree worship, agricultural beliefs, nature worship, ghost beliefs, different rituals, and so on (Doley,2019).

The Mishing religious system has been characterised by their animistic beliefs and practices. They still perform various rites and rituals propitiating various spirits, seeking remedies for various problems and fulfilment of some objectives. They still believe that a human soul turns into a spirit immediately after the person's death, and the spirit lives in and around the human habitat, seeking food and drink from time to time. The age-old belief is that the Misings are the progenies of the sun and the moon, which they call *Ane Donyi* and *Abu Po:lo*, respectively, and invoke them on every events of sacred function and oath-taking in affairs of dispensing justice.

#### **(a) Folk beliefs associated with weaving:**

In Mishing society, many folk beliefs are connected with weaving activities such as preparing the loom, spinning thread, winding thread, stretching the warp, setting the loom, weaving cloth, cutting cloth, and wearing garments. Some of such important folk beliefs related to weaving are mentioned below:

1. If a member of the household sets out for auspicious work or a ritual ceremony, spinning or stretching thread on the loom is prohibited. Similarly, if a death occurs in the village, weaving activities are suspended on that day. The Mishings believe that engaging in weaving activities may invite danger or ill fate upon the household or community.
2. If a ritual such as *Donyi-Polo* worship is held in the village, or if any ritual ceremony is performed in the household, then it is believed that spinning thread, cutting thread or weaving cloth should not be done. The Mishings believe that performing these activities during such times may bring misfortune and danger to the household and society.
3. Women generally do not cut textile on Tuesday and Saturday. If they do so, it is believed in Mishing society that evil spirits may attach

themselves. Due to some specific reason, if they have to cut, the cut piece of cloth must be wrapped with a black dog to remove the evil effect.

4. There are also certain customs and beliefs regarding dress in Mishing society. During the ritual known as *Mibu Dagnam* (a priestly ceremony), newly woven clothes are traditionally worn. Wearing such garments is considered auspicious and is believed to bring blessings. If any mistake occurs in performing the ritual or in wearing the prescribed attire, it is believed that displeasure from the deities may follow.

**(b) Folk beliefs associated with bamboo and wood crafts:**

There are various folk beliefs connected with crafts and objects made of bamboo and wood in Mishing society. In daily life, a variety of tools and implements prepared of bamboo and wood are used—such as agricultural tools, fishing tools, household utensils, and items used during festivals and rituals. Many of these objects are closely associated with religious beliefs and folk traditions (Deka.2018).

1. For preparing household daily utensils or other ritual items with certain materials like bamboo, cane, etc., they are generally not cut or collected, especially on Tuesday and Saturday. It is believed that doing so will create difficulties in the preparation process.
2. The Mishings consider that the utensil used for preparing *Apong*, well-known as *Apong Korai*, should not be used to carry other objects, and also outsiders are not permitted to touch it.
3. Kitchen utensils known as *Kundang aatung* (used for storing ginger, garlic, etc.) placed on *poirab* should not be reverted back and are believed to be unlucky if left for any reason.
4. In Mishing there is a popular belief that for making the agricultural implements from bamboo and cane, etc., after cutting them, they should be placed on smoke sheds. By doing so it is thought that the equipment stay well for a long time.

**(c) Beliefs associated with Terracotta:**

Among the Mishings of Assam, traditional belief systems are closely linked with nature, ancestral spirits, and ritual purity. Terracotta (earthen objects) also holds symbolic and ritual significance in certain contexts.

1. The Mishing people use terracotta objects known as *manbang kihling* for collecting and storing *Apong*. In religious observances like *Dabur Puja*, *Dadgang*, etc., the use of newly made earthen pots is often preferred, as they believe that unused clay pots are pure, clean and free from pollution.
2. The Mishings were basically an farming community. They used clay pots for their agricultural festivities, such as *Ali-Aye-Ligang*. They thought

that by using earth-based materials, they could increase crop fertility and prosperity. Clay symbolises the fertile soil that supports life.

3. The Mishing people, after a demise in the household, use clay vessels during the mourning period. They believed that breaking or disposing of clay vessels ended ritual impurity and the symbolic partition between the living and the spiritual world.
4. The Mishing people believed that humans' bodies originate from nature and finally return to it. Clay objects, which also originate from soil and after destruction mix with soils, embody continuity and change within their socio-cultural life.

**(d) Folk Beliefs in House Construction (*Chang Ghar*):**

Traditionally the Mishings are live in *Chang-ghar*. The house of the Mishing community are construct using their unique and traditional architectural designe. The construction starts with the planting of the main post on an auspicious day. Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and days on which parents have died are considered auspicious for the purpose. In the pit of the first pillar, they preferably offer a copper coin to ceremonially acquire the plot from Basumati. It is believed that the copper coin protect the land from lightning strike (Medak, 2015).

1. The Mishing people consider that architectural mistakes in constructing their pile house (*Chang-Ghar*) have religious consequences. If the base of the pile house is defective accordance to their spiritual beliefs, the *Mibu* (priest) might also lose their spiritual connection with deities in that house.
2. The Mishing people believed that mistakes in the building of the pile house are to bring disease, misfortune, or “bad luck” to the pinnacle of the family and their entire circle of relatives contributors.
3. The Mishings have the custom to extend help to the neighbourhood in the construction of homes. Generally, the youths of the village participated in the house construction process and in return the owner of the house entertained with traditional wine called *Apong* and a feast in return. This tradition has great importance not for its cooperative undertone but as an active agent in the continuation of the tradition.
4. On the occasion of constructing a new house, the owner chants the subsequent *mantra*:

*'Tala-taya nulu. Tat-lengthy-ka oog-akum bertee,  
Dekpe omna medang oyadek praman chil,  
lengkan-hangks ommna petam peki dung '*

which means, “Oh ancestors! I am going to build a house in this land. display me the symptoms of your approval. Swearing in the call of ancestors, I declare that I wait for the sign of your approval.” (Sarma, 2000).

## Conclusion

The folk beliefs and practices of the Mishing community represent a socio-cultural relationship between humans, nature, and spiritual beings. As an agrarian society with deep roots in the Brahmaputra valley, the Mishings have still tried to preserve their heritage, where material culture ranging from their weaving to the strategic architecture of the *Chang-ghar* (split house) is inseparable from their spiritual worldview. These beliefs and traditions serve several vital functions within the community, such as practices like community labour during house construction, agricultural fields, religious festivals, etc., which increase communal bonds and help traditions and rituals be passed down through collective action. However, due to modern education and expanding globalisation, the younger generations of the Mishing community currently stand at a crossroads of tradition and modernity. Ultimately, the survival of Mishing folk culture depends on the continued documentation and appreciation of these practices as living heritage.

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# Exploring The Traditional Religious Festivals and Ceremonies of The Tai-Buddhist Communities of North East India

Ripunjyoy Sonowal

**Abstract:** This paper explores and documents the major traditional religious festivals and ceremonies of the Tai-Buddhist communities of NE India. The findings are based on observation, in-depth interviews and discussions. The Tai-Buddhist communities of NE India follow *Theravada* Buddhism. The important religious festivals and ceremonies viz. *Poi Sang-Ken*, *Mai-Ko-Chum-Fai*, *Poi Noun-Houk*, *Barsha Bash (Poi-Chatang)*, *Poi Pa-Te-Sa*, *Poi Kathin*, *Poi Lu-Phra*, *Poi Kham-Sang*, and *Poi Leng* are celebrated with great religious fervour. Their pre-Buddhist worships and ceremonies viz. *Phi-Su-Moung* worship, *Mang-Kala*, *Khavan Khao*, *Hong Kwan*, and *Kong-mu Phi-han* ceremonies holds profound importance in their religious life. The religious festivals and ceremonies of the Tai-Buddhists are significant cultural, social, and spiritual events marked by their syncretic blend of *Theravada* Buddhism, animistic beliefs, and ancestor veneration.

**Keywords:** Religious festival, Tai-Buddhist, *Poi Sang-Ken*, *Poi Kathin*, NE India.

## Introduction

Traditional religious festivals and ceremonies of the Tai-Buddhist communities of Northeast (NE) India are significant cultural, social, and spiritual events marked by their syncretic blend of *Theravada* Buddhism, animistic beliefs, and ancestor veneration. The Tai people are the native inhabitants living within a vast geographical region covering parts of Southern China, North Vietnam,

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Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, and NE India (in present day Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Lakhimpur, Golaghat, and Karbi Anglong districts, Assam; and in Namsai and Changlang districts, Arunachal Pradesh). Grierson (1966) states, “its members are to be found from Assam to far into the Chinese province of Kwangsi and from Bangkok to the interior of Yunnan”. The Tai people came to then Assam from the Yunnan Province, China and North Myanmar at different historical time periods. Today, they are known as the Tai Ahom, Tai Phake, Tai Khamyang, Tai Khamti, Tai Turung, and the Tai Aiton. Except the Tai Ahom all the other Tai groups are devout followers of *Theravada* Buddhism, and are recognized as Scheduled Tribes (Hills; *Man* Tai speaking) by the constitution of India. They regard Lord Buddha as the almighty God or *Phra*, the Supreme Being, who is omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent. *Theravada* means ‘the doctrine of the elders’ (Gellner, 1990), ‘the Teaching of the Elders, or ‘the Ancient Teaching’. This school of Buddhism preserves the teachings of the Buddha in the Pali language. The Tai’s of NE India have been practising *Theravada* Buddhism since a much earlier period. *Theravada* Buddhism among them is highly influenced by the Burmese tradition of the religion. They must have adopted *Theravada* Buddhism after the Tai/Shan principalities of North Myanmar came into contact with the Burmese Bagan Kingdom (849-1297), where *Theravada* Buddhism was the main religion. King Anawrahta invited many Mon, Indian and Sinhalese *Theravada* monks to Bagan to propagate and reform *Theravada* Buddhism in his kingdom (Htin Aung, 1967). Mong (2004) states that, since the 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D. the Burmese had adopted *Theravada* Buddhism, the Tai’s also must have been influenced by Buddhism since then. The oral history of the Tai-Buddhist communities says that they brought the faith along with them when they arrived in *Saumarapitha*, i.e., erstwhile eastern Assam from North Burma in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and established Buddhist temples. Except for the Tai-Ahoms, the other Tai groups were *Theravada* Buddhists before they arrived in Assam and have maintained their faith till today (Mishra & Sahai, 2007). *Theravada* Buddhism forms an integral part of the life and culture of the Tai’s. Their socio-religious life significantly circles around the Buddha *Vihar* (*Bodh Vihara*), the precepts of the Buddha, the Buddhist monks (*Bhikkhus*) and the monastic life.

Studying traditional religious festivals and ceremonies is essential in anthropology because these events help to understand the core values, social structure, and worldview of a culture. They are not merely religious acts, but powerful social performances that reinforce community solidarity, transmit cultural heritage across generations, and help people cope with life crises. The present paper attempts to explore and document the major traditional religious festivals and ceremonies of the Tai-Buddhist communities of NE India. Standard anthropological methods -observation, extensive personal interviews and discussions were used to generate the required mass of primary data from the

key informants' viz. the *Bhante* (senior monk) and the novices of the Buddha *Vihars*, and select knowledge holders (both male and female) of the studied Tai villages during fieldwork conducted at different time periods. The collected data is systematically organised and presented in the following paragraphs.

## Results and Discussion

The Tai-Buddhist communities celebrate several festivals and holy days (*Poi* - the Tai word meaning festival) in different periods of the year. They consider the four days of each lunar month, i.e., the new and full moon days and the eighth day after each of the days mentioned, as holy days. The people collectively celebrate these four holy days as *Uposatha* days. *Uposatha* days are times of renewed dedication to *Dhamma* (Dharma) practice, observed by the lay followers and the monastics. On the holy days, all the people assemble in their village Buddha *Vihar* early in the morning and collectively pray to Lord Buddha, the *Dhamma* and the *Sangha* in the presence of the *Bhante* and other monks. In front of the Buddha idols in the prayer hall of the *Vihar*, the devotees light candles, burn incense sticks, and offer flowers, food and gift (*Dan/Dana*) articles, besides listening to sermons by monks and participating in meditation sessions. The people also pay homage to the monks by offering alms, food and other items of day-to-day need to earn merit. The monks bless the devotees and administer the moral precepts of *Pancha Sil* and *Asta Sil*. As per the Buddha's teachings, to attain *Nirvana* (salvation), one must 'earn merit' (*Punya*) in life and it is important to preserve the merit for the next birth, and improve *Kamma* (*Karma*) – the concept of action, work, or deed, and its effect or consequences. Merit can be earned through charity, i.e. offering *Dana*- giving something to someone who most needs it. It signifies the most pious and virtuous act of the donor. So, the people regularly offer *danas* to the monks through food, robes, and articles of daily need. Besides, they render their services in cash and kind in the construction, renovation and maintenance of the village Buddha *Vihar*. Donating *Tan-khon* (Prayer flag) and Buddha idols to the *Viharis* done by the people with extreme devotion. The important religious festivals and ceremonies of the people are briefly described here –

### *Poi Sang-Ken*

It is celebrated as the spring festival that marks the beginning of the traditional New Year of the Tai-Buddhist communities of NE India. Considered as the most important festival, it is publically celebrated in the Buddha *Vihar* of all Tai villages annually from 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> of April with great religious fervour and with much pomp and gait. *Poi Sang-ken* starts on the day of *Sankranti* in April (*Nuean Ha*), the fifth month of the year of the Tai Luni-solar calendar. It is celebrated in the closing days of the old year, with the New Year starting immediately on the very next day of the festival. *Poi Sang-ken* festival is rich

with symbolic traditions; it also means ‘cleansing with fresh water’ (water is considered as the symbol of peace and purity)- the *Buddha, Dharma* and *Sangha*. On the first day of the festival, all the Buddha idols and the sacred manuscripts and religious books of the *Vihar* are ritually washed. The idols are taken out from the *Vihar* and are placed inside the *Kyong-Phra* (a beautifully decorated shrine) for the next three days for the ceremonial bathing (*Chon-phra*). A specially designed rotating wooden fountain (*Kung-pan*) with small hollow pipes and a wheel fixed in its centre is made to perform the ceremonial bathing ritual. It is placed inside the *Kyong-Phra* and connected to the wooden boat (*Hang-hoe*) so that when water is poured into the boat, the wheel starts rotating owing to the pressure of the water. The rotating wheel thus helps sprinkle the water over the Buddha idols kept in the *Kyong-Phra*. All the villagers bring clean water from the nearby river, pond or wells to pour over the idols, and the process has to be repeated three times. Before pouring, flowers are put in the water in order to make them scented. The devotees collect this water as holy, sanctified water after it has washed the Gods. The sacred manuscripts and religious books are placed on a table next to the *Kyong-Phra* window. They are held together by a rope, one end of which is positioned outside the *Kyong-Phra*. The people pour water over the rope three times, thus performing the ritual washing of the *Dharma*. For the ceremonial bathing of the *Sangha*, people pour water three times on the feet and folded hands of the monk/s, and offer gifts, flowers, and take their blessings for good luck, good health, peace and harmony throughout the year. Water is also poured on the feet of elders and parents seeking blessing from them. This act is a formal “greeting” of respect, acknowledging their wisdom and seeking their blessings for the year ahead. The sacred Bodhi tree (*Thon Pho-Thi; Ficus religiosa*), the pagoda, and all other monuments within the *Vihar* premises are also given ceremonial wash by splashing water over them. The people pray by offering flowers and lighting candles and incense sticks. The Buddha *Vihar* campus is illuminated with candlelight, and the villagers in their homes do the same. On the third day, at an auspicious time, the Buddha idols are reinstalled at the original altar of the *Vihar*. The traditional musical instruments viz. *Konglung* (Large drum), *Yammong* (Medium-sized hanging gong), *Pai-Seng* (Cymbals), *Pee* (Flute) and *Kese* (Bronze bell) are played on the occasion, along with performing their traditional dance and songs. During the festival, as a customary ritual greeting, all the villagers, especially the young boys and girls, splash small buckets full of clean water on each other and on passers-by. This symbolizes spiritual purification in order to begin the New Year free from impurities; and the washing away of one’s diseases, sins and bad luck, as well as fostering unity, amusement and merrymaking. Hence, *Poi Sang-ken* is also popularly called as the ‘Festival of Water’, and as *Pani Bihu* in Assamese. The people also prepare traditional foods from glutinous rice and make offerings to earn merit on the occasion. On the last day, devotees recite *Pancha Sil* or *Ashta Sil*

as per their age and vows. After the final prayer, everyone in the village gathers for a community feast. During the festival, at individual level, people clean their houses, pray to Lord Buddha for the well-being of their family, bow and show respect to their elders, and serve delicious food and present new clothes to them. Donations are made to the *Vihar* and the needy. *Poi Sang-ken* festival, thus, celebrated with great devotion and enthusiasm marks a farewell to the old year and a warm welcome to the New Year.

### ***Mai-Ko-Chum-Fai***

*Mai-ko-Chum-fai* (*Mai*: wood; *Ko*: to place one above the other; *Chum-fai*: to burn) means the burning of wood placed in a pile. It is celebrated on the *Purnima* night in the month of *Magh* (*Noun Sam*; Jan-Feb) to mark the success of the new harvest. During the festival, young boys of the village collect firewood and construct a *mai-ko* on the river bank or in an open field suitably selected near the village. It is constructed by piling the firewood horizontally, one above the other crosswise, up to a height of about 8-10 meters. The shape is triangular, which tapers at the top and is supported by long bamboo poles from all sides to prevent it from falling. The *mai-ko* is decorated with colourful papers. In the evening, all the villagers gather near it with flowers, incense sticks, candles, and steam cooked rice packets as offerings. The *Bhante* conducts the prayers and administers *Panch Sil* to the people. After that, an elderly villager sets fire to the *mai-ko* at the summit with the help of a long bamboo pole. All the villagers propitiate the *mai-ko* fire called as *Phi-fai* (*Phi*: spirit; *fai*: fire), meaning the fire spirit. The celebration is concluded with a community feast where the newly harvested rice is cooked along with the preparation of other traditional dishes.

### ***Poi Noun-Houk***

Buddha *Jayanti* or Buddha *Purnima* is celebrated as *Poi Noun-Houk*. It is celebrated on the full moon, *Uposathaday* of the *Vaisakha* month according to the Buddhist calendar to commemorate the birth, enlightenment and death of Lord Buddha. Incidentally, all three sacred events of the Buddha's life occurred on the same day. On the day of the festival, early morning, all the villagers gather in the Buddha *Vihar* for a mass prayer. The festival begins by pouring water onto the sacred Bodhi tree, under which Siddhartha Gautama meditated and attained enlightenment to become the Buddha around 500 BCE. The people pray by offering flowers to the Buddha idols of the monastery and light candles and incense sticks. The Monks of the *Vihar* are gifted with articles of daily use by the villagers. A community feast is also organised on the festival day. For the same, the village youths, on the previous day of the festival, collect rice, vegetables and other items necessary for the feast from every village household.

### ***Barsha Bash (Poi-Chatang)***

It is an essential religious occasion in which the Buddhist monks and the followers of the Eight Precepts do fasting for three months from the full moon day of *Aahar* (June-July) to the full moon day of *Aahin* (September-October). On the occasion, the elderly villagers visit the village *Vihar* and hold regular prayers. The starting day of *Barsha Bash* is called *Poi Khaw-Wa*, and the ending day is called *Poi Aak-wa* – where the union of the Buddhist monks assemble and pray to the Buddha to forgive them for their faults.

### ***Poi Pa-Te-Sa***

It is observed to conclude the ceremony of *Poi Aak-wa*. Here, the people tie their offerings like holybooks, pens, currency notes, biscuits, candles and incense stick packets onto a handmade wishing tree called as *Kalpataru* with strings considered auspicious and pray for their wishes to be fulfilled. The Tai Khamtis call the ceremony as *Tun-Pa-Te-Sa*; and in Pali, the wishing tree is known as *Kapparukha* (Singh, 2013). The *kalpataru* is taken to the Buddha *Vihar* in a vibrant procession featuring traditional dance and playing musical instruments, where it is solemnly donated to the Bhikkhu Sangha. Prayer sessions are held in the *Vihar* during the ceremony, seeking peace, progress and prosperity of the people. The ceremony of releasing floating lamps (*Poi-Phong-Fai*) is organised in the evening.

### ***Poi Kathin***

Also called *Kathin Chivar Dan*, celebrated within the month of October-November before the conclusion of the *Prabarana Purnima*, means offering of the sacred yellow robes. This festival commemorates the Buddha's first sermon to his five disciples. Among the various gifts offered to the monks, all the *Theravada* Buddhists world over, including the Tai's of NE India, consider that the gift of a new *Chivar* (monks robe) that is weaved in their looms with much hardship (*kathin*) is the most prominent symbol of sacrifice, through which one can achieve salvation. Hence, a day before the festival, women and girls who are expert weavers gather at a common place in their villages and weave the *Chivar* for the *Bhante* (and *Sarman*) of the Buddha *Vihar* in a single night. Early morning on the day of the festival, all the villagers go to the *Vihar* with the gifts of new robes, fruits, and foods prepared in their respective homes and other necessary items of day-to-day needs for donating to the monk/s.

### ***Poi Lu-Phra***

It is the festive occasion in which a person or a family or the entire village collectively donates an idol of Lord Buddha to the village *Vihar* to fulfil some special wish or earn merit. On an auspicious day, generally on *Purnima*, the

*Bhante* and novices of the *Vihar*, the village headman, and other senior villagers arrive at the donor's place where the idol is kept. The monk sprinkles holy water on the idol and moves the same to the *Vihar* in a procession. After reaching there, the idol is first moved around the main worship hall three times. After that, it is ceremoniously placed along with other idols and statues of Lord Buddha on the main altar. The occasion is marked by prayers and lighting candles and incense sticks. In a similar manner, *Poi Lu-Lik* is the ceremonial occasion of donating sacred religious script to the Buddha *Vihar*.

### ***Poi Kham-Sang***

An interested Tai boy who intends to become a novice (*Sarman*) and thereby a Buddhist monk must start by serving as a temple boy (*Mung-jang*) in the Buddha *Vihar*. He has to practice mindfulness, meditation and chanting (along with his formal education) by spending a considerable time in the *Vihar*. He is elevated to the position of a novice in an elaborate ordination ceremony called as *Sarman tula* or *Poi Kham-Sang*. The ceremony is held at an individual level on an auspicious day, and as per the convenience of the boy and his family. For the ceremony, the boy's father collects eight articles called as *Asta parikkhara* - one *Changkan* (a piece of yellow cloth about 2 meters long and 1.5 meters wide), one *Kham-peng* (yellow cloth), one *Cipic* (a begging bowl), one *Mittha* (a razor), one *Pha sat-nang* (a piece of white cloth), one *Ong ka-chet* (a yellow upper garment), one *Khi-mai* (needle and thread), and one *Tong-mai* (a stick). After the bath, the boy is adorned with colourful costumes and ornaments (representing the princely garments of Prince Siddhartha) and then seated on an elevated bamboo platform, and the guests offer him gifts. Thereafter, he is carried by his father and other older adults on their shoulders and seated on a bamboo chair with an umbrella fixed on its back (representing the throne). Two bamboo poles are fixed on the two sides of the chair to carry it on the shoulders. Then, in a big procession, the prospective *Sarman* is taken through the village and finally to the *Vihar*. He puts aside his princely garments, shaves his head, and wears a white loin cloth. He then approaches the assembled monks, taking with him the yellow robe, candles and incense sticks, and bows down three times before the chief monk, seeking permission to enter the monastic life as a disciple of the Buddha. He presents the *Asta parikkhara* to the chief monk, who in turn advises him how to follow the life of a novice; recites him the ten precepts and then formally hands back the *Asta parikkhara*. The new *Sarman* then takes up his begging bowl, kneels before the assembled monks and bows three times in reverence for being allowed to serve as a *Sarman*. Being an apprentice for becoming a future monk, a *Sarman* follows a strict code of regulations, continues to practice his daily religious duties, study the Buddhist scriptures, the *Suttas*, and learn the *Dhamma* under the guidance of the senior monk.

### ***Poi Leng***

*Poi leng* is one of the most profound and culturally significant ceremonies of the Tai-Buddhists. It is essentially a three days' funeral ceremony; however, it is not observed as a ritual of mourning, rather a sacred farewell celebration that honours the life, teachings, and spiritual journey of a highly revered Buddhist monk (e.g., on the death of a monk with the rank of *Mahather*, who has devoted over forty decades of service to *Theravada* Buddhism and monastic life). Such monks are considered spiritually accomplished, and their death is viewed as a transition towards *nirvana*, the ultimate liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth. Hence, the death ceremony is celebratory rather than sorrowful. It is believed that honouring the monk through *Poi Leng* helps guide the departed soul toward enlightenment. In this ceremony, the dead body of the monk is preserved for 7-8 months; using traditional methods the body is placed in a coffin and stored in a specially constructed elevated structure known as *Nick Paan-Kong*. On the final day of the festival, the coffin is placed inside a ceremonial chariot (*Leng*), locally revered as a sacred vehicle, at a temporary sanctified venue known as *Nibbana-Thana*. The chariot is made from wood, designed in a boat-like structure with multiple wheels, and is beautifully decorated with traditional motifs, colourful fabrics and Buddhist symbols. The chariot is specifically constructed to carry the coffin of the deceased monk and symbolizes the final spiritual journey toward *nirvana*. Buddhist monks, devotees, and general people from far and near come to offer prayers, flowers, and paying their final respects. *Poi leng* is marked by the pulling of the chariot by the villagers and devotees using long ropes from both sides. This act is considered highly virtuous; it is believed that pulling the chariot brings spiritual merit and offers satisfaction to the departed soul. Also, religious prayers and discussions, an exhibition, and the traditional game of tug-of-war between the men and women of the village are an integral part of the celebration. The community participation in the symbolic tug-of-war, one side representing the "spirits" trying to take the monk to heaven, and the other representing the "devotees" trying to keep him on earth, is believed to earn great spiritual merit by the people. The funeral procession moves slowly from the *Nibbana-thana* to the cremation ground, accompanied by traditional Buddhist chants, ceremonial music, and prayers, where the chariot and the mortal remains of the monk are ceremonially cremated. *Poi leng* plays a significant social role as it unites the Tai-Buddhist communities under one umbrella, strengthens unity, preserves traditional customs, and hands down spiritual values to the younger generation. It is a living example of the Tai-Buddhist heritage, showcasing how faith, tradition, and community coexist harmoniously. The festival also serves as an educational experience for visitors and researchers interested in Tai-Buddhist culture in NE India (Assaminfo, 2026).

### Pre-Buddhist Worships and Ceremonies

It will be relevant to note here that *Theravada* Buddhism among the Tai's has become, over the centuries, so amazingly blended with some aspects of earlier animism or pre-Buddhist indigenous faith that it is difficult to segregate the pure elements, and it has ultimately enriched their religious configuration. Initially, until the arrival of Buddhism, the Tai's followed animism and were spirit worshippers. The Tai-Buddhists believe in and worship several primordial malevolent and benevolent spirits (*Phi*), for example, the spirit of the rice fields, river, forest, mountain, as well as the house spirit who protect their dwellings, and the guardian spirit responsible for the survival and safety of the Tai villages. They also worship ancestral spirits, and other types of spirits of seemingly supernatural forces. These spirits if appeased and respected by the people, can bring them luck and prosperity, and at times they also protect the people. However, if angered or disrespected, they are believed to cause harm, bring hardships and loss upon the offender.

One of the most notable ceremony in this category is *Phi-Su-Moung* worship. *Phi-Su-Moung* is the village's guardian spirit propitiated with communal gatherings and offerings of food. *Phi-Su-Moung* is worshipped the following day or after seven days of *Poi-Sang-Ken*. It is usually believed that if this spirit is not worshipped correctly, there might be an epidemic outbreak and unnatural deaths in the Tai villages. For the ceremony, a pyramid-like structure - *astupa* (*Chaitya*) of sand and clay, having eight round steps and a wooden crown on its top is constructed at the village's main entrance. Every step of the *Chaitya* is decorated with coloured prayer flags. A bamboo fence is erected encircling the *Chaitya*. The villagers offer flowers, puffed rice, and light candles and incense sticks at the *Chaitya*. The *Bhante* and other monks of the *Vihar* are invited for the performance of the ceremony and pray for the welfare of the whole village. The next day, in the *Vihar*, an elevated bamboo platform is constructed where a basket of sand is placed. On it, a pot of water, leaves of mango tree, *Dubori bon* (*Cynodon*) and a bundle of white thread are kept. By touching the thread, the *Bhante* recites holy verses. All the villagers collect a small portion of the above items, which are believed to have possessed magical powers for protecting the village and the households. The sand and water are sprinkled around the household compound to ensure safety from evil spirits. A piece of the holy thread is also placed horizontally at the main entrance of the village in order to prevent evil forces from entering the village.

At the beginning of the Buddhist New Year, *Mang-kala* - a family-level ritual is celebrated. Organized early in the morning, a family prays to the almighty and wishes for an auspicious year with plenty of good health, fortune, prosperity and happiness. The *Pathek* (one who plays an essential role in all the religious functions and ceremonies of the village) administers *Mongol-sutra* (*Prik*) verses to the family members. Ritual prayers are conducted by the Buddhist monks.

All the fellow villagers are invited to the ceremony. *Khavan Khao* is another key ceremony celebrated at the family level. *Khavan Khao* means the soul of the rice, represented by a female spirit. The rice soul is ceremonially propitiated by the female members of every Tai-Buddhist family after the annual harvest. The rice soul is believed to reside in the paddy's last sheaf, left in the field tied in a bundle. So, it is ceremonially brought to the family granary from the field on an auspicious date. Propitiation of rice's soul is akin to the propitiation of the Goddess of wealth. It is believed that if the spirit is satisfied with the family, it enjoys a good harvest and never faces any financial crisis. The Calling of *Kwan* or *Hong Kwan* is another important traditional ritual celebrated by the Tai-Buddhists. The *kwan* can be described as a person's 'inner-self', 'soul' or 'individual spirit'. It is believed that a person's soul (spirit) will be destabilised or even lost when he/she is in a bad situation or experiences misfortune such as having an accident or being harmed, or it may leave the body to protect itself from potentially damaging situations, either emotional or physical. Whenever the *kwan* is lost, the sufferer undergoes severe depression and becomes susceptible to diseases and unexplained morbid conditions. In such situations, the ritual of *hongkwan* (i.e., to call or bring back) is performed to fetch the soul of an individual from wherever it may be roaming back to the body, and thus, re-establish maximum health. The ritual is performed by the elderly womenfolk of the village.

Long before adopting Buddhism, Tai-Buddhists practiced ancestor worship as a major tradition. It is related to the idea of the soul living forever; after one's death, his/her soul would leave the body, and return to heaven where the ancestors live. They believe that if the family members observe the ritual of ancestor worship, the dead ones, particularly the parents and grandparents, come down to the earth to bless their offspring and accept their offerings. It is ritually observed at family level annually during *Poi Sang-Ken* to pay homage and reverence to the spirits of their dead ancestors. The Tai-Buddhists believe that the souls of their ancestors reside in the central post/pillar (facing the eastern direction) of their houses, which they call *Phi-Lum-Khuta*. Hence, in the ceremony, the people, with great devotion, offer steam-cooked glutinous rice (*Khao-hai*), fruits, flowers, and water at the foot of the main post. Some people also perform the ceremony outside their houses at the *Kong-mu* (a small pagoda-shaped structure constructed in the eastern direction). All the family members pray to seek blessings from their ancestral spirit for a peaceful, happy and prosperous life. The ceremony is also known as the *Kong-mu Phi-han* ceremony. However, the people have abandoned the ceremony's sacrificial (animistic) practices - the slaughter of fowls and the use of rice wine, long back due to the influence of Buddhism. The pre-Buddhist folk religion of the Tai-Buddhists can be conjectured as polytheistic and animistic; however, they are more syncretic in nature. The people believe in multiple primordial spirits and regional deities, who

can be termed as tutelary deities, and have continued worshipping them generation after generation, apart from the tenets of *Theravada* Buddhist philosophy. In the traditional ceremonies, which are not purely related to Buddhism, the monks generally do not participate. *Chow-MoorChow-Seli*, the conventional priest, performs such ceremonies and rituals in the presence of the villagers. The Tai religious hymns (*Kham Tra*), mainly from the pre-Buddhist period, recorded in old manuscripts, are chanted in a specific manner during the traditional religious ceremonies. These manuscripts are not kept in the *Vihar*, but well-preserved by the village priests in their homes.

*Theravada* Buddhism plays a major role in shaping the identity and existence of the Tai-Buddhist communities of NE India. The active participation and celebration of the different traditional religious festivals and ceremonies by the people through a unique blend of *Theravada* Buddhist rituals and indigenous Tai traditions function as a cohesive system to maintain social harmony, spiritual well-being, and happiness, as well as reinforcing a distinct Southeast Asian cultural identity within India. This is particularly seen in the celebration of *Poi Sang-Ken* - the traditional New Year (according to the *Theravada* Buddhist calendar and in line with the *Theravada* Buddhist world) with great devotion and in a more grandiose way. Celebrated in mid-April (coinciding with Thai *Songkran*), the community participation in celebrating *Poi Sang-Ken* serve as the primary mechanism for “greeting” the new agricultural and spiritual year, welcoming it with specific rituals of renewal. It deepens the spirit of brotherhood and brings a new dawn of hope, peace, happiness and prosperity among the Tai-Buddhists. During the three-day festival, many locals observe specific rules of conduct, such as abstaining from work, spending money, or telling lies. This moral discipline is believed to create a peaceful environment that naturally fosters a happy and prosperous society. The festivals feature performance of traditional dramas called *Pung* and dances like *Ka-Pat-Kai* (Cock Dance) or *Ka-Meng-Bi* (Butterfly Dance), as observed among the Tai Khamtis, which preserve distinct Tai folklore. These performances along with the “water fights” of *Poi Sang-Ken*, provide a socially sanctioned break from hard labour (farming and other agricultural activities) and daily stressors. The traditional festivals and ceremonies of the Tai-Buddhists are designed to foster mutual care, ensuring that no member of the community is left isolated or hungry. A central pillar of care is the practice of *Dana* (giving) i.e. generating prosperity through merit, as prosperity is seen not just material but karmic. During festivals like *Poi Kathin* and *Poi Sang-Ken*, families offer food, robes, and daily necessities to monks and the monastery. This supports the spiritual community (*Sangha*) and is believed to generate merit for the laypeople to ensure future success and well-being. Community feasts in festivals like *Mai-ko-Chum-fai* ensures that everyone is fed and included. In festivals like *Poi Leng*, the entire community collaborates to construct the funeral chariot (for the deceased monk) and pull it. This requires

massive cooperative effort, physically reinforcing the bonds of support and unity within the village, as well as among members of all the Tai-Buddhist communities. Rituals often include visiting the village Buddha *Vihar* to wash Buddha statues, which is seen as a way to care for one's own spiritual hygiene and mental peace, "washing away" negativity from the community's collective consciousness. The people also perform community service, such as cleaning the monastery and repairing public spaces.

## Conclusion

The practice of Buddhism, a highly doctrinal and metaphysically advanced religion, by the Tai-Buddhist communities is a matter of great value, i.e., the believers have assimilated the metaphysical spirit to a high degree. They follow all the rituals detailed in their holy texts and are deeply guided by the various precepts of Lord Buddha's teachings. The celebration of the various Buddhist festivals, religious ceremonies, and worship reflects the intrinsic values of their culture and tradition. They are invariably important cultural markers that help to create a sense of identity, unity, brotherhood and mutual understanding among all the Tai-Buddhist communities of NE India. Moreover, celebrating traditional religious festivals and ceremonies enhance cultural tourism by aiding in the attraction of tourists to a region, the preservation of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, the selling of local products, and the preservation and development of infrastructure (Munshi, 2022).

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# Folk Culture And The Rāmāyaṇa Tradition In Assam

Champak Deka

## Abstract

Rāmāyaṇa composed by Vālmīki has exercised an unparalleled influence on the Indian psyche. A literary work that touches the deepest chords of human emotion inevitably absorbs local beliefs, customs, and narrative variations as it travels through time and space. Over the centuries, the Rāmāyaṇa transcended the geographical boundaries of India and spread across South and Southeast Asia. Rāma came to be deified and recognized as an incarnation of Viṣṇu, possibly from the early centuries of the Christian era and certainly before the time of Kālidāsa.

For nearly two millennia, Rāma has been worshipped as a divine figure, and the Rāma legend has been richly represented in painting, sculpture, architecture, performance traditions, and oral narratives. Gradually, the Rāmāyaṇa evolved into a vibrant folk tradition, with new episodes and regional adaptations interwoven into its narrative framework.

The Rāmāyaṇa tradition has profoundly influenced the beliefs, customs, rituals, and lifestyles of the people of North-East India, a region inhabited by diverse ethnic and cultural communities since time immemorial. Assam, in particular, possesses a rich and varied corpus of folk literature—comprising folksongs, ballads, myths, legends, folktales, proverbs, and riddles—which forms an integral part of Assamese social and cultural life. The multi-ethnic composition of Assam further enriches its folk traditions and literary expressions.

This paper examines the impact and influence of the Rāmāyaṇa tradition on Assamese folk literature and folk culture, highlighting its role in shaping the region's narrative traditions, cultural practices, and collective consciousness.

**Key Words:** Rāmāyaṇa, Rāma-kathā, Assamese, folk culture, folksongs, literature.

### **Introduction:**

The term *culture* is derived from the Latin word *cultus*, meaning ‘to care’. Scholars offer various definitions of culture, but in a broad sense, it refers to the collective mental, social, and material expressions that shape human life.

The word *folk* etymologically means ‘people’. It originates from the common masses of a country or region and reflects their traditional way of life. In Assamese, the equivalent term for folk is *loka*, meaning ‘people.’

Thus, **folk culture** refers to the culture of the common people of a particular region. It includes their beliefs, customs, traditions, oral narratives, social practices, rituals, performing arts, and material aspects of life. Folk culture represents the lived experiences and inherited traditions passed down from generation to generation. Technically, the study of folk culture encompasses the following major areas:

- Oral Literature – folktales, myths, legends, proverbs, riddles, ballads, and folk songs transmitted orally.
- Material Culture – traditional crafts, tools, clothing, dwellings, food habits, and other tangible cultural objects.
- Social Folk Customs – rituals, festivals, life-cycle ceremonies, and community practices.
- Folk Performing Arts – folk dances, music, drama, and other traditional performance forms.

### **Assam as a Cultural Mosaic**

Assam is widely recognized as a vibrant mosaic of cultures, often described as a melting pot of multi-ethnic and multicultural communities. Owing to its remarkable diversity, it is regarded as a miniature replica of the Indian subcontinent. The region’s unique geographical setting—situated at the crossroads of South Asia and Southeast Asia—has historically facilitated the movement of people, ideas, and cultural traditions. Over centuries, different trans-regional cultural elements adapted to Assam’s ecological conditions, resulting in a dynamic and pluralistic society.

The history of Assam reflects continuous waves of migration and large-scale population movements. Various ethnic groups settled in the region at different times, bringing with them distinct languages, customs, beliefs, and social systems. Despite close interaction and cultural exchange, these communities maintained their separate identities while contributing to a shared regional culture.

Each tribe of Assam possesses its own rich corpus of oral traditions, including:

- Folk tales
- Folk songs
- Myths and legends
- Ritual traditions

These oral traditions serve as invaluable sources for understanding the ethnic and tribal history of the region. They preserve collective memories of migration, origin myths, social structures, moral values, and spiritual beliefs. In the absence of extensive written records for many tribal communities, such traditions play a crucial role in reconstructing the historical and cultural evolution of Assam.

Thus, Assam's cultural landscape is not merely a product of diversity, but a testament to centuries of coexistence, adaptation, and mutual influence among its many communities.

### **Folk Literature: Nature and Significance**

From time immemorial, people have expressed their experiences, beliefs, and values through oral traditions such as myths, legends, epics, fables, folktales, and folksongs. These various forms together constitute the folk literature.

The Folk literature is typically created by ordinary people rather than known individual authors; therefore, its authors are generally anonymous. It is transmitted orally from generation to generation, allowing it to evolve over time while preserving the cultural identity of a community.

Importantly, folk literature serves as a mirror of society. It reflects the social structure, religious beliefs, moral values, customs, traditions, and cultural practices of the people who create and share it.

### **Influence of the Rāmāyaṇa in Assamese Folk Tradition**

#### **The Pan-Indian Impact of the Rāmāyaṇa**

The Rāmāyaṇa, traditionally attributed to Vālmīki, is one of the foundational texts of Indian civilization. More than a literary masterpiece, it has shaped religion, ethics, politics, art, and cultural identity across the Indian subcontinent and beyond. Over centuries, the epic evolved from a heroic narrative into a theological and civilizational framework that continues to influence millions.

In its earliest form, the Rāmāyaṇa presents Rāma as the ideal human king—*Maryadā Puruṣottama*, the perfect embodiment of moral duty and righteous conduct. However, as religious thought developed, particularly through Purānic literature such as the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*, Rāma came to be identified as an incarnation (*avatāra*) of Lord Viṣṇu. This theological transformation was further strengthened during the medieval Bhakti movement, which emphasized personal devotion to a chosen deity. Through devotional poetry, temple worship, and pilgrimage traditions, Rāma became not only a moral exemplar but also a deeply

personal object of faith. This shift illustrates how literature gradually evolved into theology.

The pan-Indian influence of Rāmāyaṇa is also evident in its numerous regional adaptations. Each linguistic and cultural community reinterpreted the epic in its own idiom. In North India, *Rāmcharitmānas* by Tulsīdās popularized the story in Hindi and made it accessible to the masses. In Tamil Nadu, *Kamba Rāmāyaṇam* by Kambar infused the narrative with classical Tamil aesthetics and devotional intensity. Beyond India, the epic traveled across Southeast Asia, appearing as the *Ramakien* in Thailand, the *Ramaker* in Cambodia, and the *Kakawin Rāmāyaṇa* in Indonesia. These versions reflect local artistic styles, political ideals, and religious interpretations, demonstrating the epic's remarkable adaptability.

Artistically, the Rāmāyaṇa has inspired centuries of creative expression. Temple carvings at sites such as Angkor Wat depict dramatic scenes from the epic. Performance traditions like Rāmlīlā bring the story to life annually in towns and villages. Miniature paintings from Mughal and Rajput courts visually narrate episodes with exquisite detail. Folk ballads and oral traditions further enriched the narrative, sometimes presenting alternative perspectives, including sympathetic portrayals of Rāvana. This constant interaction between classical texts and oral traditions ensured the story's continued relevance.

Actually, the Rāmāyaṇa profoundly shaped Indian ethical and political thought. It articulated ideals of kingship, governance, and *dharma* (righteous conduct). The concept of *Rāma Rājya* became a symbol of just and moral rule. Models of family loyalty, sacrifice, and social responsibility found in the epic influenced social norms and collective values.

Thus, the Rāmāyaṇa is not merely a religious text but a civilizational force. Through its theological evolution, regional adaptations, artistic expressions, and ethical teachings, it has left an enduring imprint on Indian society and continues to inspire cultural and moral reflection across generations.

### **Assamese Translations and Adaptations of the Rāmāyaṇa Mādhava Kandalī's Rāmāyaṇa (14th Century)**

The earliest and most significant Assamese rendering of the Rāmāyaṇa was composed in the 14th century by Mādhava Kandalī under the patronage of king Mahāmānikya. This work holds a distinguished place in Indian literary history as the first regional translation of the Rāmāyaṇa in North India. It marked a major step in the evolution of Assamese literature and demonstrated the growing importance of vernacular languages in medieval India.

Mādhava Kandalī composed the epic in simple and lucid Assamese verse to make it accessible to the common people. Unlike the Sanskrit original, which was largely confined to the learned elite, this version aimed to popularize the sacred narrative among the masses. The work originally consisted of seven

*kāṇḍas* (books), following the traditional structure of the epic. However, over time, only five *kāṇḍas* survived, as the *Ādikāṇḍa* and *Uttarakāṇḍa* were lost.

The missing portions were later supplied by prominent Vaishnavite saints of Assam, thereby ensuring the continuity of the text. Śaṅkaradeva composed the *Uttarakāṇḍa*, while Mādhavadeva composed the *Ādikāṇḍa*. Their contributions not only completed the text but also integrated it into the broader Neo-Vaiṣṇavite religious movement in Assam.

The Rāmāyaṇa tradition in Assam developed through the contributions of several scholars and poets who expanded and enriched its literary form over time. After the early Assamese rendering of the epic by Mādhava Kandalī, later writers continued to reinterpret and popularize the narrative in diverse styles. Among them, Durgāvara Kāyastha composed the *Gīti-Rāmāyaṇa*, i.e. verses of the Rāmāyaṇa in the traditional *Ojā-pāli* style, blending devotional expression with performative elements. Ananta Kandalī retold the Rāmāyaṇa story in poetic form, helping sustain its appeal among Assamese readers.

Another important contributor, Kalāpachandra Dvīja, authored *Rāmāyaṇa-candrikā*, a concise summary of the epic that made the vast narrative more accessible. Ananta Kāyastha composed *Rāmakīrtana*, reflecting devotional themes and reinforcing the religious significance of the epic in Assamese society. Additionally, Raghunāth Mahanta prepared a prose version of the Rāmāyaṇa, which further widened its readership by presenting the story in a simpler narrative style.

In the modern period, efforts were made to adapt the epic to contemporary language and understanding. Between 1962 and 1972, Gauhati University published modern Assamese prose translations of the Rāmāyaṇa. These translations used clear and updated language, ensuring that the timeless epic remained relevant and accessible to students and general readers. Thus, the Rāmāyaṇa tradition in Assam evolved continuously, reflecting both literary creativity and cultural devotion.

### **Literary Works Based on Rāmāyaṇa Themes**

The Rāmāyaṇa tradition in Assam developed through rich literary reinterpretations and localized storytelling, expanding far beyond the original Rāmāyaṇa composed by Vālmīki. Assamese poets and dramatists reshaped episodes from the epic to reflect regional devotion, imagination, and cultural values.

Several creative works reinterpret major Rāmāyaṇa themes. *Rāmavijaya*, a popular drama, celebrates Rāma's triumph over Rāvana and is often associated with devotional stage traditions such as Bhāona. *Mahīrāvaṇa-vadha* of Candra Bhāratī (Ananta Kandalī?) narrates the dramatic episode in which Mahīrāvaṇa, a powerful underworld ruler, abducts Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa; Hanumān ultimately rescues them after a fierce battle. This episode, though not central in Vālmīki's

version, gained prominence in later traditions. Similarly, Harivara Vipra, in his *Lava-Kuśara Yuddha*, focuses on the battle between Rāma and his twin sons, Lava and Kuśa, during the Aśvamedha sacrifice, emphasizing themes of identity, separation, and reunion.

### Folklore-Based Episodes

In addition to these literary adaptations, Assamese versions include folklore-based episodes not found in Vālmīki's epic. Narratives such as *Lakṣmaṇara Śaktiśela*, which elaborates on Lakṣmaṇa's wounding and Rāma's emotional anguish, enrich the devotional tone of the story. *Mandodarīra Maṇiharana* and *Sītāra Pātāla-Praveśa* further reflect local imagination and moral interpretation. These additions demonstrate how the Rāmāyaṇa evolved dynamically within Assamese cultural and devotional contexts, blending classical tradition with regional creativity.

### Rāmāyaṇa in Assamese Folk Performing Traditions

The Rāmāyaṇa holds an important place in Assamese folk performing traditions, especially through *Bhāonā*, the devotional theatre form introduced by Śaṅkaradeva in the 15th–16th century. As part of the Neo-Vaiṣṇavite movement, he composed *Aṅkīyā Nāt* or *Bhāonā* to spread religious teachings among common people. These plays are performed in Satras and Nāmagharas with elaborate costumes, expressive gestures, devotional songs (*Borgeet*), and traditional musical instruments. For instance, *Rāmavijaya* by Śaṅkaradeva is still a very popular play in Assam, other plays based on Rāmāyaṇa continue to be written and staged. Episodes such as Rāma's exile, Sītā's abduction, the battle with Rāvaṇa, and Rāma's coronation are commonly staged. In these performances, Rāma is depicted as the ideal king and embodiment of dharma.

Another important medium is *Putolā Nāc* (puppet theatre), where wooden string puppets narrate Rāmāyaṇa stories in a simple and engaging manner. These shows combine music, dialogue, and moral instruction, making epic narratives accessible to rural audiences.

*Kuśān-gān*, a dynamic and widely practiced form of folk theatre prevalent in the westernmost regions of Assam, is traditionally understood to derive its name from Kuśa, one of the twin sons of Rāma, who, according to the Rāmāyaṇa tradition, first recited the epic narrative. The form's foundational association with the Rāmākathā is substantiated by its alternative designation, *Rāvan-gān*, wherein *Rāvana* is considered a vernacular transformation of Rāmāyaṇa. In certain localities, the performance tradition is also known as *Benā-gān*, a nomenclature that underscores the central role of the *benā*, a single-stringed instrument integral to the musical and performative structure of the genre. Significantly, the thematic corpus of *Benā-gān* is drawn exclusively from episodes of the Rāmāyaṇa, thereby reaffirming its embeddedness within the broader Rāmākathā tradition.

*Khuliyā Bhāorīyā* and *Dhuliyā Bhāorīyā* represent two earlier traditional forms of folk theatre in Assam, which once enjoyed considerable popularity, particularly in the Lower Assam region. The narrative structure of these performance traditions was largely derived from episodes of the Rāmāyaṇa as well as the Mahābhārata. However, while the epic narratives supplied the foundational plots, the dialogues, characterization, and dramatic progression were typically marked by a pronounced burlesque mode, often privileging comic exaggeration and improvisation over strict adherence to the source texts.

### **Rāmāyaṇa in Assamese Folk Songs**

Folk songs are among the richest treasures of oral literature in any country, and in Assam they form a vibrant cultural tradition deeply inspired by the story of the Rāmāyaṇa. Innumerable Assamese folk songs based on its themes, spirit, and ideals have been composed over generations and continue to be created for both secular and religious purposes. These songs are preserved through oral transmission and remain an integral part of Assamese social and cultural life. Some major categories are discussed below.

#### **(i) Biyānām (Marriage Songs)**

The Rāmāyaṇa plays a pivotal role in Assamese marriage songs, as it does throughout India, especially in the North-East. Rāma and Sītā are regarded as the ideal couple despite their suffering and trials. In Assamese weddings, the bridegroom is symbolically considered Rāma and the bride Sītā. These songs are sung mainly by the women of the household during various marriage rituals, both folk and orthodox. Though rarely written down or printed, they are carefully transmitted from one generation to another, becoming an inseparable part of community life. For example:

*Kaikeyī āhiche, sumitrā āhiche, āhiche rāmare māo/  
Janakar jīyārī jānakī sundarī āji joran pindhāi cāo//  
Janakara ghare sītā āche bāt cāi/  
Dhanubhāngi biyā karāo bidāi diyā āi//  
Sakhisave bole sītā tumi bhāgyavati/  
Tumāra bhailanta svāmi rāma raghupati//*

These verses recall episodes from the epic, especially the breaking of Śiva's bow and the wedding of Rāma and Sītā, blending mythology with present-day ritual.

#### **(ii) Nisukani Geet (Children's Songs)**

The Children's songs in Assamese include lullabies, nursery rhymes, and play songs. Known as *Nisukani Geet*, these are sung by parents, grandparents,

and elders to lull children to sleep, soothe them, or entertain them. The language is simple and melodious, making it accessible to young minds.

Even here, the Rāmāyaṇa serves as a central theme. Episodes from the lives of Rāma and Sītā are gently woven into the verses:

*tulasir tale tale mriga pahu care/  
tāke dekhi rāmacandrai śaradhanu dhare//  
rām jai raṇaloi sītāi loge dhare moko niyā prabhu raṇe/  
nelāge jāba oi janakar jīyarī mriga māri āhu vane//*

Through such songs, children are introduced to epic characters and moral ideals from an early age, embedding cultural memory within domestic affection.

### (iii) Bihu Geet / Husari Geet (Bihu Songs)

Bihu songs, popularly known as *Bihu Geet* or *Husari Geet*, are among the most celebrated forms of Assamese oral literature. They are primarily sung during Bohāg (Rongali) Bihu, though some are associated with Kāti and Māgh Bihu as well. These songs transcend caste, creed, and religion, reflecting the collective spirit of Assamese society. Many Bihu songs incorporate themes from the Rāmāyaṇa:

*Kausalyānandana hari kausalyānandana/  
pitṛvākye banabāse karilā gamana//  
Rāma kānde vane vane  
Lakṣmaṇa kānde sange  
śunyagrhat pāi sītāk harile rāvaṇe//*

Here, Rāma’s exile and Sītā’s abduction are evoked within the festive musical tradition, blending devotion, emotion, and celebration.

### (iv) Bāramāhī Geet (Songs of Twelve Months)

The *Bāramāhī Geet* (Songs of Twelve Months) describes the emotions and experiences across the twelve months of the year. In Assam, both *Rāma-bāramāhī* and *Sītā-bāramāhī* are popular forms. These songs poignantly narrate the month-by-month agony of Rāma and Sītā during their separation. Through seasonal imagery—rain, heat, cold, blooming flowers, and falling leaves—the inner sorrow of the epic characters is mirrored in nature. In one dialogue-form song, Sītā insists on accompanying Rāma to the forest:

*“Let me also go to the forest, O my husband,  
Oh husband mine, please do not let me down.  
I shall also endure the forest exile by your side.”*

Such songs dramatize key episodes of the Rāmāyaṇa, making them emotionally immediate and culturally intimate.

Assamese folk songs inspired by the Rāmāyaṇa demonstrate how an epic narrative becomes woven into everyday life—marriage ceremonies, children’s upbringing, seasonal festivals, and emotional expression. Through oral transmission, these songs preserve not only the story of Rāma and Sītā but also the moral ideals, cultural values, and collective memory of Assamese society.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, it can be said that the Rāmāyaṇa tradition in Assam is not merely a retelling of an epic but a living cultural force deeply embedded in the folk life of the region. Through oral narratives, *Ojā-pāli* performances, *Bhāonā* theatre, folk songs and local adaptations like Mādhava Kandalī’s *Rāmāyaṇa*, the epic has been reinterpreted in ways that reflect Assamese social values, beliefs, and aesthetics. The blending of Vaiṣṇavite devotion with indigenous traditions demonstrates how folk culture absorbs and reshapes classical literature to suit local contexts. Thus, the Rāmāyaṇa in Assam stands as a powerful example of cultural continuity, regional identity, and the dynamic relationship between written texts and oral traditions.

The Rāmāyaṇa tradition in Assam illustrates how a pan-Indian epic acquires distinct regional color through folk culture. Assamese society did not merely adopt the epic but localized it through language, performance traditions, rituals, and community practices. This localization strengthened cultural identity and helped preserve moral values, social harmony, and devotional spirit among the people. The Assamese Rāmāyaṇa tradition, therefore, reflects both unity in diversity and the creative power of folk imagination in shaping religious literature.

From the above studies, it is clear that the survival of the Rāmāyaṇa tradition in Assam owes much to its integration with folk culture. Oral storytelling, festival performances, dramatic enactments, and musical traditions have ensured that the epic remains accessible to rural communities across generations. Even in the modern era, these folk expressions continue to sustain cultural memory and spiritual values. Therefore, the Rāmāyaṇa in Assam is not confined to manuscripts but lives vibrantly in the collective consciousness of the people.

Ultimately, the interaction between folk culture and the Rāmāyaṇa tradition in Assam reveals a dynamic process of cultural negotiation. The epic, while rooted in the classical Sanskrit tradition, evolved within Assamese society to reflect regional ethos, linguistic identity, and devotional movements. This transformation highlights the adaptive nature of Indian epics and underscores the role of folk traditions as custodians of cultural heritage. The Assamese Rāmāyaṇa

tradition thus becomes a site where literature, religion, and community life converge harmoniously.

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# **Costume, Community, and Continuity: A Historical Reading of Koch Rajbongshi Attire**

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## **Abstract**

Traditional clothing among the Koch Rajbongshi community has been a living record of their history, memory and a sense of collective identity. The traditional attire of the Koch Rajbongshi examines the evolution, symbolism as well as the socio-cultural significance through a historical and cultural lens. Traditional clothing in the Koch Rajbongshi were made of handwoven textiles using natural fibers and indigenous weaving techniques that formed the material base of their traditional clothing. These practices have evolved over time as a result of interactions with regional kingdoms, colonial influences and transformations. However, in spite of these processes of modernization and cultural assimilation, the Koch Rajbongshi attire continues to serve as a medium of cultural continuity throughout history.

**Key words:** Koch-Rajbongshi, Costume, Collective Identity, Cultural Continuity, Material culture, Textile Tradition, Ornamentation, Ritual Symbolism, Indigenous Heritage.

## **Introduction**

The Koch Rajbongshis are one of the indigenous communities in Northeast India. They traditionally settled in Western Assam and Northern Bengal. Belonging to the broader Mongoloid stock, the community's population also

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extends to West Bengal, Bihar, Meghalaya, Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan. The Koch community came to be identified as Rajbongshi, a term interpreted as “descendants of royal blood”, and associated with the *Bhanga Kshatriya* identity. In regional social contexts particularly in North Bengal and Goalpara, the designation Koch gradually declined in usage and was replaced by the identity term ‘Rajvanshi’. Agriculture forms the primary basis of livelihood among the Koch-Rajbongshi community and their economic sustenance largely depends on agricultural production. This agrarian foundation is deeply reflected in their folk life. Paddy cultivation remains the dominant agricultural activity. At the same time, weaving remains a significant supplementary occupation, particularly for women, who are recognized as highly skilled textile producers. Many women weave traditional garments within the household and sell them in local markets and contribute to family income. As a result, weaving serves as both a cultural tradition and an economic support, and together with agriculture it forms an important base of Koch folk life. Clothing practices emerged within this context, which was shaped by the availability of natural fibres. Thus, the Koch Rajbongshi traditional attire also functions as a mechanism of cultural continuity and adaptive change.

### Objectives of the study

1. To examine the Koch Rajbangshi community’s traditional costume forms, including materials, weaving techniques, and outfit designs.
2. To analyze the cultural significance and symbolic uses of traditional dress, particularly in social settings.
3. To analyze the role of costume in identity development and ritual life.
4. To study the continuation of traditional dress as a type of cultural legacy, as well as how it contributes to historical consciousness within the community.

**Methodology Applied :**The study adopts interview, observation and analytical methods.

**Findings :**The traditional Koch Rajbongshi attire has been a visible marker of ethnic identity. These costumes are deeply embedded in ritual life and sacred traditions. Spinning and weaving have historically formed an essential component of Koch Rajbongshi material culture, that developed within a household production system. The traditional dress of Koch men commonly includes the *angsa*, worn as a lower garment. Women traditionally wear the *patani*, a single cloth wrapped closely around the body from the chest to the feet. These garments that were mostly produced through local weaving practices, indicate the continuity of indigenous dress traditions and the close relationship between material culture and everyday life in Koch society. The various traditional garments of the community can be outlined as follows:

**Attire for men:** Men in the Koch Rajbongshi community traditionally wore the *Angsa*, especially in a larger size, which resembles a towel-like cloth used in everyday life. They also wore *dhotis* of different colours, though white was the most commonly preferred. The *angsa* itself appeared in various sizes, colours, and patterns depending on use and status. However, in the eastern part, this cloth is called *gamsa*. The colours of the *gamsa* are white, green, pui (peach colour), yellow, coffee colour, and blue. Different types of geometric designs are woven into the *gamsa* using different colours. However, floral designs are not used in the *gamsa*. Historical observations also indicate that the dress of nobles and elite sections consisted of several garments. As noted by D. Nath, the attire of the gentry included a fine cotton or silk *dhuti* or *netabhuni* reaching the knees, along with a *pachara* and a *dopati* or *tana* (scarf). In later periods, particularly towards the closing phase of the traditional polity, elements of Mughal-style dress such as the *chauga* (waistcoat), *chapkan* (long shirt), and *jama* appeared in a royal setting. Among common men, clothing remained simpler, usually consisting of a single coarse cotton *dhuti* or *churiya*, shorter than those worn by the upper classes. During winter, people across social divisions covered themselves with an *Endiscarf* for warmth prepared from *EndiSilk* at their home popularly called *Chaddar* or *EmitGilap*. Another essential part of male dress was the *gamocha*, used by both elites and commoners, which could be tied at the waist, wrapped around the head, or carried over the shoulder that shows its everyday practical use and cultural importance.

**Attire for Women:** The dress of women in the Koch society showed clear differences based on both region and social position. Among the noble and upper sections, clothing styles were not uniform across the kingdom. In the western Koch areas, women generally wore a single piece of cloth similar to the *sari*. In contrast, women in the eastern Koch region more commonly wore two garments known as the *mekhela* and the *riha*. The *mekhela* was tied either at the waist or above the chest and extended down to the feet, while the *riha* was wrapped around the upper part of the body. Although *silk* or costly saris were sometimes used, these were mostly limited to wealthy families and therefore did not become a common form of dress among the wider population. In eastern Kamarupa, the sari was even regarded with some disapproval. This highlights that regional preferences strongly shaped clothing practices.

Historical traditions also indicate that when saris were once sent as gifts from the Koch ruler Naranarayan to the Ahom king Sukampha for his queens, while they were not considered suitable for royal display, which further shows that clothing carried social and cultural meanings beyond simple utility. New garments such as jackets and blouses began to appear, but these developments seem to belong to a later phase.

During winter, women of aristocratic families protected themselves from the cold with richly decorated shawls made of *endi* cloth. These shawls, often

embroidered with gold or silver thread, were known as *chadar* or *cheleng* and signified both comfort and social status. Among ordinary and tribal women, clothing remained simpler and more practical. At home, many women wore a single cloth known as *patni* or *tona*, tied in a style similar to the *mekhela*, usually above the chest. The *patni* is approximately five cubits long, that equals about ninety inches, and two and a half cubits wide, roughly forty-five inches in width.

This cloth is produced in various colours, though green and yellow are considered the most prominent traditional shades. The *patani* is typically decorated with borders and floral motifs in multiple colours. Designs having simple border lines is referred to as *pari*. When borders incorporate floral ornamentation, the design is called *foolbasa*. Koch women traditionally employ a wide variety of decorative patterns. Among the plain border designs are *ghugupari*, *dighlapari*, *sotopari*, and *boropari*. In addition, several traditional patterned motifs remain popular, including *paskolxolopiya*, *nakarxujia*, *chikolbaala*, *parsuka*, *tin paatiya*, *paaspoti*, and *paspotikundul*. Mekhelas are mostly designed with some simple flowers.

Designs such as *kasidaat*, *kodexeira*, *lewaa*, *magor* designs are most popular. When going outside, however, they generally used two pieces of cloth, one wrapped around the waist and another covering the upper body, together known as *agran*. Young girls and unmarried women also wore *chaddars*, which were wrapped across the chest. The *topor* is another important element in the traditional dress of Koch women. It functions as a customary head-dress and holds symbolic significance. The *topor* is adorned with *sedarkaata* (porcupine spines) after the head is tied and covered with a tiny *gamsa* (cloth). Within Koch belief systems, the use of porcupine spines carries ritual meaning. It is widely believed that the *sedarkata* serves as a protective charm and also protects the wearer from the evil eye and malevolent spirits.

These variations in dressing patterns reflect the historical background, social structure, and culture of the Koch Rajbongshi community. Differences in garments across regions indicate how local traditions shaped material culture, while distinctions between aristocratic and common dress point to the presence of social hierarchy within the society. At the same time, the continued use of garments such as the *mekhela*, *riha*, *patani*, *angsa*, and *gamocha* demonstrates the persistence of indigenous textile traditions across generations. Although new styles were introduced through external influences, older forms of dress did not disappear but adapted within changing historical contexts. Thus, clothing becomes an important historical source through which one can trace the continuity of cultural practices, the shaping of community identity, and the interaction between tradition and change.

Among the different aspects that shape the cultural life of the Koch Rajbongshi community, costume and visible cultural markers have become

especially important because they are more easily influenced by outside cultures and therefore more likely to change or be absorbed. Although many traditional rituals and practices have survived, several customs connected with everyday life have gradually weakened or been forgotten. One clear example can be seen in clothing practices. In many places, members of the community began to use widely accepted regional garments such as the *mekhelachadar* or *sari* of their own traditional dress, the *patni*. This shift highlights broader processes of social interaction, modernisation, and cultural assimilation within the Koch Rajbongshi community.

Various sections of the community made conscious efforts to revive and preserve their traditional cultural identity in response to this change. Organisations and social groups began to emphasise the importance of folk traditions, customary dress, and indigenous practices as symbols of community continuity. In this context, the role of the **All Koch Rajbongshi Students' Union (AKRSU)** became particularly significant. The organisation actively worked to promote awareness about Koch Rajbongshi culture and encouraged the preservation of traditional practices, especially those connected with folk life and material culture. During 2007–08 AKRSU publicly encouraged women of the community to wear the *patani* in everyday and social contexts. The organisation also proposed that this traditional garment be introduced as a school uniform in place of the *mekhela–chador* in areas with a strong Koch Rajbongshi population.

This idea was first put into practice at **DotomaHighSchool** in Kokrajhar, where the *patni* was introduced as the uniform. Several other schools in the district, such as Kalipukhuri, Serphanguri, Chandrapara, and Salekati, also adopted the same dress code. As a result, many students today wear their traditional dress in school, which helps to express their cultural identity and keeps the tradition alive among the younger generation. Thus, the revival of the *patani* shows how dress can play an important role in preserving community identity and maintaining cultural continuity in this context.

**Ornamentation and Material Culture in Koch Rajbongshi Society:** The idea of costume in Koch Rajbongshi society extends beyond clothing to include ornaments and other elements of material culture which formed an important part of their social and cultural life. These ornaments were not only used for decoration but also indicated social status, economic condition, and cultural identity. Literary sources refer to a wide variety of ornaments used in Koch Rajbongshi society, many of which were made of gold or silver and sometimes decorated with valuable stones. The making of ornaments was carried out by a specialised artisan group known as the *Sonari*, who were traditionally associated with jewellery production. Both men and women wore ornaments, and common items included rings, earrings, necklaces, and bracelets. Women, however, used a greater variety of ornaments such as *nupur*, *gamkharu*, *kinkini*, and *galpata*.

The type of material used in ornaments often reflected social status. Members of the aristocracy usually wore ornaments made of gold, while common people used silver, nickel, coral, or other less costly materials. A similar distinction could be seen in household utensils: gold and silver vessels were limited to upper-class families.

In traditional practice, Koch Rajbangshi women commonly wore shell bangles known as *sankha*, usually on the left wrist. Those who could afford it also wore silver bangles called *churis*, and another widely used ornament was the *mutha*, a type of silver bracelet. Neck ornaments included the mala made of gold or silver and the *hashli*, a rigid silver neckpiece. Ear ornaments such as anti (gold earrings) were popular, and women also wore *nat* or *nakful* (nose rings) made of gold or silver. The ankles were decorated with ornaments like *hank-kharu*. Rings of gold or silver were sometimes worn not only on the fingers but also in the ear lobes. Children were also adorned with ornaments, often made of silver or gold, and necklaces made from small silver coins were especially popular among ordinary people. Coin-based ornaments continue to be used in some sections of the community even today, showing the continuity of older decorative traditions.

**Costume and Ritual in the Koch Rajbangshi Community:** In the Koch Rajbangshi community, costume is closely connected with ritual life and religious belief. Marriage rituals among the Koch community are closely associated with sacred clothing traditions. The attire worn during marriage ceremonies is often woven under special conditions and by selected individuals, indicating the ritual purity attached to such clothing. For marriage, the bride traditionally wears the *pachrangipatni*, along with a *doppati* placed around her neck. Although the method of draping remains similar to ordinary *patani*, the *pachrongipatani* is distinguished by its symbolic border design consisting of five coloured stripes. The term *pachrongi* refers to “five colours,” which include *matiya* (brown), *nila* (blue), *ranga* or lal (red), *dhungaarong* (ash colour), and *akakhi* (sky blue). These colours are believed to represent the five fundamental elements: **earth**, **water**, **fire** (or blood), **sky**, and **air** that are considered essential for the existence of human life in the Koch belief system. Thus, the marriage cloth symbolically links the human body to cosmic creation. However, in contemporary times, cultural interaction with Assamese society has influenced marriage practices. Many families now prefer the white *Mekhela-Sador* made of *Pat silk*.

The groom’s attire also holds ritual importance. The groom dons a white shirt and a green *aosa* or *angsa* with a white or yellow border. Sometimes people wear a white kurta with a white *aosa* or *half-dhuti*. A *selengsador* is placed on the shoulder, and the groom must wear a *paguri* (turban) on his head. This *paguri* is prepared using a ten-hand-long *phalikapur*, which is ceremonially gifted by the bride’s father and signifies bond between the two families. Additional ritual objects are incorporated into the marriage costume for protective purposes. Both

bride and groom wear symbolic head ornaments: *murali* for the bride and *mukut* for the groom, traditionally made from cork. To guard against black magic and evil spirits, a small knife (*daabkatri*) and charmed mustard seeds (*jarabehor*) are tied inside a handkerchief and kept with the couple throughout the ceremony. The knife is believed to ward off harmful spirits, while the mustard seeds function as protective ritual substances.

Another example of sacred textile usage is seen in *Ai Puja*, where the colour white dominates the ritual space. Devotees wear white clothing and ritual items are also chosen in white. This symbolises purity and sacredness. A particularly important ritual cloth is the *anakata*, which is prepared exclusively for sacred purposes. The word literally means “**uncutcloth**,” referring to the process where the finished textile is not cut using metal instruments. Stones are used to break the threads that preserves its ritual purity. The responsibility of weaving such cloth is entrusted to a married woman whose husband is alive and has given birth to a child. She must observe strict purity rules, including refraining from weaving during menstruation.

Marriage clothes, sacred textiles, and ritual accessories together express ideas of purity, protection, and community belonging. Even though many practices are changing today, these traditions continue to connect the Koch Rajbongshi community with their past and help preserve their cultural identity. Thus, costume in Koch Rajbongshisociety remains an important link between tradition, ritual life, and continuity of the community.

## Conclusion

The historical reading of Koch-Rajbongshi attire clearly shows that clothing in this community is deeply connected with social life, belief systems, and historical experience. Costume carried meanings related to identity, status, gender roles, and ritual practice. Traditional garments such as *patani*, *angsa*, *dhoti* and other woven clothes reflected the agrarian and craft-based life of the people, where spinning and weaving formed an essential part of domestic economy as well as cultural expression. Thus, costume becomes an important focal point for understanding the material culture of the Koch-Rajbongshi community. Historical evidence further suggests that variations in attire developed due to regional differences, political changes, and cultural interaction with neighbouring societies. Influences from Assamese, Mughal, and broader regional traditions shaped elite and courtly dress, while common people largely retained simpler forms of clothing made from locally produced cotton and *endi* silk. These differences indicate that costume also functioned as a marker of hierarchy and social distinction. At the same time, ritual textiles such as *pachrongipatani*, *anakata* cloth, and marriage garments reveal the symbolic dimension of dress, where colour, weaving practices, and rules of purity expressed religious beliefs and collective values. However, like many indigenous communities, the Koch-

Rajbongshi society experienced processes of cultural change, assimilation, and loss of certain traditions. In many areas, traditional dress was gradually replaced by *mekhela-chador*, *sari*, or other modern garments. However, the continuity in the presence of weaving traditions, ritual costume practices, and recent cultural revival efforts shows that attire still plays a crucial role in preserving community identity. The growing awareness about traditional dress, including its use in festivals, rituals, and even institutional settings such as schools, indicates that costume remains a visible symbol of belonging and historical continuity.

Thus, it can be concluded that the Koch-Rajbongshi attire represents a tradition that connects the past with the present. A historical understanding of these dress practices thus, contributes to the broader understanding of community formation, culture and continuity in North East India. Therefore, the study and preservation of Koch Rajbongshi costume traditions play an essential role in protecting indigenous heritage and ensuring that cultural knowledge, ritual meanings, and historical continuity are transmitted across generations.

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# **Culinary Practices of Assam's Subaltern Culture in Assamese Novels: A Subaltern Historiographical Analysis** *(With Special Reference to the Novels of Arupa Patangia Kalita and Dhruba Jyoti Borah)*

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## **Abstract**

Over the past forty years, subaltern historiography and food studies have emerged as robust interdisciplinary fields; however, their intersection remains underexplored in Northeast Indian literature. This article addresses this gap by analysing the representation of culinary practices among marginalised communities in two Assamese novels: *Felanee* (2003) by Arupa Patangia Kalita and *Kalantarar Gadya* (2021) by Dhruba Jyoti Borah. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Antonio Gramsci and Ranajit Guha, the analysis contends that food is more than a routine aspect of daily life. Rather, it constitutes a site where class, gender, ethnicity, and political conflict are negotiated. Through close readings of these novels from a subaltern historiographical perspective, the study demonstrates that food practices exemplify what Guha (1982) terms an autonomous area of subaltern action, while remaining entangled with dominant power structures. The findings indicate that food in these narratives symbolises displacement, gendered labour, surveillance, and survival, and preserves cultural memories often omitted from mainstream history. The article concludes that Assamese fiction offers valuable insights into the material and affective histories of subaltern

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communities in Assam, and that culinary practices merit greater attention within South Asian literary studies.

**Keywords:** Subaltern historiography; Assamese novel; culinary practice; food studies; gender; cultural memory.

## 1. Introduction

Food is a fundamental aspect of human life. Since the earliest use of fire, culinary traditions have evolved in response to environmental conditions, resource scarcity, social organisation, and ritual practices. Cooking and eating are now deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of every community. The study of food traditions prompts broader inquiries into societal, economic, political, and environmental dynamics. Appadurai (1981) observes that food extends beyond mere nutrition; it operates as a system of meaning through which social hierarchies are constructed and contested. Examining dietary habits, culinary methods, and communal eating practices provides critical insight into the everyday politics and economic structures of society.

The Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, writing from a fascist prison in the late 1920s and early 1930s, used the term subaltern in his *Prison Notebooks* to denote groups that have been socially, politically, and economically subordinated across successive historical periods (Gramsci, 1971). For Gramsci, the history of such groups is necessarily fragmentary and episodic because they have been excluded from the institutions through which dominant classes record and transmit their version of the past. To understand the nature of the state, he insisted, one must examine not only the apparatus of rule but also the relationship between ruling groups and the autonomous aspirations of the subaltern. In India, this argument was decisively reformulated by Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies collective from the early 1980s, who sought to recover the agency of peasants, tribal communities, women, and labouring classes whose voices had been muted in colonial archives and elite nationalist narratives alike (Guha, 1982; Chatterjee, 1993; Chakrabarty, 2002).

In Assamese literature, several novelists over the past three decades have engaged with the scattered, fragmented histories of subaltern communities in Assam. These works document political turbulence, ethnic conflict, ecological precarity, and the slow violence of poverty, both supplementing and contesting the official historiography of Northeast India. Arupa Patangia Kalita and Dhruba Jyoti Borah have been particularly persistent in this endeavour, returning across multiple novels to the lives of displaced, dispossessed, and politically marginalised characters. Yet while these novels have been read for their political and gendered themes, the question of how they represent the everyday culinary practices of subaltern communities has received remarkably little scholarly attention.

This article seeks to address this gap by selecting two novels, *Felanee* by Arupa Patangia Kalita and *Kalantarar Gadya* by Dhruva Jyoti Borah, and analysing them through the lens of subaltern historiography. The central research questions are: How do these texts represent the food practices of marginalised communities in Assam? What do these representations reveal about the lived experience of subalternity? In what ways does culinary representation in these novels function as a form of historiography from below?

## 2. Literature Review

The scholarship informing this study draws on three distinct fields: food studies, subaltern studies, and the literary criticism of South Asian fiction. Counihan and Van Esterik (2013) consolidated food studies by compiling foundational and contemporary essays that conceptualise food as a cultural text, a political economy, and an embodied practice. Holtzman (2006), in a seminal review of the anthropology of food and memory, contends that culinary practice is a privileged site for nostalgia, identity formation, and intergenerational transmission, particularly among displaced and diasporic populations. In the South Asian context, Appadurai (1981, 1988) advanced two influential arguments: gastropolitics encodes caste and ritual hierarchies in everyday food transactions, and the notion of a national cuisine is a modern construct shaped by print culture, middle-class women, and the contemporary household. Roy (2010) has more recently traced an alimentary genealogy of South Asian literature, in which eating, hunger, and disgust function as metaphors for colonial subjection and postcolonial belonging.

Subaltern studies, for its part, has moved well beyond its initial concern with peasant insurgency. Spivak's (1988) interrogation, in her landmark essay, of whether the subaltern can in fact speak through the mediating apparatus of elite discourse remains a defining provocation. Chakrabarty (2002) has extended the project to questions of historical time, religion, and modernity, while Chatterjee (1993) has examined how the inner domain of culture, including domestic and culinary practice, became a contested terrain within colonial and nationalist discourse. Guha's (1997) later work on dominance without hegemony refined his earlier formulations, arguing that colonial rule in India never achieved full ideological consent and that the subaltern domain therefore retained a degree of autonomy. Recent scholarship by Ludden (2002) and Chaturvedi (2000) has critically reflected on the legacy and limits of the subaltern studies project.

The literary scholarship on Assamese fiction has long recognised the political and ethnographic density of writers such as Kalita and Borah. Misra (2011) and Baruah (1999) provide the historical context in which the novels under discussion must be situated, particularly the long arc of insurgency, counter-insurgency, and ethnic mobilisation in Assam from the 1970s onward. Saikia (2011), writing on

women and political violence in adjacent regions, offers methodological cues for reading literary representations of conflict against the grain of state archives. More directly, scholars such as Bora (2017) and Phukan (2019) have examined Kalita's fiction for its gendered representation of displacement, though neither has focused specifically on food. Sengupta (2010), in her study of Bengali print culture and cuisine, demonstrates how regional literatures can be. This review reveals a productive yet uneven scholarly landscape. While food studies have examined the political implications of eating, subaltern studies have focused on recovering marginalised voices, and literary criticism has explored Assamese fiction for its political and gendered themes, the intersection of these fields remains largely unexamined. This article seeks to address this gap by focusing on their convergence. Gramsci's notion of the subaltern, articulated in the fragmentary entries of the Prison Notebooks, refers to social groups subjected to the cultural and political hegemony of dominant classes. Gramsci emphasised that the history of such groups is necessarily episodic and fragmented, as their attempts at autonomous action are repeatedly absorbed, deflected, or suppressed by the ruling bloc (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 52–55). This formulation has two significant implications for the present study: first, the historian or critic must read against the grain of dominant sources to recover traces of subaltern initiative; second, hegemony is never absolute, operating through what Gramsci termed common sense, the sedimented assumptions through which subordinated groups partially internalise their own subordination, even as they continue to resist it. Subordinated groups partly internalise their own subordination, even as they continue to resist it in practice.

Ranajit Guha translated and radicalised these insights for the South Asian context. In his programmatic statement for the first volume of *Subaltern Studies*, Guha (1982) argued that the historiography of Indian nationalism had been dominated by colonialist and bourgeois-nationalist elitism, both of which denied the subaltern classes' autonomous political agency. Against this, he proposed a parallel domain of subaltern politics, structured by its own forms of solidarity, organisation, and resistance. In his later work, Guha (1997) developed the concept of dominance without hegemony to describe a colonial situation in which coercion was never fully translated into ideological consent, leaving the subaltern domain a measure of cultural and practical autonomy.

Spivak (1988) complicated this framework by drawing attention to the gendered subaltern, particularly the figure of the subaltern woman, whose voice is doubly mediated by patriarchal and colonial discourses. Her injunction that the subaltern, when understood in the strictest sense, cannot speak within available representational economies has shaped much subsequent feminist and postcolonial work. Together, these three thinkers furnish the analytical vocabulary used below: hegemony and common sense from Gramsci; autonomous domain and dominance without hegemony from Guha; and the gendered limits of subaltern

representation from Spivak. The analysis that follows shows how these concepts operate concretely in the culinary representations of the two selected novels.

#### **4. Objectives, Methodology, and Scope**

The principal objectives of this study are: (i) to examine how Assamese novels, with particular reference to Felanee and Kalantarar Gadya, represent the culinary practices of subaltern communities in Assam; (ii) to analyse the social, political, economic, and cultural forces that shape these practices; and (iii) to read these literary representations through a subaltern-historiographical lens to assess their value as a counter-archival source. This study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in close textual analysis of the selected novels. The analysis focuses on language, narrative style, and thematic content, situating these elements within the theoretical and historical contexts previously outlined. The approach is descriptive and analytical rather than ethnographic, concentrating on literary representations of food rather than actual culinary practices. Where relevant, historical research on Assam is referenced to assess the realism and significance of these portrayals. These portrayals are glad.

This article does not aim to exhaustively catalogue every instance of food in the novels or to focus exclusively on a single ethnic or caste group. Instead, it examines four principal contexts: food in refugee camps during the Assam Movement, kitchens in insurgent camps, the slum economy centred on women's culinary labour, and the rural liquor trade. Each context illuminates a distinct dimension of subaltern life in Assam.

### **5. The Selected Novels: A Brief Overview**

#### **5.1 Felanee (2003)**

Arupa Patangia Kalita's *Felanee* is set against the long, turbulent socio-political history of Assam from roughly the 1940s to the 1990s. The narrative opens with Ratnamala, a young widow who elopes with a Bodo youth named Kinaram and incurs the wrath of an aristocratic Mauzadar's household; the consequences of that defiance reverberate through three generations. The novel records the violence, ethnic conflict, and humanitarian crises that punctuated the Assam Movement of the late 1970s and 1980s, consistently from the perspective of those who paid the heaviest price. Felanee, Ratnamala's granddaughter and the novel's protagonist, loses her home twice and is widowed during communal violence. She eventually settles with her son Mani in a suburban slum, where a precarious community of displaced people without a stable ethnic identity gradually takes shape. The novel attends with unusual care to the daily struggles of these characters, including their gendered labour, their food, and their shifting social relationships.

### **5.2 *Kalantarar Gadya (2021)***

Dhruba Jyoti Borah's *Kalantarar Gadya* reconstructs the fragmented history of postcolonial Assam through the lens of armed conflict between the Indian state and insurgent organisations in the region. The novel examines the role of the central government, the pressures of capitalist development, and the rising tensions in late-twentieth-century Assamese society. Through characters such as Prabhat, who become collateral casualties of the confrontation between state forces and underground militants, the narrative documents how structural violence reshapes the consciousness, occupations, and everyday routines of ordinary people. As the analysis below demonstrates, the novel's attention to food, particularly within insurgent camps and rural households, makes it an unusually rich source for a culinary reading of subaltern history in Assam.

## **6. Analysis and Discussion**

The following discussion examines the two novels through four representative configurations of subaltern culinary practice. In each case, the analysis moves beyond description to identify hegemonic operations, the presence of an autonomous subaltern domain, and the gendered structures that shape subaltern food-related labour.

### **6.1 *Refugee Camp Cuisine and the Politics of Provisioning***

Kalita's *Felanee* depicts the lives of those who lost their homes, families, and livelihoods during the violence associated with the Assam Movement and were subsequently sheltered in government camps. According to the novel, camp residents were initially fed through community kitchens organised by the authorities, with rations of wheat flour, oil, porridge, and rice, sometimes imported from overseas, distributed to the inmates. However, both the quantity and the quality of these provisions deteriorated over time; the rice grew progressively scantier and frequently spoiled, and residents were compelled to cook and eat in conditions rendered acutely unhygienic by rainwater, mud, and the absence of proper sanitation (Kalita, 2003, pp. 41–42). The predictable consequence was widespread illness.

Reading Gramsci, the camp emerges as a site where the state exercises a peculiar form of dominance that fails to translate into hegemony. Provisioning is presented as benevolence; in practice, it operates as a mechanism of containment that allows the state to manage displaced populations at minimal cost while obscuring the inadequacy of its own response from public view. Guha's (1997) formulation of dominance without hegemony illuminates this configuration sharply: the state coerces and partially provides, but it secures no genuine consent from those it shelters. The deteriorating rations and unhygienic kitchens are not incidental details; they index the limits of the state's willingness to recognise camp inmates as full citizens. Kalita's narrative, by restoring these material

details to view, performs precisely the kind of historiography from below that Guha called for: the camp kitchen, ordinarily absent from official accounts of the Assam Movement, becomes a privileged vantage from which to reread that period.

### ***6.2 Insurgent Kitchens: Cooking Under Surveillance***

Borah's *Kalantarar Gadya* presents an equally striking, though structurally distinct, configuration of subaltern food practice. The novel depicts the daily life of members of armed groups who lived clandestinely in forest camps with severely limited resources. They typically ate rice twice a day and avoided cooking after dark, since firelight could betray their position to the army or nearby villagers (Borah, 2021, pp. 60–61). Provisions were stored discreetly near the camps, and cooking duties were assigned, often in rotation, to younger members of the group. The food itself, though sparse, is presented as adequate and even satisfying: thick, tasty rice accompanied by a porridge of vegetables and small pieces of chicken, lightly seasoned (Borah, 2021, p. 60).

This passage rewards careful theoretical attention. The insurgent kitchen represents what Guha (1982) describes as the autonomous domain of subaltern politics, a sphere of action neither absorbed by nor fully intelligible to the dominant order. The very rhythm of cooking, eating, and not cooking is dictated by the logic of evasion: meals are timed to avoid detection, fires are extinguished early, and labour is distributed according to the group's operational requirements rather than the gendered conventions of the surrounding rural society. At the same time, the autonomy of this domain is never absolute. The fugitives remain dependent on rural supply networks, on the goodwill or coercion of local villagers, and on the very rice economy that the Indian state regulates. The insurgent kitchen, then, simultaneously enacts subaltern self-organisation and registers the long reach of state power into the forest. Its representation in the novel functions as a counter-archive of the conflict, recording what state and counter-insurgency reports systematically erase: the ordinary, embodied texture of insurgent life.

### ***6.3 The Suburban Slum: Women's Culinary Labour and the Hegemony of Gender***

A substantial portion of Felanee is occupied by the suburban slum on the city's outskirts, inhabited by displaced and marginalised people from many backgrounds. Here, the representation of culinary practice illuminates not only economic precarity but also the gendered organisation of subaltern labour. Felanee, having taken refuge in the slum with her young son, learns to prepare fried *muri* (puffed rice) from another woman in the locality, Kali Budhi, who is also her landlady. Gradually, she begins preparing and selling *muri* alongside other women in the slum, generating a small but vital income that allows her to send Mani to school. She subsequently learns weaving as a supplementary

livelihood, though there are periods when her wares fail to sell and hunger returns (Kalita, 2003).

Other women in the slum, including Jon's mother and Minti, follow similar paths, preparing muri, or fried snacks, for sale in nearby markets. On occasion, several women pool their labour under the guidance of an elderly neighbour to start a small food enterprise. Jagu's wife, meanwhile, grinds nearly thirty coconuts by hand each day to make sweets such as laddoo and bhujia for local shops. The intensity of this work eventually destroys her health and contributes to her death, an episode that Kalita renders with quiet, unsentimental force.

This configuration demands a feminist reading inflected by Gramsci and Spivak. The slum kitchen emerges as the household's principal economic engine, yet the labour that drives it is not recognised as such. It is naturalised as women's work, an extension of domestic care, and is therefore systematically undervalued. Here, Gramsci's notion of common sense becomes indispensable: the assumption that women cook, while men, when present, do not, operates as a sedimented common sense that is not seriously questioned even within the subaltern community. The hegemony of patriarchal labour norms persists even where the hegemony of class society has clearly failed to secure consent. Spivak's (1988) argument that the subaltern woman occupies a position of double subordination, mediated simultaneously by class and gender, finds vivid corroboration in Jagu's wife, whose body is consumed by the demands of culinary production for a market she does not control.

At the same time, the slum kitchen is not only a site of suffering. It is also a space of solidarity, skill transmission, and what Holtzman (2006) calls culinary memory. The fact that women teach one another to fry muri, pool their labour in collective ventures, and recognise their cooking as a form of knowledge with economic value suggests an incipient form of subaltern self-organisation. In Kalita's hands, the kitchen becomes a site where the autonomous domain Guha theorised acquires a specifically feminine cast.

#### ***6.4 Rural Subalternity, Diet, and the Liquor Economy***

Guha (1982) explicitly included poor peasants and small landholders within the analytical category of the subaltern. By the 1990s, a substantial share of rural Assam belonged to precisely such economically vulnerable strata, and Borah's *Kalantarar Gadya* reflects their daily food culture with care. The diet of the rural subaltern, as depicted in the novel, consists predominantly of rice, vegetables, and, where available, pork or fish. In Assam's riverine tracts, fish in particular are a regular part of meals, reflecting both ecological abundance and a long tradition of inland fishing. The novel also captures another dimension of rural livelihood: the household production and sale of locally brewed liquor. Although this practice generates much-needed income, it also carries social and medical costs that the narrative does not elide.

A particularly telling episode follows the life of a widow who supports herself and her speech-impaired grandson by selling locally brewed liquor and small household items. Lacking other resources, she relies on her culinary and brewing skills until a member of an underground organisation persuades her to abandon the trade. He provides her with capital to open a small shop selling cloth and household goods. However, the withdrawal of liquor from the village has unanticipated consequences: a habitual drinker, denied his usual supply, is reported to have died. Soon afterward, the same activist returns and locks the shop. Through this sequence, the novel suggests that even when the harms of a traditional practice are widely acknowledged, the economically marginalised cannot easily abandon the occupations on which their survival depends.

Theoretically, this episode dramatises the internal contradictions of the subaltern domain. The activist intervenes in the name of the community's welfare; the widow accepts the intervention with cautious hope; the drinker's death reveals the depth of dependence; and the locking of the shop signals the activist's withdrawal once moral reform proves more complicated than anticipated. The episode confirms Guha's (1997) insight that subaltern life is structured by competing claims to leadership and authority, and that even insurgent or reformist agents within the subaltern domain may exercise their own form of dominance. The liquor economy is neither romanticised nor moralised; it is presented as a structural feature of rural poverty, deeply imbricated with caste, gender, and patron-client networks.

## 7. Conclusion

This study examines how culinary practices among subaltern communities in Assam are portrayed in two recent Assamese novels and assesses how these portrayals contribute to subaltern historiography. The analysis yields several significant findings. Depictions of poor rations in refugee camps, organised kitchens in insurgent camps, fried muri in slums, and homemade liquor in rural households each reveal distinct aspects of class, ethnicity, gender, and political conflict. Collectively, these representations offer a nuanced account of subaltern life in Assam that is often absent from mainstream historical narratives. The theoretical framework drawn from Gramsci, Guha, and Spivak proves productive when applied to culinary representation rather than solely to political insurgency. Gramsci's concept of hegemony elucidates the persistence of patriarchal common sense in slum kitchens; Guha's notion of the autonomous domain clarifies the structural distinctiveness of the insurgent kitchen and women's collectives; and his concept of dominance without hegemony helps explain the ambivalent provisioning of the refugee camp. Spivak's focus on the gendered subaltern further sharpens the analysis of women such as Jagu's wife, whose labour is both indispensable and rendered invisible.

More broadly, this study contributes to the ongoing dialogue between food

studies and subaltern studies. By treating cooking and eating as significant subjects for subaltern history, it demonstrates that everyday food routines can serve as an archive, helping to consolidate the fragmented narratives of marginalised communities. Assamese fiction, with its attention to lived experience and political transformation, is particularly well-suited to this approach. However, this study does not systematically address how translation, circulation, and reception influence the reach of these texts, nor does it draw extensively on ethnographic or oral-historical sources to triangulate its literary analysis. Future research could productively situate these novels in conversation with other Northeast Indian literatures, the broader archive of South Asian food writing, and the lived testimonies of the communities whose histories they represent.

The representation of food in Felanee and Kalantarar Gadya prompts broader social reflection. These novels illustrate that the subaltern kitchen is not a static tradition but a dynamic site of ongoing struggle, where issues of food rights, women's labour, displacement, and political violence intersect. Recognising these dynamics is essential for those seeking to engage with, rather than merely study, Assam's marginalised communities.

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# Ethnolinguistic Study of Mog

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## Abstract

Mog is a Tibeto-Burman language, largely spoken in the small hilly state of north eastern India called Tripura. It is also spoken in the neighboring country Bangladesh, and also a small number of speakers are found in the bordering state Mizoram. As per the census report of 2011, the total population of the tribe is 37893. This paper examines the anthropo-linguistic background of the language, that may include the socio-cultural profile, economic condition (The tribe is economically backward), demographic scenario and political spheres of people of the tribe.

**Keywords:** Tibeto-Burman, Mog, Sociolinguistic, Socio-Cultural, Anthropolinguistic

## 1. Introduction

In an article published in 1972, the Norwegian-American linguist, Einar Haugen, presented a novel method to the study of language in multilingual cultures. He dubbed this method 'language ecology', and defined it as 'the study of the interplay of every given language and its environment' (Garner<sup>1</sup>, 2005). The main focus of Haugen's substantial linguistics and philosophical writings was how several languages coexist and interact in a multilingual society in both spoken and written forms. Haugen was not satisfied with contemporary approaches to linguistic description. Linguists, he claimed, too often treated the speech community of a language as little more than a kind of accidental background

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to what they saw as the essential business of linguistics. Haugen was proposing some type of a parallel with the natural world, and the phrase ‘environment’ of language makes one think immediately of the actual surroundings in which language is uttered. However, he defined environment in a different, and at first sight somewhat confusing, way: the environment is not the physical location but the social and cultural setting in which the language is utilized. According to Haugen (1972: 325),

“The true environment of a language is the society that uses it as one of its codes. Language exists only in the minds of its users, and it only functions in relating these users to one another and to nature, i.e., their social and natural environment [...]. The ecology of a language is determined primarily by those who learn it, use it, and transmit it to others.” (Haugen, 1972, p. 325)

It is not appropriate to view a language as merely a structural system (phonology, morphology, syntax, etc.) that exists in some way apart from its speakers. Haugen claims that, it is difficult to understand the language without the speakers.

The tribal population of Tripura comprises about 32% of the total population as per the report of 2011 census. The tribe is one of the sixth largest tribes of Tripura after—Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Chakma and Halam. The Mog people were eventually migrated from Bangladesh, just after the Independence. Though the Mog tribe is the sixth largest tribe of Tripura, their contribution in the total population of the state is very minimal, it only around 2-3 %. They followed Buddhism as their religious practice. They are very generous and humble by their attitude.

‘Ethnolinguistically the term Mog stands for the tribe as well as the language of the community’ (Chakraborty, 2025). Depending on the UNESCO’s vitality test, Mog is a vulnerable language<sup>2</sup>. Mogs are the inhabitants of Tripura, but they also live in Mizoram and the neighboring country Bangladesh, where their concentration is the largest almost 150000 (2007 census). In Tripura they largely reside in South Tripura District (especially in Sabroom, Santirbazaar, and Belonia subdivision). The Mogs are the tribe of Mongoloid origin. Linguistically they belong to the Tibeto-Burman language family of Lolo-Burmese group. According to the 2011 census report of India, the total population of Mog speakers in Tripura consists 37893.

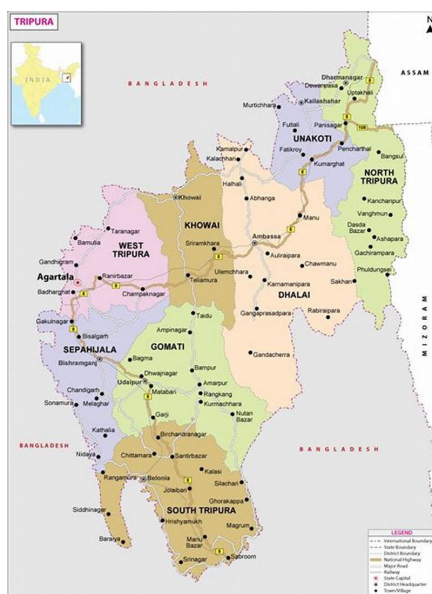


Figure 1.1—Map of Tripura. Source: [www.mapsofindia.com](http://www.mapsofindia.com)

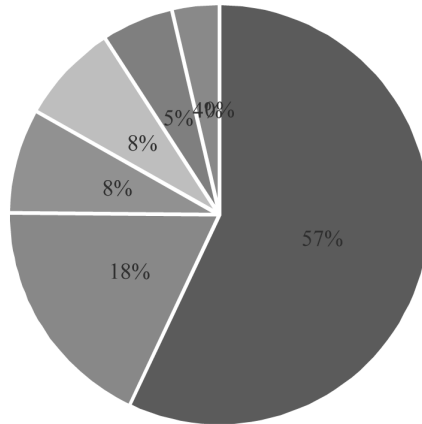
### 1.1. Ethnic Groups of Tripura

Tripura is a small hilly state in the north eastern region of India, filled with lush greenery and enriched with its flora and fauna. In this beautiful land lock hilly state; there are nineteen recognized ethnic groups and many sub-groups, which is again diverse and unique by their languages and cultures. Two dominant language families are stand side by side in this state, i.e. Indo-Arian and Tibeto-Burman. From Indo-Arian branch we have languages like Bangla and Hindi. On the otherhand, from the Tibeto-Burman stock we have 19 tribes, and the stock can be divided into valley-dwellers and highlanders, the former having originally occupied the river valleys while the latter lived apart from them in the interior spaces of the hills (Debnath, 2010, p. 4). Among the valley dwellers, we have Tippera, Chakma, Sak, Mog and Tanchangya; and in the highland, the Kuki-Chin tribes, besides the Reang and the Mru.

According to 2011 census, the total population of the state is 3671032, with 1871867 males and 1799165 females. The number of tribal populations of the state is 1166813, where male constitute 50.43% i.e. 588327 and the female is 49.57% i.e. 578486. The density of the tribal population is 111/km<sup>2</sup>. Interestingly, out of the total tribal population only 4.22% people i.e. 49247 live in urban areas and the rest i.e. 95.78% or 1117566 people still live in rural areas. The sex ratio of the tribal population is 983 females per thousand males (for rural 982 and urban 1017); lower than the national ratio of 990. The tribal population of the state is largely Hindu, but a substantial growth has seen during 1991—2001 in Christian population due to the missionary movements or activities. On

the otherhand, the population of Buddhists gradually declined within the same period. Demographically, the valley dwellers (Exceptional in the case of Mog/h), comprise small and marginalized communities, living mostly in far-flung villages and hamlets with little access to the basic amenities of life.

**Population**



■ Tripura ■ Reang ■ Jamatia ■ Chakma ■ Halam ■ Mog/h

Figure 1.2—Major Tribes’ population with total Tribal Population

**1.2. Place of Mog in Language Family**

The term Sino-Tibetan was coined by Jean Przyluski in 1924. Tibeto-Burman is the sub-brunch of Sino-Tibetan family. Sino-Tibetan is the most populous language group in the world, predominantly spoken in the South-East Asian countries like China, India, Nepal, Myanmar, Northern parts of Thailand, Laos, Vietnam. One of the typological features shared by almost every Sino-Tibetan language is its Tonal feature. North-Eastern states of India are the hotspot of Language diversity, as there is the concentration of many TB languages which are different from each other linguistically as well as culturally.

According to Benedict (1942), Sino-Tibetan languages fall into two groups—Sinitic and Tibeto-Karen; the later again sub grouped as Karen and Tibeto-Burman.

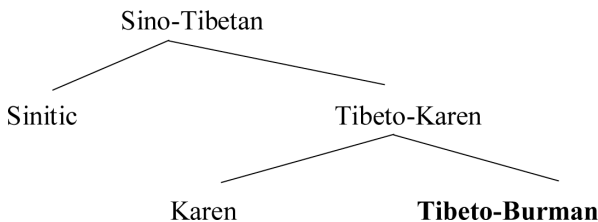


Figure 1.3—Classification of Tibeto-Burman by Benedict (1942)

According to Sergei Starostin (1996), Sino-Tibetan is divided into two major groups i.e., Sino-Kiranti and Tibeto-Burman. He also further classified the main Sino-Tibetan into three major groups namely Sinitic, Kiranti and Tibeto-Burman.

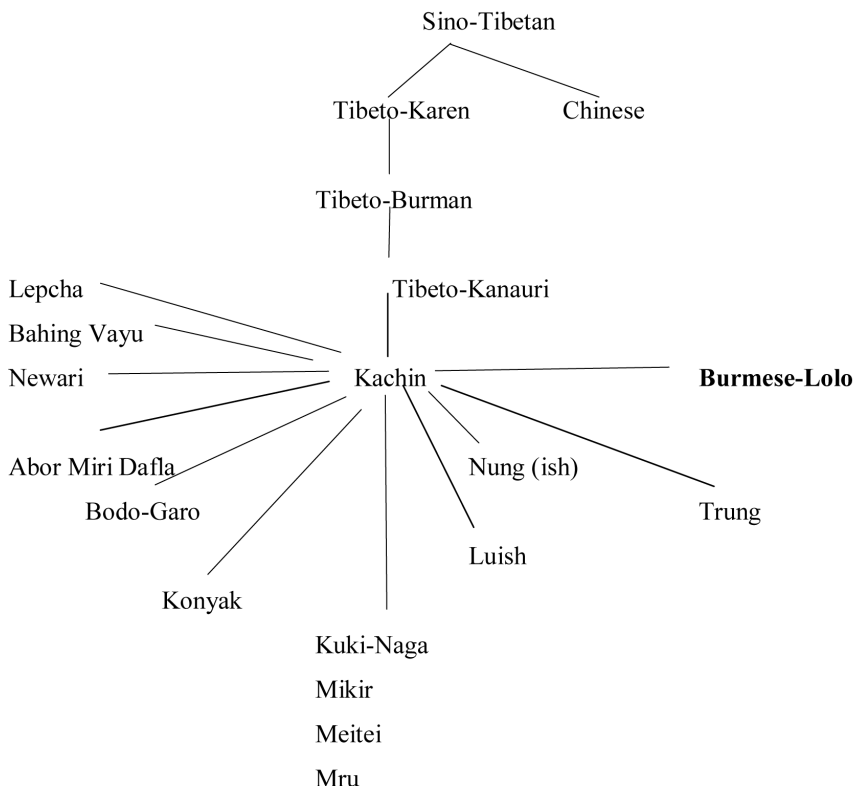
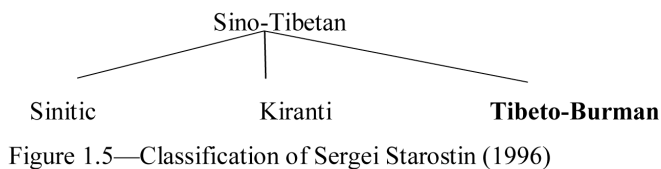
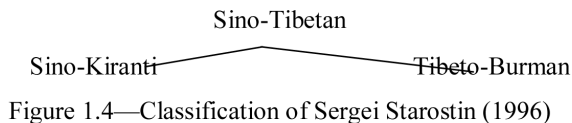


Figure 1.6—Classification of Needham, Robbinson (1855)<sup>3</sup>

Scot de Lancy (1989) classified Tibeto-Burman into 4 groups—Bodic, Baric, Burmic, Karenic. He again grouped Bodic as Bodish and East Himalayan; Baric as Kamarupan and Kachinic; Burmic as Riyang Lolo Burmic. Kamrupan again sub-classified into Abor Miri Dafla, Mikir Meitei, Kuki Naga, Bodo

Konyak. On the otherhand, Kachinic grouped into two—Luish, Jingphlo. Bodo Konyak again sub-branched into two as Konyak and Bodo. Under Lolo Burmic group there is Burmese languages which is again categorizes as Arakanese, and further as Mog language.

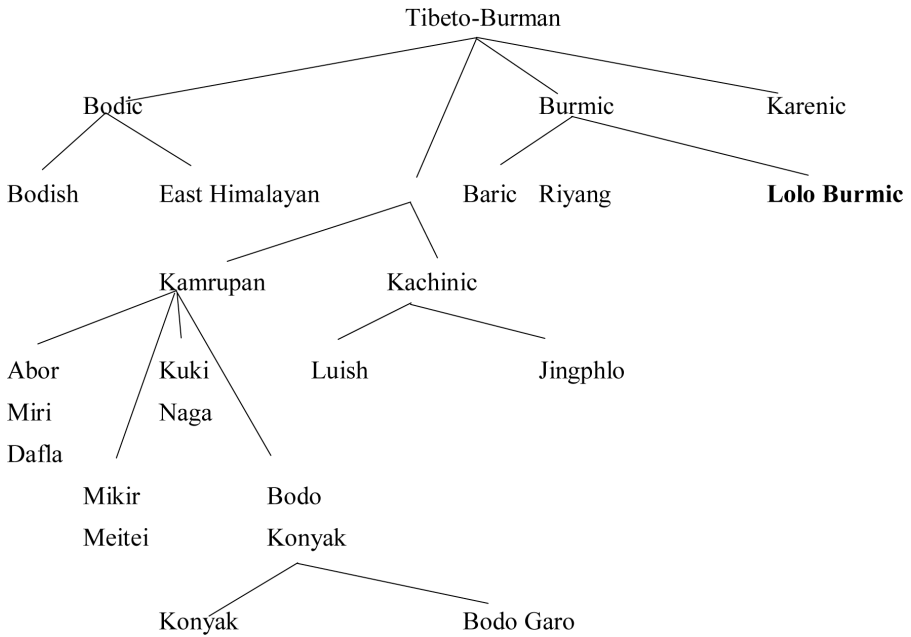


Figure 1.7—The Classification of Scot de Lancy (1989)

## 2. The Tribe Mog

Numerous academics contend that Mogs are descended from Mongoloids. They go by several names in different places. For example, the Mog people, who speak their own language, but the term ‘Mog’ are derived from Bangla. However, the same speakers of the relevant language are referred to as Marma in Bangladesh. It’s interesting to note that the tribe, whether it is Marma in Bangladesh or Mog in Tripura, has the same name as its language. Given that Bangladesh encircles Tripura on three sides—the north, south, and west—it is most likely that the tribe is migratory, most likely from the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh. The tribe’s migration saga is extensive and rich. Nearly all historians asserted that the tribe originated in Arakan, a region of Burma (Myanmar). Some academics claim that the word Marma is derived from the Burmese word ‘Myamm’, changing it to Myamma > Mamma > Mara > Marma. Some others hold alternative views because they claim that the name ‘Marma’ originates from the Chinese words ‘Ming’ or ‘Mirma’, which are used to refer to the Burmese people of Myanmar in China. It is also clear from historical Myanmar coins, which called the country’s citizens as ‘Meyama’.

However, there is another explanation for why the speakers of the language known as ‘Mog’ in Tripura are also referred to by the same name in numerous works of Bengali literature. Since the tribe gained notoriety for its theatrical exploits in the latter half of the sixteenth century, they became a particular menace to Bengali traders. At the time, they were pirates who plundered maritime tradesmen. Therefore, the tribe is associated with the term ‘Mog’, and a frequent expression in Bangla that refers to the home of the tribe is “Moger Muluk” (territories of Mog). The Bangladeshi tribe members, however, objected to the term ‘Mog’, viewing it as derogatory.

### 3. Linguistic demography and composition of Tripura

Linguistically, Tripura has four separate language families: Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman, Austro Asiatic and Dravidian. According to the 2011 census, there are 3673917 people living in the state, with Schedule Tribes making up 31.8% of the overall population. The vast majority of people in the state are native Bengali speakers. Speakers of the 14 languages that make up the Tibeto-Burman family are acknowledged as Scheduled tribes. Every tribe has its own unique language and culture. The scheduled tribes are Bhil, Bhutia, Chaimal, Chakma, Garo, Halam, Jamatia, Khasia, Kuki, Lepcha, Lushai, Meitei, Mizo, Mog, Munda, Noatia, Orang, Reang, Santals, Tripuri, and Uchai. The following displays Tripura’s current linguistic demography as reported by the 2011 Indian census.

Sl. No.	Languages	Language Family	Number of Speakers
1	Bengali	Indo-Aryan	2414774
2	Bhil	Indo-Aryan	3105
3	Bhutia	Tibeto-Burman	28
4	Bishnupuria	Indo-Aryan	22112
5	Chaimal/ Saimar	Tibeto-Burman	549
6	Chakma	Indo-Aryan	79813
7	Garo	Tibeto-Burman	12952
8	Halam	Tibeto-Burman	57210
9	Jamatia	Tibeto-Burman	83347
10	Khasia	Austro-Asiatic	366
11	Kuki (Included with other Kuki-Chin languages)	Tibeto-Burman	10965
12	Lepcha	Tibeto-Burman	157
13	Lushai/Mizo	Tibeto-Burman	5384
14	Manipuri/ Meitei	Tibeto-Burman	23779

15	Mog	Tibeto-Burman	37893
16	Munda	Austro-Asiatic	14544
17	Noatia	Tibeto-Burman	14298
18	Orang	Austro-Asiatic	12011
19	Reang	Tibeto-Burman	188220
20	Santals	Austro-Asiatic	2913
21	Tripuri/ Kokborok	Tibeto-Burman	592255
22	Uchai	Tibeto-Burman	2447

Table No 1: Major languages spoken in Tripura according to the Census, 2011.

Bengali is the most common language in the state, both in terms of number and status, compared to the other 21 languages, as seen in Table No 2. In addition to English and Kokborok, it is one of the main official languages. There is ample proof that all of the state's minor languages, including Mog, have borrowed vocabulary from Bengali.

#### 4. Ethnolinguistic Demography of Mog

Sothern part of the state of Tripura, i.e., South Tripura district is witnessing the largest concentration of the Mog people. The district is surrounded by Bangladesh from three sides, on its south, west and east. It also shares border with two districts namely—Gomati and Sipahijala. The east border of the district is important from the geographical point of view. As we mentioned earlier, the primary settlement of the tribe rested on Chittagong Hill Tracts, which is situated on east side of the district, from where the tribe most probably migrated to Tripura. Chittagong Hill Tracts has three divisions—Khagrachori, Rangamati and Bandarban, in which Khagrachori sharing its border with South Tripura District.



Figure—2 Map of South District. Source: [www.mapsofindia.com](http://www.mapsofindia.com)

Based on 2011 census the following information about South District is given below:

- a. Area—1514.3 sq. km.
- b. Population—453079
- c. Male—234118
- d. Female—218961
- e. ST population—162463 (35.85%)
- f. Density—299 persons per sq. km.
- g. Literacy—85.09%
- h. Principle languages—Bengali, Kokborok, Mog

Growth of the Language (Mog) from 1971 to 2011 is mentioned below—

Year	Persons who turned as their mother tongue	Decadal Percentage increase
1971	12378	
1981	17958	(1971-1981) = 41.06
1991	28135	(1981-1991) = 61.16
2001	30639	(1991-2001) = 8.90
2011	37893	(2001-2011) = 19.67

Table 1: Population Growth among Mog people from 1971 to 2011.

## 5. Economy

Mog economy is basically agriculture centric. Almost 80 % of the Mog population lives in countryside villages. At the beginning they used to practice the semi-primitive way of land harvesting, but now they are more comfortable with the modern way of agriculture. Like the other tribes of Tripura, Mog people also practiced Jhum cultivation but now days it is not that much popular among the tribe, there are many reasons for this transition from hill land cultivation to plain land cultivation; it is just due to their settlement after the migration. As the people of Mog community migrated from Chittagong Hill Tracts, they settled mainly in the plain land, where they have had fertile land, efficient water supply and proper weather for agriculture, they used to harvest rice, potato, cabbage, cauliflower and seasonal vegetables. Recently, mixed farming and animal husbandry plays an important role in their economy. Govt. initiative is also taken for this purpose, like supplying pigs, calves, ducklings etc. to stabilize their economic condition.

## 6. Socio-Cultural Ecology of Mog

The Mog people are of Mongoloid origin. They have their own rich, historical, social heritage and very unique and distinct cultural tradition. Their

cultural identity is reflected through their folk songs, dance, dress, food habits, music and festivals. In general, the Mog people are peace loving and very generous in their attitude. And they are famous for their bravery and keeping promises.

The Mog society is Patriarchal one, i.e., father is the head of the family. But in some events both father and mother play the equal role in decision making. In property both male and female children share equal right. The Mog women are more laborious than men. Mog people enjoy two marriage systems i.e., arrange marriage and choice marriage, and the marriage genuinely happens in the house of the bride.

### **7. Religion**

Mogs are Buddhist by their religion. It is evident from history that before the spreading of Buddhism they have practiced some pagan religious belief. The spread of Buddhism in Arakan valley is dates back in 8<sup>th</sup> century AD. As the Mogs of Tripura historically migrated from Arakan through Chittagong Hill Tracts, so it is also quite obvious that they had adopted the religion at the same time. History tells us that during the reign of Sankarachariya<sup>4</sup>, who is a Hindu revivalist, Buddhists were oppressed and persecuted and they were forced to flee eastwards and finally settled in Arakan (Magh Raiders of Bengal, Jamini Mohan Ghosh, p 18). The Mogs of Tripura are mostly followers of Hinayana<sup>5</sup> Buddhism, one of the two major schools of Buddhism. Famous French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss<sup>6</sup> described the religion of Mog people as a ‘Syncretic religion’<sup>7</sup>, which refers that some sort of elements of the ancient animist cults continues having official confession of Buddhism. Buddhism also plays an important part in their lives too it is dissolved in their daily rituals. Thus, one can find at least one Buddhist monastery in each and every Mog village. Recently, there is a sharp rise of among the Tribes in Tripura, but interestingly the spreading of Christianity among the Mog people is very marginal.

### **8. Education and Literature**

In recent times the community has witnessed a gradual rise in literacy rate. But there is no school or textbook, written in Mog language. From the preliminary stage to higher education, they must rely on either English or Bangla. So, the younger generation speaker of the language is mostly multilingual due to the immense pressure from the neighboring two dominant languages. On the otherhand, in the case of Literature, there is no prominent writer of that language, like Kokborok has. Thus, the only literature they have is folk and oral literature. These days, a number of NGOs and other community language activists—or more precisely, language enthusiasts—try to narrate stories in their own mother tongue. But the effort is still in the very beginning stage. To encourage the process, a mass awareness is highly recommended.

## 9. Festivals

Every community, irrespective of their language must have their own culture, tradition and festivals. Festivals play an important role within a community because it binds them with their ethnicity and cultural heritage. Human is a social animal, so these festivals are the manifestation of our own being. In Mog community also, there are many festivals, regarding a particular event or special day in a year. For instance, *Sangrain* i.e. New Year celebration in the month of April, they visit the local Buddhist temple and offer food and cloth to the deity and wish to spend a good and healthy year. Another interesting festival is *Waachu*, which genuinely held in the month of July, after this festival no one can get married for the period of 3 months. When the time period is over, there is another festival, called *Wahgywea Laabrea*, in the month of October in a full-moon (Purnima) day. On the first full-moon (Purnima) in the month of October they worship the deity *Wahgywea Laabrea*, only after that one can get married. Apart from this, the Buddha Purnima and Madhu Purnima are also auspicious to them. Another notable festival is *Tengchongbou Cheamii*, i.e. the festival of light; occurred in the month of November. One thing is common in these festivals that, during the day all the people visit the Buddhist temple, pray there and offer sweets and food to the deity.

## 10. A brief note on the Phoneme Inventory

Mog phonology permits 25 consonants and 7 vowels. Among the consonants, Mog has Plosives<sup>8</sup>, Nasals<sup>9</sup>, Tap/flap<sup>10</sup>, Fricatives<sup>11</sup>, and Approximants<sup>12</sup>. And in the case of vowels, Mog has 3 Front Vowels, 3 back Vowels and 1 central Vowel.

### 10.1. Consonants

A consonant is a sound produced when the vocal tract closes completely or partially. A consonant is formed by an interaction between a passive articulator and an active articulator. The passive articulator is placed in close proximity to or in touch with the active articulator.

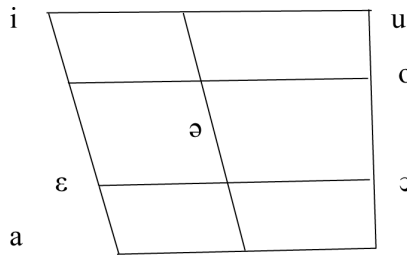
	Bilbial	Alveolar	Post-Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosive	p b p <sup>h</sup>	t d t <sup>h</sup>		c	k g k <sup>h</sup>	
Nasal	m ṃ	n ṅ			ŋ	

Trill/ Flap		r r̥				
Fricative		s z	ʃ			h
Approximant		l l̥		j	w	

Figure—3 Consonants in Mog

**10.2. Vowels**

A vowel is a sound formed when the resistance of the air through the vocal tract is small and the vocal tract is totally open.



Figure—4 Vowels in Mog

Vowels in Mog— Front Vowels /i, ε, a/; Central Vowels /ə/; Back Vowels /ɔ, o, u/.

**11. Language Status and Endangerment**

We cannot imagine our civilization without language as it is so essential to our daily existence. The ancestor of a community’s ethnicity and cultural identity is its language. Language is so evident to us that we seldom pay attention to it in our daily lives, much like our bipedal locomotive idea and breathing. ‘Every action we take on a daily basis, including playing, studying, making love, and appearing in public, involves speaking (Fromkin, 2007)’. Language is all around us. Various factors are involved in language endangerment, it is not a matter of suddenness, but a gradual decline. Some of the factors that are common in world languages are being described here with the reference to our concerning language Mog. We identified 5 major factors for the endangerment—*Intergenerational Language Transmission, Absolute Number of Speakers, Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population, Response to new domains and media, Materials for Language Education and Literacy*. After evaluating all these factors, we can say that Mog is a vulnerable language, which need awareness and preservation for its safeguarding (see Chakraborty, 2025)<sup>13</sup>.

### ***11.1. Reasons for Endangerment***

From the Socio-linguistic perspective, the factors that are responsible for the language endangerment vary from language to language. The aforementioned factors are responsible for the endangerment of Mog language.

- a. A Language, irrespective of geographical boundaries, threaten mainly by two forces. Firstly, the external forces which includes—economic, political, religion, culture or educational subjugation and secondly, the internal forces which mainly focuses on the attitude of the native speakers towards their own language. In current situation, both the external and internal forces going hand by hand to endanger Mog language. For instance, a rapid urbanization which forced them to adopt a dominant language for job, education and daily communication in institutions. On the otherhand, intermarriage also help to endanger the language and the rising number in this case is also alarmingly high, which again forced the speakers of Mog language to habituated with the dominant language.
- b. The generational gap between the older generation and younger generation, can be responsible for the endangerment. However, for the better education and health facilities the younger speakers of the language gradually shifting to the urban areas and the older people still find themselves in the rural, that's why the language's lexical items related to food, culture, flora-fauna, household materials are not found or carry forward with the young speakers.
- c. As we have mentioned earlier, Mog is not yet considered as the medium of instruction in school or academic institutions. Thus, the young speakers are bound to adopt or learn a non-native language for educational purpose and slowly brings the endangerment.
- d. Today's world is a multilingual world, and in this scenario, borrowing become a common phenomenon. It is common to all languages there are hardly any language which is not influenced by borrowing. But the problem is, when a language is endangered the trend to borrow from other languages especially from a dominant language is become obvious. So, Mog has so many borrowed words from Kokborok, Bangla, English.
- e. Practicing own cultural programs, tradition and rituals is always essential for an endanger language. It actually carries the authenticity of a particular language. But unfortunately, due to the urbanization the heritage is not carry forward to the current generation. That's why they somehow not connected with the root of their culture as well as the language.

## 12. Conclusion

The current study gives a brief introduction of Mog language and the people of the language as well as their habitat. It gives an account on the Festivals, Education and literature, Socio-Cultural issues of the tribe. Lastly it gives a very brief sketch on the phoneme inventory of the language, in which a much more detailed work is required and the status of the language, and the possible reasons why the language should be studied more comprehensively from the endangerment and vitality point of view. Though, it is also true that there are differences in languages. Mog settlements also reside in Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh from where they might migrate to Tripura. Though the actual origin of the tribe and how they came to Tripura is still a question of debate. Thus, it would be interesting to trace down the history as well as a comprehensive study of the language from the Linguistic point of view. To conclude we can say that, the Mog language has a small group of speakers, yet it remained active in their own personal domain. It was on the verge of extinction from time to time and somehow revive itself wonderfully. Here the most crucial step was taken by the speakers of the community and their attitude to safeguard the language. The potential threat from other neighboring languages can only be stopped if the young speakers take the language as their pride and identity to make them unique from others. Because only by the language we can differentiate a community from others. The Government and local authorities should stand side by side to safe the language from potential endangerment by addressing the language in rural schools and institutions, by actively involve in language and cultural activities, encourage folk culture such as proverb, folk songs, folk tales etc. its oral tradition also. By preserving it we can preserve the culture of the Mog society. A positive and enthusiastic attitude can be very helpful to safe the language from potential endangerment.

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## Endnotes

1 For more details, kindly go through, Mark Garner. (2005). Language Ecology as linguistic theory. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267545297>

2 Here is a detail of the endangerment level— ‘(a)Intergenerational Language Transmission, it is unsafe, as the language is used by some children in all domains; it is used by all children in limited domains. (b) Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population, again it is unsafe, because, nearly all speak the language. (c) Response to New Domains and Media, it is in minimal grade, as the language is used only in a few new domains. (d) Availability of Materials for Language Education and Literacy, in this parameter, written materials exists but they may only be useful for some members of the community; for others, they may have a symbolic significance. Literacy education in the language is not a part of the school curriculum (Chakraborty, 2025, p-110).’

For further details kindly check N. Chakraborty. 2025. Language Vitality and Endangerment: A Case Study of Mog language of Tripura. *Journal of Native India & Diversity Studies* 2 (1), 99—111, 2025. <https://jnids.com/index.php/ojs/article/view/29>

3 ‘Needham, Robbinson (1855), classified Sino-Tibetan into two branches—Tibeto-

Karen and Chinese, further under Tibeto-Karen, Tibeto-Burman and Karen. The Tibeto-Burman is again sub divided into Tibeto-Kanauri, which is again further classified as Kachin, which has many branches namely—Kuki-Naga, Lepcha, Bahing Vayu, Newari, Abor Miri Daffa, Bodo-Garo, Konyak, Trung, Luish Taman, Burmese-Lolo, Nung (ish). Mog comes under the Burmese-Lolo group (Chakraborty, 2025).

- 4 Sankarachariya was an Indian Vedic Scholar and teacher of Advaita Vedanta. During the movement of Sankarachariya, the Vedanta was influenced and shows similarities with the Mahayana Buddhism, so during this period, the other branch of Buddhism i.e. Hinayana was persecuted and forced to migrate to another places.
- 5 In the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, Buddhism witnessed a division in them based on their paths and philosophy. One branch is named as Mahayana and the second one is known as Hinayana, whose followers condemn idol worship and seeks individual salvation via consciousness and meditation.
- 6 He was a famous French anthropologist and ethnologist whose work was prominent in the development of the theories of structuralism and structural anthropology.
- 7 ‘Syncretic Religion’ or ‘Religious Syncretism’ is the blending new religious belief into an existing religious tradition. One of the finest examples is Buddhism.
- 8 A plosive is a sound made when the vocal tract is completely closed, in Mog plosive sounds are—/p, p<sup>h</sup>, b, t, t<sup>h</sup>, d, k, k<sup>h</sup>, g/.
- 9 A consonant sound produced by lowering the soft palate so that the air is flow through the nasal passage. Mog has voice and voiceless nasal sounds, /m, ɱ, n, ŋ, ŋ/.
- 10 Tap/flap, the terms are now used interchangeably, a single strike of the tongue usually against the alveolar ridge. In Mog we have the voice and voiceless tap as /ɾ, ɾ̥/.
- 11 A consonant sound articulated by bringing articulators coming close together and the friction occurring as the air is forced through a narrow passage. Mog has 4 fricative sounds such as /s, z, ʃ, h/.
- 12 Approximant consonant sounds are made by bringing two articulators close together without them touching as sound departs the oral passage. The resultant is a smooth, vowel-like sound.
- 13 N. Chakraborty. 2025. Language Vitality and Endangerment: A Case Study of Mog language of Tripura. *Journal of Native India & Diversity Studies* 2 (1), 99—111, 2025. <https://jnids.com/index.php/ojs/article/view/29>

# **Assam Sadri As An Industry Vernacular: Understanding Unity, Identity and Network Through Language Use**

**Suranjana Barua<sup>1</sup>, Porixita Kakoty<sup>2</sup>**

## **Abstract**

The paper examines the status of Assam Sadri (AS), used as a lingua franca among the Tea Tribe and Adivasi community of Assam, from the lens of a general vernacular. AS has been shaped by colonial history, migration, multilingual contact induced by the tea industry, and its settlement patterns. This paper employs Ethnographic fieldwork to explore the usage of AS based on *communicative events* and proves it to be a vernacular based on industry network *density* and *multiplexity*. As a lingua franca tied to occupation, AS is sustained in a dense, multiplex plantation network and, beyond workplace, it circulates in routine interactions tied only to industry and network structures. It also contributes to social cohesion and shared identity, bringing together nearly a hundred ethnic communities in Assam through a shared linguistic code. The analysis foregrounds the importance of industry and network strength in the functioning of AS as an *industry vernacular*.

**Keywords:** Assam Sadri, Tea Tribe and Adivasi, communicative event, *industry vernacular*, identity, network

## **1. Introduction**

The tea gardens of Assam create a unique plantation ecology which is a result of historically layered socio-cultural factors shaped by colonial labour regimes and patterns of migration. The migrated labour population today consists of the

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composite group known as the ‘Tea Tribes and Adivasi’<sup>1</sup> community in Assam. Despite heterogeneity in terms of community backgrounds, the prominent lingua franca used in the tea milieu is ‘Assam Sadri’ – also known as *Sadri*, *Sadani*, or *Baganiya* (Chakravarty, 2017). However, little attention has been paid to how the language is *sustaining* in this multilingual tea plantation ecology despite the absence of institutional support and acute heterogeneity. This paper argues that AS – shaped by industry, residential space patterns and the unique interactional structures of the tea industry – can be better understood as an *industry vernacular*.

The above stand directly engages with Labov’s (1972a) foundational work on vernacular as ‘least monitored speech’. Subsequent critiques, notably Coupland (2016), argue that while Labov’s idea of vernacular includes core criteria of low prestige, early acquisition, least consciousness, and structural irregularity, it does not entirely account for the *conditions* under which any vernacular is sustained. Milroy (1987) bridges this gap by demonstrating how *density*<sup>2</sup> and *multiplexity*<sup>3</sup> work in the maintenance and change of vernacular norms. In order to map the dynamics of AS’s functioning within the tea gardens of Assam, methodologically, the paper takes Hymes’ (1972, 1974), *Ethnography of Communication* (EoC) approach, which analyses *communicative events* and *network structures*. By integrating these multiple theoretical lenses and methodological frameworks, this study will position Assam Sadri as an *industry vernacular* wherein unique patterns of interactions span beyond workplace domains to everyday life across heterogeneous communities, thereby contributing to a shared linguistic and socio-cultural identity formation among the tea garden workers.

## 2. Tea industry and its Kaleidoscopic Community

The colonial footprint expanded in Assam and the bordering North East region with the inception of the tea plantation industry in the area (Chatterjee & Das Gupta, 1981) and a systematic appropriation of Assam’s land and resources followed the Treaty of Yandaboo on February 24, 1826, whereby vast tracts of virgin jungle were used for transforming Assam into a land of tea cultivation, particularly due to the region’s favourable agro-climatic conditions (Guha, 1977). The story of the discovery of tea is largely familiar (Dutta, 1992): the first tea garden was established in 1837 at Chabua. From the 1850s onwards, the tea industry expanded (Chatterjee, 2001), and Assam eventually became one of the leading tea-producing centers of the world (Kar, 2005). This expansion required labour but much of the population of Assam was unwilling to work in the tea gardens (Behal, 2017) which created an acute shortage of the labour force. Consequently, the colonial administration had to import cheap labour from different regions in India (LeFavre, 2013). The tea planters’ associations recruited labourers through various intermediaries, including labour contractors, *arkattis*, and *coolie catchers* (Dutta, 1992), and later increasingly through the *sardari*

system. These recruitment practices formed part of the broader 'girmitiya' or indentured labour mechanism (Behal, 1985; Behal & Mohapatra, 1992) that supported the colonial tea plantation economy in Assam.

Overtime, such workers who were originally migrated from Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, and West Bengal during colonial times, permanently settled in more than 1000 tea gardens of Assam and are now known as Tea and Ex-Tea Garden Tribes (*Directorate of Tea Tribes and Adivasi Welfare*). This large-scale migration created a major shift in the socio-cultural demography of Assam as a whole (Dutta, 1992). Initially, the workers used to reside only within the tea-garden lines<sup>5</sup> with restricted mobility and severe conditions (Chatterjee & Das Gupta, 1981). Even in the post-colonial times, residential structures and social arrangement have not changed much (Sumesh & Gogoi, 2021) and plantation ecology faces criticism for entrenched social marginalization and exploitation (Bhowmik, 2001).

However, such conditions also produced a distinctive socio-cultural ecology as workers belonging to heterogeneous ethnic communities with varied socio-cultural and linguistic practices negotiated social boundaries, and gradually developed shared practices within the same site through co-existence. Within this context of sustained proximity and shared labour, Sadri emerged as a common communicative resource for everyday interaction. Today, 715,180 people in Assam speak it as their mother tongue (Census of India, 2011). Sadri is regarded as the mother tongue of the Sadans, an Aryan group in the Chota Nagpur Plateau (Nowrangi, 1956), and Grierson (1903) classifies it as a dialect of Bhojpuri. Paudyal & Peterson (2020) identify distinct Sadri varieties across India, including an Assam-specific one. Assam Sadri diverges systematically from Nagpuri Sadri under contact with Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, and regional tribal languages (Dey, 2011; Chakravarty, 2017).

### 3. Conceptual Framework

Methodologically, this study adopts *Ethnography of Communication* (Hymes, 1972, 1974), which highlights culturally patterned communicative events where the language is actively used. Labov's (1972a, 1972b) theoretical notion of *vernacular* and Coupland's (2016) *vernacularity* are used to explore the status of Assam Sadri as a naturally emerging choice of linguistic code for community interaction. Further, Milroy's (1987), *Social Network Theory* reveals the associated structural mechanisms that reinforce and sustain AS as a vernacular within the plantation ecology of Assam. These three perspectives are not separate analytical lenses, but rather interlocking components that together form a unified framework and are discussed below.

#### 3.1 Ethnography of Communication

Hymes' (1972) *Ethnography of Communication* (EoC) highlights how

language actually functions while embedded in social life and cultural practices. It focuses on speakers' shared knowledge of ways of speaking: of what to speak, when, and with whom, within a particular social context (Hymes, 1974). Rather than examining language as an abstract system, EoC provides an alternative approach of looking at language as a set of communicative behaviour within specific cultural contexts (Saville-Troike, 2003). Hymes' (1962) *communicative competence* and his formulation of EoC deal with actual *communication events* as the core analytical unit (Hymes, 1972). EoC enables analysis of "the situations and uses, the patterns and functions, of speaking as an activity in its own right" (Hymes, 1972:38). Hymes (1974: 53-62) also theorizes the *SPEAKING* grid (encompassing Setting or Scene (S), Participants (P), Ends (E), Act Sequence (A), Key (K), Instrumentalities (I), Norms (N), and Genre (G)) which help in identifying key components that govern language use in various communicative events (Philipsen & Coutu, 2005). In Tea Tribe and Adivasi contexts, the EoC framework illuminates how recurring communicative events shape tea garden interactive norms. The ethnographic lens will enable us to see how language sustenance and maintenance are a *direct outcome of continued participation in culturally meaningful communicative practices* (Garrett & Baquendano-López, 2002).

### 3.2 Vernacular

Vernacular is defined as the style in which "minimum attention is paid to the monitoring of speech" (Labov 1972a:208). It constitutes "the basic form of language that is used in the everyday affairs of the speech community" (Labov 2001:146). The vernacular has been studied from varied perspectives such as Labov's (1966) *class-based vernacular patterns* (urban working-class, community-based vernacular norms in Labov, 1972a); *ethnically grounded vernacular* (African American Vernacular English in Labov, 1972b) and *neighbourhood and class-based vernacular* (based on Belfast study (Milroy's 1987). For Milroy,

"...an *urban* vernacular is defined as the kind of speech the majority of speakers of a city (usually low-status speakers) acquire in their adolescent years. When we speak of Black English Vernacular or Belfast vernacular, we are using the term in this general sense rather than referring to an *individual's* vernacular" (Milroy, 1987: 24).

Milroy (ibid: 24) extended the boundary of the vernacular beyond the dimension of 'personal style' to the larger dimension of 'standardization'. Decades later, Coupland extends it to *vernacularity* that examines speaking as "social practice and social evaluation" (2014:4) and as a relational practice, achieved through social practices that index identity, authenticity, and in-

group membership<sup>6</sup> (ibid, 2016:203). Recent scholarships also showcase how vernacular varieties serve as *markers of identity* and *community membership* in the contexts of language contact and shift (Sharma & Rampton, 2015; Eckert, 2012). The sustenance of vernacular depends heavily on its *continued use* in intimate domains where it is valued (Holmes, 2013): it is here that we see the bridge between communication and network that we examine in the next section.

### 3.3 Social Network Theory

Vernacularity does not occur in a vacuum: Milroy's (1987) framework highlights the role of network *density* and *multiplexity* (see notes 2 and 3) in shaping linguistic practices (Milroy, 1987; Milroy & Milroy, 1992). Milroy's research in working-class communities showed that individuals embedded in *dense* and *multiplex* networks (see Notes 2 & 3) often appear as the continuator of vernacular linguistic norms more strongly (Wei, 1994; Lippi-Green, 2012) than those individuals from *loose-knit* networks (Milroy, 1987).

Building on these traditions, this study extends the concept of a generic vernacular (like Milroy's urban vernacular discussed above) by proposing the *industry vernacular*, which is sustained through networked interaction patterns bounded with tea garden industry setting. This study claims that in the context of the Tea Tribes and Adivasi community, spatial boundedness, occupational roles, residential settlements, and interweaving kinship ties contribute to the formation of a *dense* and *multiplex* network structure, and it is *Assam Sadri that provides the linguistic code which binds the intense community-based heterogeneity encountered within the tea garden industry into a coherent identity*.

The study of urban vernaculars has an aspirational angle to it: Labov's (1966) model and many subsequent studies have revealed that people aspire to the speech characteristic immediately *above* them. Yet, Labov himself, in his later work, and many others have shown that people manipulate the linguistic resources available to them. AS serves as more than a neutral code, functioning as an *industry vernacular* within Assam's tea industry (Barua & Kakoty, 2024): despite its low prestige, it signals an *industry* identity and loyalty. It offers the scope to understand how vernacular ways of speaking carry social meanings (Coupland, 2016) in terms of building solidarity and defining community boundaries.

### 4. Methodology: Research Design and Sampling

The study employs a mixed-method approach, integrating ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews to capture naturalistic language use (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Creswell & Poth, 2018). An interpreter was employed at the field site who acted as an *insider*<sup>7</sup> (Labov, 1972a). Through purposive sampling approach, Borhat Tea Estate (Charaideo District) from Upper Assam<sup>8</sup> was selected as the garden has a tea garden workforce with AS used

intergenerationally. For the semi-structured interviews, participant selection was guided by ethnographic process. The field visit involved recording domain-specific language use among the community. Interviews were conducted with the help of a semi-structured questionnaire in AS, with the aid of a bilingual interpreter when needed. Due to space constraints, only one excerpt from the observation is presented below in this study. Prior consent was taken before recording anything in the field, which was later transcribed and glossed for analysis.

## 5. An Analysis of Communicative Events in Assam Sadri

This section examines how Assam Sadri is sustained through recurring communicative events embedded within social networks of the tea garden ecology. One such excerpt is presented and analyzed using EoC and Social Network Theory (discussed earlier).

### 5.1 Insights from a Communicative Event

During the ethnographic observations, it was found that workers belonging to different linguistic and ethnic backgrounds were seen routinely engaged in interactions using Assam Sadri, and its pervasive usage across the communicative events reflects the *shared interactional norm* prevalent among the community. A workplace communicative event is being presented below as a sampler: the details of the data are presented in the format adopted from Barua (2023).

#### Excerpt 1

#### Workplace Interaction at the garden site- Borhat Tea Estate (Upper Assam)

**Transcript Detail:** NRB\_BH\_130924\_00:00:05-00:00:32

**Context:** The interaction takes place in the tea garden at the end of the plucking period. SN (Gorh) and RT (Odia) are engaged in conversation while carrying out plucking work under the direction of the ‘babu’<sup>9</sup> (BB, Assamese). The second author (Assamese) is present in the garden as a participant observer.

**Excerpt Relevance:** Prevalence of AS in workplace situations involving 4 participants belonging to three different communities (Gorh, Odia, and Assamese).

- 1 SN: *patabaj<sup>h</sup>i kene mar-te ahi et-na besi*  
 leaf sterile why appear-PST.PRFcome.PRES.PROG this-  
 much much  
 “Why are so many leaves appearing as sterile (without buds)?”

2            *dərɔb nai marte ahi xei karne na ki*  
 medicine NEG beat-PSTcome.PRES.PROG that because QS  
 what

“**They have not sprinkled medicine (pesticide) because of that or what?**”

3     RT: *hɔdawai nai marte ahi*  
 yesmedicine NEG beat-PST.PRF come.PRES.PROG

“**Yes, they have not used medicine.**”

(LINES DELETED 4-7: RT continues to make remarks concerning the non-use of pesticides)

8     BB: *bajʰi gila utʰ-ai de sob*  
 sterile PL.CLS up-PRES.PROG give.3 all

“**Pluck all the leaves without the buds.**”

The above interaction is analysed using Hymes’ (1974) SPEAKING framework as below:

<b>S - Setting/Scene:</b> Tea garden field during plucking hours
<b>P - Participants:</b> SN (worker), RT (worker), BB (babu/supervisor) and the second author.
<b>E - Ends:</b> To discuss leaf quality and production issues; to receive and clarify work instructions from the supervisor.
<b>A - Act Sequence:</b> Worker’s question → confirmation by co-worker → supervisor’s directive.
<b>K - Key:</b> Task-oriented, cooperative; authoritative tone in supervisor’s directive.
<b>I - Instrumentalities:</b> Face-to-face spoken interaction; AS- the primary code at the worksite.
<b>N - Norms:</b> Workers discuss issues collectively; supervisors issue direct instructions
<b>G - Genre:</b> Workplace task talk

From an EoC perspective, Assam Sadri functions as the dominant work language in this interaction: despite diverse communities, speakers (SN, RT, BB), used AS contextually. SN and RT’s dense neighborhood network enabled quick coordination; even the *babu* switched to AS, aligning with workers’ practices. It indexes participation in the tea garden occupational network<sup>10</sup> and substantiates Assam Sadri as a network-regulated, spatially anchored, and industry-specific language.

As evidenced in Excerpt 1 above, AS – emerging from the long-time contact and convergence that took place historically within the tea plantation ecology

of Assam – has eventually become the mother tongue of many (Chakravarty, 2017). The sample exhibits least-conscious speech (Labov, 1972a) which is acquired and used in close-member contact situations (Labov, 1984, 2001). It also exemplifies what Milroy (1987) calls “the relation between vernacular loyalty and language use” (ibid.,168): the more the members of the community use the vernacular, the more it reflects the loyalty towards their local community. In tea plantation ecology, the work setup shapes everyday interaction, reinforces vernacular norms, and fosters cohesion among diverse ethnic communities, eliciting linguistic loyalty from users for whom it becomes close to, but not quite, their mother tongue.

Assam Sadri’s function as an *industry vernacular* also aligns with Coupland’s (2016) idea of vernacular, which states “what counts as vernacular language in different environments depends on the specific sociolinguistic contrasts in which it is positioned” (ibid:412). The use of AS has spread to adjacent domains of life. The language is sustained through continuous social exchanges in the tea plantation’s industrial setup; in section 5.2, we show how dense network ties favour Assam Sadri as vernacular, unlike interactions among weak-ties.

## 5.2 Communicative Norms in Sustaining Identity

Ethnographic observations and exemplars such as Excerpt 1 above confirm that in the communicative events, *AS is found to be the most preferred communicative code*: speakers use it in routine interaction, such as at the workplace among co-workers and in other contexts: for example, in casual conversation among peers or at the neighbourhood. Same individuals, involved in frequent, repeated interactions in different domains, playing varied roles, such as co-workers, peers, and neighbours, use AS. Thus, the *dense network* of the tea gardens offers a conducive language ecology where AS, as the prime communicative resource helps the tea tribe and Adivasi community members, to coordinate their actions and *socially align with each other*.

Ethnographic observations beyond the Tea Tribe and Adivasi network reveal *a patterned shift in language choice* in interactions such as market transactions or encounters with tea garden office staff outside the garden, where speakers frequently switch to Assamese, Bangla, or Hindi according to the interlocutor. These occur in loose-knit networks (Milroy, 1987, 1989), with irregular contact and less aligned norms, as opposed to close-knit plantation settings; this contrast does not weaken Assam Sadri’s status within the tea garden speech community, but reflects multilingual competence and the ability to adapt to shifting dynamics and accommodate interlocutors (Blommaert et al., 2005).

In sum, AS remains the stable primary code in dense internal networks (Excerpt 1), contrasting with strategic use in peripheral interactions, aligning with Labov’s (2001) situational formality. In tea garden close-knit settings, *vernacularity* (Coupland, 2016) authenticates community membership; multiplex

ties from shared labour and residence sustain AS's *industry vernacular* status. Secondly, in tea garden settings, identity emerges through routine participation in the industry vernacular. Close-knit networks allow AS speakers to assert *vernacularity* based on context, ideology, and relationships (Coupland, 2016), *enacting* speech community membership. This aligns with Milroy's view that vernacular norms in dense networks persist via internal shared expectations (Milroy, 1987: 108–109). From an EoC perspective, such accommodation (Giles, et al. 1991) prioritizes communicative competence over structural uniformity. Assam Sadri as an *industry vernacular* enacts belonging and shared identity, maintaining social mechanisms and communicative norms in the heterogeneous Tea Tribe and Adivasi tea garden milieu.

## 6. Conclusion

This position paper theorises Assam Sadri as an *industry vernacular* maintained through network ties within tea garden ecology. AS is *not* an individual's language but neither is it the language of any *one* ethnic community. There are three key points regarding AS that may be gleaned from our discussion and analysis above: firstly, the extreme heterogeneity encountered in the tea gardens of Assam today on account of historical factors has facilitated the emergence of the use of this unique language variety that unifies heterogenous communities. Secondly, the *density* as well as *multiplexity* of networks sustains the use of this variety and determines its contextual use. Finally, this lingua franca is emerging as a distinct identity, bolstered by Tea Tribe communities' socio-political and cultural assertions. The *circumstances* under which it became a lingua franca include historical reasons, demands of a plantation economy, migrations, and attendant heterogeneity. The *conditions* under which it continues to grow include collective choice as well as the desire for a greater pan socio-political identity<sup>11</sup> of Tea Tribes and Adivasis.

This study draws from and lends support to Labov's (1972a, 1972b, 2001) *vernacular theory* and Milroy's (1987) *network framework*, which is based on urban communities with permeable social boundaries but extends analytic focus to *workplace-based social organisation and institutional embeddedness* as structuring conditions for vernacular use and sustenance. It highlights occupational network structure and *interactional patterns* that function together with socio-cultural and aspirational political identity. As argued in this paper, Assam Sadri is, a singular identity marker for all those associated as workers and their networks in the tea industry. As a powerful maker of this group identity – sharing a history of migration, colonial legacy and thriving in a multilingual ecology – it is now, as such, an *industry vernacular*. Outside tea garden settings with looser networks, workers demonstrate rich communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) via code-switching and code-mixing to accommodate interlocutors (Giles et al., 1991; Blommaert et al., 2005). This indexes occupational identity and solidarity within

multilingual ecology, not vernacular decline.

By extending the domain of what constitutes a vernacular beyond those studied in Labov or Milroy, this paper thus contributes to the study of language in society in general and language variation in particular. These findings remain indicative and require longitudinal and comparative enquiry of vast sample of vernacular study specific of tea garden setting.

## 7. Acknowledgement

The idea of Assam Sadri as an *industry vernacular* was first floated in Barua and Kakoty (2024) though the data presented here has not been presented earlier. We are grateful to the participants of Borhat Tea Estate, for their cooperation during the fieldwork (conducted by the second author as part of ongoing research). Special thanks to the interpreter for ensuring effective communication and cultural understanding.

## NOTES

- 1 Listed as “Tea Tribes and Adivasi” by the Government of Assam (Tea Tribes & Adivasi Welfare Department, retrieved from <https://teatribes.assam.gov.in/> on 10/02/2026), approximately 96 ethnic groups are termed “Tea Tribes” in Assam (Begum, 2017: 2). Despite differences, they are grouped under umbrella labels such as “Chah Janajati,” “Adivasi,” and “Jharkhandi Adivasi” (Sharma, 2012: 292) and as the “tea tribe” (Mishra, 2020: 2).
- 2 ‘Network density’: the extent to which members of an individual’s network are connected. *Close-knit* networks are of high density, whereas, in *loose-knit* networks, members have low density, with limited interactions among themselves (Milroy, 1987: 50-52, 63-68).
- 3 ‘Multiplexity’: relationships where individuals are connected through multiple social ties (Milroy, 1987:50-52).
- 4 Middle men exploited labour recruitment; with poor quality of transportation, food supply led to death of many labourers on board (Chatterjee & Das Gupta, 1981; Dutta, 1992; Behal, 1985).
- 5 ‘Line’: the residential settlement area provided by the tea garden owners to the workers (Behal, 2014:65-69).
- 6 Dimensions such as *locality* (association with specific place and community), *informality* (causality in context), *authenticity* (genuineness), and *opposition to standard variety* further influence the construction of *vernacularity* (Coupland, 2014:5-7).
- 7 ‘Insider’: A trusted member of the community (Labov,1972a:208-209).
- 8 <sup>8</sup>Upper Assam has highest concentration of tea gardens in Assam (*List of Tea Garden at Assam*, Directorate of Tea Tribes and Adivasi Welfare).
- 9 <sup>9</sup> ‘Babu’: staff member who assist managers in the clerical jobs, field or factory in tea plantations (Roy, 2020:129).

- 10 <sup>10</sup>In contrast to the upward motion of linguistic change – where change is initiated from below to fulfil upper class aspirational ideals (see relevant quotation earlier in section 3.3)  
– here, the upper class babu is switching to the language of the workers. Milroy, (1987) citing social psychologists notes that “...low-prestige ethnic and status groups everywhere perceive their language or dialect as a power symbol of group identity, despite long-term pressures from the standardized code” (Milroy, 1987: 24). *The criterion of vernacular being the low prestige (Labov, 1972b) is flipped because everyone engaged in that contextual moment uses it.* Here, AS – no one’s language – becomes everyone’s language by virtue of signalling a composite ‘bagan’ identity – in this sense, it is an industry vernacular.
- 11 <sup>11</sup>Tea Tribes and Adivasi communities in Assam are currently classified as OBC but have long demanded ST status for greater rights and representation. (Assam cabinet approves report on ST status for six communities, The Hindu. (27/11/2025)  
Retrieved from <https://share.google/ViVrbaFCgGp3IrJuv> on 15/02/2026.  
(*Tribal body rejects bid for ST status to six Assam communities*, The Hindu. (03/01/2026). Retrieved from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/assam/tribal-body-rejects-bid-for-st-status-to-six-assam-communities/article70464444>. ece on 16/02/2026.

## Abbreviations

- 3-third Person  
FUT-future  
CLS-classifier  
NEG-negative  
PL-Plural  
PRF-perfective  
PRES-present  
PROG- progressive  
PST-past  
QP- Quantifier Phrase

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# The Devadasi dance Tradition of Assam : Tracing Its Historical Roots, Cultural Significance and Ritual-Sacred Dimensions

Suman Bhuyan<sup>1</sup>, Preetima Gogoi<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

The tradition of dance performed by *devadāsīs* within Hindu temples functioned as a form of *arcanā* or prayer, designed to please the deity through ceremonial singing. According to Maheswar Neog, “like many other temples in India, *devadāsīs* in Assam were also related to a number of Siva temples.” However, this sacred and prestigious position gradually underwent significant transformation over time. The research seeks to trace the historical trajectory of the *devadāsī* dance tradition, from its establishment in both Saiva and Vaisnava temples to its eventual decline- while investigating the unique historical paradox of the *Bār Raja* or Chief King, where a woman from the performing community attained masculine political sovereignty. Addressing this legacy and recognizing the foundational contributions of *devadāsīs* of Assam to the socio-religious and cultural spheres constitute an essential step toward redressing historical inequities and restoring due recognition to these contributions.

**Keywords:** *Bār Raja*, cultural spheres, *devadāsī*, historical trajectory, recognition, transformation.

## Introduction

The *devadāsī* dance has been a significant part of South Indian cultural and religious life for centuries. The *devadāsīs*, often highly skilled in classical dance and music, acted as dedicated servants to the divine, offering their art as a

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devotional expression that honored and celebrated various aspects of the deity's personality and mythology. This ritualistic offering was deeply symbolic and reflected multiple dimensions of the divine, especially focusing on the theme of divine union (symbolizing the spiritual union of the individual with the divine) and the *leela* (divine play), which are essential theological constructs in Hindu philosophy. Dance, therefore, was a medium through which the temple and its devotees could connect with the deity. King Raja Raja Chola, one of the greatest Chola rulers, selected the best dancers from villages across his empire to serve in the grand temple at Thanjavur (Soneji, 2012). One of their duties was to perform a special ritual when the king left or returned to the palace. As the king entered, the *devadāsī* would light a lamp and wave it to remove the evil eye. Over the centuries, *devadāsīs* were known by different names like *ganika* (courtesan), *rudraganika* (dancing girl associated with Shiva temples), *dalusanghana* (doorkeepers), *nati* (female ritual dancer in Assam), *maharis* (great women associated with temple worship in Odisha), and others.

The presence of dancers in ancient Kāmarūpa indicates that the aesthetic and performative principles outlined in Bharata's 'Nāṭyaśāstra' were already known and practised in this region. An intriguing narrative is cited by the Sanskrit scholar Viśvanārāyaṇa Śāstrī in his article 'Bilāsini'. He refers to the Kashmiri poet Dāmodara Gupta's work 'Kuṭṭanīmatam', which recounts the story of a beautiful dancer who, unable to endure the death of King Bhāskaravarman, renounced life and passed away (Sarma, 1978). Such literary references, when read alongside other historical records, point unmistakably to the presence of organised traditions of *nṛtya*, *gīta*, and *vādyā* in early Kāmarūpa. The Kālikā Purāṇa, composed between the tenth and eleventh centuries, records the use of *gīta* and *nṛtya* as ritual means to awaken the Goddess during temple worship. Archaeological evidence from ancient Kāmarūpa further corroborates this tradition, as sculptures from the region depict female dancers (*nartakīs*) engaged in performative postures. Several of these sculptural representations include *tānṭṛkavādyas* (stringed instruments), indicating the presence of *mārgīsaṅgīta* or classical musical practices. Moreover, the dance-like *hasta-mudrās* of the flying Vidyādhara carved on the Deo Parvata hills strongly suggest that scripturally grounded and sacred dance forms were practised in the region from a very early period (Gait, 1905).

Thus, it is seen that the institution of *devadāsī*, has long been a subject of scholarly attention. Apart from Indian discourse, the *devadāsī* system duly existed in regions like Assam. In Assam, archaeological sources of *devadāsī* system are recorded in copper plates found in temples such as Dah- Parbatia, Dubi, Biswanath, Dergaon, Sivasagar, Hajo, etc. However, unlike Indian discourse or historical studies, the *devadāsī* dance tradition in Assam is not studied extensively. Thus, this work attempts to study about the *devadāsī* tradition and its development in Assam from a historical point of view to fulfil the lacunae.

### Historical Overview

The *devadāsī* system in Assam is intricately linked to the region's deep-rooted traditions of *Śākta* (Shakti) worship and Tantric practices. The Yogini Tantra, Kalika Purana etc. literary sources also refer about the tradition in Assam. The system was fully developed in ninth century CE to tenth century CE and in later period the cult became prominent as it was patronized by the royal house. It flourished under certain political conditioning of Assam region. Historical records, including "The Census of India, 1901" by B.C. Allen, indicate that rituals at the Kamakhya Temple (notably the *devadāsī* dance) formed an integral part of temple worship (Allen, 2004). The introduction and development of Tantric beliefs further strengthened the centrality of goddess worship within the Śaiva religious framework of the region. Even before the reign of Narakasura, the indigenous 'Kirata' communities of ancient Assam were ardent devotees of Shiva (Baruah & Jean, 2008). This historical continuity suggests that the *devadāsī* practice in Assam may have pre-Aryan origins, deeply rooted in indigenous religious traditions.

However, the exact origin of the *devadasi* community in Assam is difficult to determine. Dr. J.H. Hutton proposed that the Dravidians, early followers of Lord Shiva, introduced the *devadāsī* system. Later, with the arrival of the Aryans and due to the process of *Sanskritization*, Shiva was incorporated into the Brahmanical pantheon alongside Brahma and Vishnu, and the *devadāsī* system became assimilated into mainstream Hindu religious practices. Historian Pratap Chandra Chowdhury similarly suggests that the *devadāsī* system in Assam was likely introduced by non-Aryan communities, with possible connections to the early Dravidian-speaking settlers around the Mediterranean region.

Nevertheless, historical sources from ancient Assam reveal a clear differentiation between *veśyās* (public women) and *nāṭīs* (dancing girls). Prof. S. Chattopadhyaya, in his discussion, 'On the Position of Women in Ancient Assam', draws attention to this distinction by referring to the Copper Plate grant of King Vanamālā (Goswami, 2000). The inscription mentions the reconstruction of the temple of Hātaka Śulin in an area inhabited by *veśyās*, described as public women. At the same time, the same source refers to *Veśyāpalli*, a designated settlement for these women, and separately identifies *nāṭīs*; women trained in various performing arts such as dance and music. This distinction is crucial for theoretical analysis because it demonstrates that the society during medieval Assam recognized multiple forms of female embodiment and labour- viz., sexual, artistic, and ritual; without collapsing them into a single moral category. The *veśyās* were associated with public sexuality and spatially segregated settlements, while *nāṭīs* were defined by their training in music, dance, and other aesthetic practices.

### Relationship Between State, Temple, and Devadāsīs in Assam

The relationship between the state, temple institutions, and *devadāsīs* in Assam was marked by ritual integration, royal patronage, and political protection. Unlike many other regions of India, the *devadāsī* system in Assam was not confined to temple ritual alone but was actively supported and regulated by the state, particularly under the Ahom rulers. Royal grants, inscriptions, and chronicles reveal that temples functioned as state-supported institutions, and *devadāsīs* were maintained as part of the temple establishment for ritual dance, music, and service to the deity. The state played a crucial role by providing land grants, villages, and professional groups, including *devadāsīs*, to temples such as Bishwanath, Hajo, Dergaon, and Dubi. This indicates that *devadāsīs* were not independent religious agents but were incorporated into a wider administrative and economic system controlled by temple authorities and the ruling elite.

**Table I. Historical Timeline of State Patronage**

Era	Ruler	Key Action
c. 832-855 CE	King Vanamala	Rebuilt Hatakasulin temple; provided villages, elephants, and <i>veysyas</i> (courtesans).
c. 920- 960 CE	Ratnapala	Borgaon Inscription mentions town women and courtesans serving the wealthy.
16 <sup>th</sup> Century	Naranarayan & Chilarai	Renovated Kamakhya temple; assigned land and 140 <i>paiks</i> (labourers), including the <i>natas</i> class.
1724- 1731 CE	King Siva Singha	Elevated Phuleswari (from the <i>nat</i> community) to ‘ <i>Bar- Raja</i> ’ (Chief King).

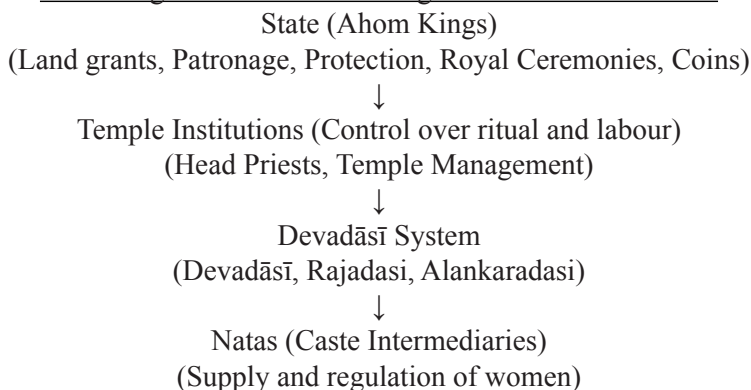
At Hajo, *devadāsī* dance tradition originally formed an essential component of daily ritual worship at the Kedarnatha Siva temple, indicating that temple dancers were not peripheral performers but integral to sacred liturgy. Following the defeat of Muḥammad Ibn Bakhtiyar’s forces by the Kamarupi soldiers during the early Islamic incursions into Assam, the *devadāsī* tradition is believed to have been newly instituted at the Hayagriva-Madhava temple, suggesting a conscious assertion of religious and cultural sovereignty through ritual practices supported by the state (Baishya, 1998). During the ninth century, King Baṇamala of Kamarupa is known to have patronized *devadāsīs* at the Haṭakesvara Siva temple. Architectural remains from this site indicate designated spaces for temple

dancers, reflecting their institutionalized position within temple complex. These women were closely associated with ritual worship and were woven into the spiritual and ceremonial life of the temple. Artistic representations, such as the stone sculpture popularly known as the *dalusanghanas* (women doorkeepers) from the Haṭakesvara temple, depict dance postures that visually attest to an established and culturally sanctioned tradition of temple performance.

Within the state–temple–*devadāsī* nexus of Assam, the *Nat* community functioned as crucial caste intermediaries who facilitated the recruitment and circulation of *devadāsīs* into temple institutions. Earlier claims that the *nat* community in Assam originated from Mediterranean customs have been partially refuted by S. Chattopadhyay, who instead locates their origins in the northeastern Himalayan regions. Colonial ethnographic records further substantiate this regional embeddedness. ‘The Census of India’ (1901) identifies the Nats as belonging to the Kalita caste, and in Assam they were commonly referred to as ‘*Nat-Kalitas*’. This caste positioning enabled them to operate as mediators between temple authorities, the state, and service-providing communities, particularly in supplying *devadāsīs* to Saiva temples (Choudhury, 1959).

Moreover, State involvement is evident through the Ahom *Paik* system, which underpinned temple economies. *Paiks* were adult male subjects (aged 16–50) organized into rotational labor units (*gots*) that supplied military, agricultural, and ritual labour in exchange for state land. According to the ‘*Assam Buranji*’ (an Ahom chronicle), King Pratap Singha assigned *devadāsīs* and other personnel to the Negheriting Sivadoul, while Swargadeo Lakṣmi Sinha later donated 159 *gots* of *paiks* to the Umananda temple (Bhuyan, 1945). Such grants reveal that *devadāsīs* were institutionally sustained through state-controlled labour systems.

#### Flow Diagram 1. Relational Diagram of Power Structures



#### **Social Stratification of the Devadāsī System in Assam**

According to the ‘*Tungkhungiya Buranji*’, an Ahom chronicle, Phuleswari originally named Phulmati and the daughter of a *nati* (*devadāsī*) from Chinātali.

The Ahom king Siva Singha married Phuleswari Kuwari, who was instrumental in introducing *devadāsī* dance to the Ahom royal court. Phuleswari herself was a trained dancer, and it is said that while she was performing *natinach* (*devadāsī* dance in Assam was called as *natinach*) at the Jaidol in Sivasagar, King Siva Singha was attracted to her and brought her to the royal court. Her accession to sovereign authority, marked by the assumption of a masculine political title and the Sakta name ‘Pramateswari’, disrupted normative gender hierarchies by allowing a woman trained in ritual performance to exercise direct political and religious power (Deka 2022). However, Phuleswari’s agency was deeply ambivalent. Described as ‘a staunch believer of the Sakta cult’, Phuleswari used religious authority to discipline dissenting Vaishnava leaders, ordering that sacrificial blood be smeared on their foreheads- an act recorded as one of ‘oppression and insult’ that later contributed to the Moamoria rebellion. Her enforcement of Sakta practices, coercion of Vaishnava religious heads, and deployment of state violence illustrate how women’s empowerment within patriarchal systems may reproduce the same hierarchies that marginalize other women and subaltern groups. Phuleswari’s trajectory thus embodies the paradox of the *devadāsī* system in Assam: a space where women could attain extraordinary power, yet only by inhabiting and reproducing patriarchal religious and political frameworks.

The social stratification of *devadāsīs* of Assam attests to what Frederique Marglin refers to as the connection between *devadāsī*, monarchy, and society. To quote Marglin:

‘The *devadāsīs* are closely associated with kingship....[and] are among the very few temple servants who perform rituals in the palace as well as in the temples.’... (Marglin, 1986)

Again, the tri-fold hierarchy of the *devadāsī* system in Assam was structured around sacred, political, and social spaces. *Devadāsīs*, attached to the *garbhagrha* (sanctum sanctorum), occupied the highest ritual status and performed temple-centred religious duties. *Rājadāsīs* served within the royal palace, where ritual skill was translated into courtly and state ceremonies. *Alānkāradāsīs*, positioned in public and domestic spaces, performed during life-cycle rituals such as births and marriages and held the lowest social status.

### **The Devadāsī Dance Rituals in Assam**

The *devadāsī* dance of Assam begins with the *bayans* playing the ‘*Guru Ghat*’, a special drumbeat. This *guru ghat* is very important as it increases the tempo of the music and is known as ‘*Swaraghat*’. The principal rhythmic structure of the *devadāsī* dance tradition is characterized by patterns set in an eight-beat cycle ( $4 \times 2 = 8$ ). The dancers perform using various dance poses in time with the *khol* (drum) beats. Scholars have noted similarities in posture, movement

patterns, rhythmic structures, and devotional intent between *Nāṭī* dance and certain *Sattriya* components, particularly *Chālī Nritya* (a graceful, feminine dance form of Assam introduced by Madhavadeva). According to Ramkrishna Talukdar, a recipient of the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, the *devadāsī* dance of Assam includes many types of hand movements, which are similar to classical Indian dance styles (R. Talukdar, personal communication, January 22, 2025).

The *devadāsīs* of Assam also engaged in singing which were mainly devoted to Siva. These songs were called ‘*Nati- Songs*’. After the coming of Burmese to Assam in 1821 CE; the system degraded and it almost became next to impossible to recollect the *nati* songs. The following is an example of *nati* song collected during my fieldwork in Dubi region:

“*Siva Kar Pora Ahila*  
*Siva Katia Bhangula*  
*Siva Sarpare Bandhala Hiya*  
*Siva Nidiye Parvatik Biya.....”*

(Free Translation: Siva from where did you come from  
Siva, *Ganja* smoker  
Sivawrapped the heart with snake  
Siva, will not give Parvati to marry you)

The Neo-Vaishnavite movement led by Śrīmanta Śaṅkaradeva did not eradicate pre-existing ritual aesthetics; rather, it restructured them within a new devotional ideology. It is widely believed that Srīmanta Sankaradeva, who had exposure to temple dance traditions outside Assam, absorbed elements of *devadāsī* practice and restructured them within the Vaishnava framework of the *sattras*, monastic institutions in Assam (Bordoloi, 2010). The structural grammar of movement, the emphasis on bhakti-centric *abhinaya*, and the use of expressive *hastas* in *sattriya* bear strong continuities with *nāṭī* dance aesthetics. While *Sattriya* later emerged as a distinct classical dance tradition, its aesthetic and spiritual roots remain deeply connected to the earlier *devadāsī* dance tradition of Assam.

The *devadāsī* dance commences with a fixed sequence of *taal* (rhythmic cycles), beginning with the first *taal*, which unfolds in two principal sections:

The first taal of Nāṭī dance

A. Bilambit

*Guru Guru Guru Guru...*

(*Devadāsīs* prays to the deity at the start of the performance in standing posture)

*Tak Dhinna Dhinna – Guru Guru Tak Dhi Natta*

(The above posture in repeated 5-6 times)

B. Swarghat*Dhiniki Dhiniki Khita – Khitiki Khitiki Dhina**Khitta Tatta Dhinatta**Guru Riddhai Ridhai Dhai, Dhenitaki Dhai, Dhenitaki Dhai**Aa- Ki Dhenekhita Didhinakka Ta*

(The above *bols* describe how the dancers went to the pond and started bathing before starting dance rituals)

In the *devadāsī* dance tradition of Assam, practitioners utilize four specific head movements (*mudras*) to convey expression and form. These gestures include: *Paribahita*, *Abadhuta*, *Utksipta*, *Adhogata* (Phukan, 2011).

**Table II. Classification of Devadāsī Head Movements**

Gesture Name	Description of Movement
<i>Paribahita</i>	Side- to- side turning
<i>Abadhuta</i>	Bending towards the ground
<i>Utksipta</i>	Upward tilt
<i>Adhogata</i>	Lowering the head

**Colonial Moral Reform and the Regulation of Devadāsī Bodies**

Colonial moral reform in India operated through the regulation of women’s sexuality, casting *devadāsīs* as central targets of imperial intervention. British administrators, shaped by Victorian ideals of chastity, monogamy, and domesticity, viewed *devadāsī* practices as evidence of Hindu moral degeneration. As a result, *devadāsīs* were discursively transformed from ritual specialists into “religious prostitutes,” a categorization that legitimized colonial governance over their bodies and livelihoods (Rao, 1968). Legal measures such as Sections 372 and 373 of the Indian Penal Code and the Contagious Diseases Acts institutionalized this moral gaze. These laws subjected *devadāsīs* to medical surveillance, criminal suspicion, and sexual regulation, treating their bodies as sites of contagion and disorder rather than religious agency. Colonial reform thus functioned as a biopolitical project aimed at disciplining non-conforming female sexualities in the name of public health and imperial morality. Colonial authorities homogenized diverse temple-dancer traditions across India into a singular “*Devadāsī* System,” ignoring regional variations such as the ‘*Nati-Devadāsīs*’ of Assam, who historically enjoyed ritual authority, matrilineal inheritance, and economic autonomy. This reductionist framework erased indigenous understandings of bodily agency and facilitated the exclusion of *devadāsīs* from temples and public religious spaces.

Importantly, colonial moral reform did not end with independence. Postcolonial abolition laws reproduced colonial notions of respectability

and deviance, further marginalizing *devadāsīs* without providing sustainable alternatives for social or economic rehabilitation. Thus, colonial moral reform must be understood as a historically continuous regime of bodily regulation that reshaped gender, sexuality, and citizenship in both colonial and postcolonial India. On the ban of *devadāsī* system in Assam, Maheswar Neog states as follows:

“In today’s Assam, there were no temple dancers present in any of the temple in Assam but in Dubi Temple it was present till thirty years ago; but for the *doloi* (drum player) of that time and one of the hakims (magistrate), the situation deteriorated and which ultimately resulted the ban of *devadāsī* cult in Dubi. Although the *devadāsīs* lived a simple life with their parents and remained unmarried, they had to face much disrepute. This shame ultimately pushed the beautiful art to death.” (Neog & Changkakati, 1975)

### Revived Devadasi Dance Form of Assam

With the decline of temple patronage, the *devadāsīs* faced severe social marginalization and economic hardship. Over time, the dance tradition almost disappeared from public memory. The first serious attempt to revive this lost heritage was undertaken in the 1950s by Ratna Kanta Talukdar of Pathsala, a noted cultural worker of Assam. He was guided and supported by Bishnu Prasad Rabha, a prominent cultural icon and intellectual. Talukdar collected valuable information from the last surviving *devadāsīs* of the Dubi temple, namely Kausalya Priya and Roya Priya, as well as from traditional musicians such as Besaram and Kinaram Bayan (Sarma & Choudhary, 1987).

The original *devadāsī* dance performance lasted about forty to fifty minutes. Bishnu Prasad Rabha critically analysed the structure of the dance and removed repetitive and unclear portions while preserving its core essence. Through this process, the dance was condensed into a performance of approximately eight to ten minutes, making it suitable for the modern stage. The revived form retained important features such as group performance, *lasya*-based footwork, specific stances, hand gestures, and the use of traditional instruments like the *khol* and *taal*. One notable modification introduced during the revival was the alteration of the blouse colour from white to yellow, as yellow is traditionally regarded as an auspicious colour in the religious and cultural context of Assam (L. Talukdar, personal communication, May 22, 2025).

### Conclusion

Thus, it is evident that the *devadāsīs* played an essential role in the religious and ritual life of the temple community in Assam. Their dance was not merely a performance but a sacred service that formed an integral part of daily worship and temple rituals. However, the *devadāsī* institution began to decline with the weakening of the Ahom kingdom and the gradual collapse of the temple-based economy in the nineteenth century. The loss of royal and temple patronage

severely affected the livelihoods of the *devadāsīs*. British colonial intervention, combined with changing social and moral attitudes, further questioned the sacred status of *devadāsīs* and associated their tradition with social stigma. Reformist movements and colonial laws eventually led to the abolition of the system, forcing *devadāsīs* to lose both their social identity and economic support.

Despite these historical setbacks, contemporary efforts by cultural organizations and committed individuals in Pathsala, located in Bajali district of Assam have played a significant role in reviving and preserving the *devadāsī* dance tradition. Central to this revival has been the ‘*Devadāsī Silpī Samāj* of Pathsala’, an organization dedicated to safeguarding the dance form as an artistic and historical legacy rather than as a ritual institution tied to temple service. The *Devadāsī Silpī Samāj*, earlier known as the ‘Pathsala Art Society’, was established in the mid-twentieth century as part of broader efforts to rescue the *nāṭī* dance from complete extinction (D. Sarma, personal communication, July 11, 2025). The *Devadāsī Silpī Samāj* became the primary platform through which this reconstructed form was taught to new generations of dancers, including Dilip Kakati, who later emerged as the principal custodian of the tradition. These revival initiatives not only restore a near-extinct ritual tradition but also reaffirm the cultural and historical significance of *devadāsīs* in the religious heritage of Assam.

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1. Oral interview with Lila Talukdar, one of the *devadasi* practitioners of Assam, conducted on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2025.
2. Oral interview with Ramkrishna Talukdar, one of the *devadasi* artists, conducted on 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 2025.
3. The authors collected the *Nāṭī*- song from the Dubi region during their fieldwork.
4. Oral interview with Debendra Nath Sarma, Managing Secretary, Parihareshwar Devalaya, Dubi, conducted on 11<sup>th</sup> July, 2025.

# Foodways and Cultural Identity: Traditional Culinary Practices of the Tai Ahom Community of Assam

Ananya Saikia

## Abstract

Food is not just a biological need but also a significant cultural icon, which speaks of traditions, beliefs, and identification of a community. Assam is a state with its own culinary culture that has been running through generations among Tai Ahom people. Foods of traditional types include *luk lao* (rice beer), *amroli tup* (red ant eggs), *eri polu leta* (eri silkworm larvae), pork preparation, and foods with rice like *hurum*, which are very important in rituals, festivals and social life in general. These foods share symbolic representations and also serve as ethnic identity. This paper examines the roles of traditional food in the formation and maintenance of Tai Ahom identity. The research reveals the fact that, food traditions not only assist in safeguarding the cultural heritage but also enable the community to be more socially integrated.

**Keywords:** Tai Ahom, foodways, cultural identity, folklore, traditional cuisine, Assam

## Introduction

Food is among the most important used manifestations of culture and identity among human societies. Food practices are a significant aspect of material culture well understood by anthropologists and folklorists because it represents day-to-day traditions and beliefs of a community. Food culture is more likely to be used as an ethnic identity and cultural persistence. Another element of this cultural system is the food, which was a powerful element of the kingdom in the Brahmaputra Valley, but was formed by the Tai Ahoms who migrated to Assam in 1228 CE under the ruler Sukapha. Special meals like the

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*luk lao* (rice beer), *amroli tup*, *eri polu leta*, pork preparations and rice-based meals like *hurum* and *sandoh* are also traditional foods of Tai Ahom. These are foods which are directly linked to rituals, festivals, and social events and are representative of cultural identity as well as community values. This paper explores the contribution of traditional food ways to the cultural identity of the Tai Ahom community and how it preserved it.

### **Literature Review**

Anthropologists and cultural researchers have extensively discussed the association between food and identity. Claude Fischler (1988) claims that the food habits tend to mirror social binding and cultural recognition. Fischler argues that food is a very strong symbol, which is used by people to demonstrate their cultural affiliation.

Another scholar, Roland Barthes (1979) also notes that food is symbolic and food practices convey some social meaning beyond its nutritional role. On the same note, Terry Eagleton (1998) highlights the fact that food is more or less intertwined with memory, emotion and cultural experience.

In folklore research, Richard M. Dorson (1972) and Jawaharlal Handoo (2001) recognize food traditions as significant component of material culture, which can be used to describe the daily way of life and custom of a particular community. Thomas A. Green (1997) also says that food preparation is a part of the folklore and cultural heritage.

Although there have been such academic debates on food culture, few studies have specifically gone on to do a study on the culinary practices of the Tai Ahom people. Thus, this study aims to address this gap with the problem that is to see how traditional food practices have been a part of the Tai Ahom cultural identity formation.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To examine the role of traditional food practices in shaping Tai Ahom cultural identity.
2. To analyze the symbolic meanings associated with Tai Ahom cuisine.
3. To document traditional food items connected with festivals and rituals.
4. To understand how food traditions strengthen social relationships within the community.

### **Research Methodology**

The current study applied to the qualitative research approach that examines the traditional eating habits of the Tai Ahom people of Assam. The qualitative method is appropriate in studying cultural practices since it can enable the researcher to know the social meanings, beliefs and practices that are associated with food in the society. The primary and secondary sources of information were

adopted to acquire a full picture of the issue.

### **Primary Data**

The study adopted primary sources collected by using field observation and informal discussions with the Tai Ahom community members. These engagements aided in the recording of food practices, food preparation techniques as well as aesthetic values placed on different traditional cuisines. The practice of food preparation and eating at social events and community occasions was also very informative on how food culture is supported and passed across generations.

### **Secondary Data**

Secondary data have been gathered on the basis of various academic literatures, such as books, research articles, folklore works, and historical documents that address the Tai Ahom culture and traditional Assamese food. These sources assisted to place the research in the framework of the world discourse concerning Folklore Studies and Cultural Anthropology.

### **Method of Analysis**

The data obtained on the basis of the primary and secondary sources were analyzed using descriptive and interpretative analytical tools. The analysis was aimed at learning how traditional food practices play a role of cultural symbols and how such practices can be helpful to maintain social traditions and community identity.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

Food is essential in the formation of our identity just like our clothes, customs and ideologies. Much about whom we are as individuals, as a culture and as a society can be deduced not only by what we eat, but also the time, manner in which we eat, how we cook, how we consume, and the reasons. The collective identities of any culture in form of a blueprint enable one to comprehend the way its members are continually upheld.

Identity is simply a self-reflective concept or image which we all construct in our family, culture, ethnicity and our socialization process as individuals. Nonverbal and verbal behavior, which is symbolic, has meaning within a community; however, there is a common system of such behavior, which is cultural identity. It is a product of society. The cultural identity is the distinct part of each community and when another community looks at it, they will be in a position to know whether it is the culture of the county or not. Likewise, eating patterns allow representatives of an Ahom group to feel more attached to their culture. Food plays a basic part in every culture. It plays one of the symbolic functions of cultural identity.

The cultural identity of the Tai Ahom community includes the traditional

food system. It is closely related to the family and society. These food practices are practiced among one society to another. It is an exclusive source of connection between the society and the members of the community.

### **Symbolic food practices**

In any given community, traditional food is significant. Foods are consumed by the people symbolically because of relationships or conventions. Traditional food has a symbolic meaning, and its attachment to food is not always so. Certain cultures shower newlyweds with some types of traditional food items. In most cases, social food has little to do with nutrition but rather communication and relationship. Religion is another aspect in which the traditional food item has been significant. The food preparation techniques and processes are applied in the society in this. These food activities are benefiting and eating the society. Sharing a meal is a social activity, as it is acknowledgment of companionship and social duty. This is also usually accompanied by practices or rituals peculiar to the community in question or even to one group or subgroup of the larger group. In most cases, everyone who consumes vastly diverse food or consumes similar food in different forms is usually assumed to be different and food habits are strongly correlated with the kind of food consumed.

The food that is traditional has a symbolic meaning. It is founded on the connection with other meaningful. The symbolic significances, such as food allusions, are present in most of our everyday experiences. An example is that of *luk lao* or rice beer, *amroli tup*, *eri polu leta*, *gahori mankho*, chicken, and *hurum*. These are the good examples of the symbolism of traditional food in Ahom community. In most cases, this term is used to represent a place where individuals gather in a welcoming, warm and light-hearted way to feast. Such food stuffs have been referred to as cultural identity of this community. Social status has been identified to be expressed in these kinds of food that an individual eats. Indicatively, whole food products are the norm in the modern society by individuals who care more about their status. People in this community share *luk lao* during their social festivals.

List of traditional food practices:

### **Agriculture-based festival food items:**

Many prominent festivals have foundations that are essentially based on agriculture. Among them are those of Chip Song Ka or Kati Bihu, Kin on Meu or Na Khuwah, Mai Ko Chung Phai or Magh Bihu, and Poi Chankien or Bohag Bihu. The Bihus The three Bihus of Assam are significant celebrations. If not, *jalpan* is another common food item in the neighborhood. It is one of the salient parts of the Bihu festival. *Chira-doi*, *aakhoi*, *gur*, *sandohguri* etc. are examples. The *jolpan* makes up the majority of it. In this community, it's a snack. It often

includes some form of rice, such as *hurum*, *kumol saol*, or cooked sticky rice, flattened rice (*chira*), puffed rice (*muri*), roasted and crushed rice (*sandoh*), or *kumol saol*.

*Bora Rice*: It is boiled and it is *jalpan* which eat with curd or milk, jiggery.

Another form of eating this rice is called *chewa dia bhat*. *Bora chaul* is a type of sticky rice which is soaked in water overnight. It is then washed out of the water the following day and then stored in a basket of bamboo or aluminum with a few holes. The fire must have a naked pot of boiling water. Bark of a banana tree is then applied to the face of the pot, and a hole is then pierced in the vapor. Then the basket of rice is put up on the hole of the banana bark and the rice is covered with a banana leaf and then with a heavy plate. The rice then is cooked in a proper manner up to 30 minutes.



**Fig-1: Chewa dia bhat Cooking Process**

Another delicacy prepared of *bora chaoul* is *tupula diya bhat*. *Bora chaoul* is left to soak in water overnight and the following day *boron chaoul* is taken out of water. *kalpat* or *tarapat* is used to wrap *bora chaul*. Veiled *bora chaoul tupola bhat* is subsequently placed in a large pan that has been filled with boiled water. After that, it was boiled within a given number of minutes. *Kalpat* and *tarapat* are both medicinal. Very refreshing taste is added to this item because of *tarapat*.



***Fig-2 Tupula bhat cooking process***



***Tora PatTupula Bhat***

ii) *Kumol* Rice: It's a special kind of rice. It may be consumed uncooked and is unrefined. This rice can be eaten with milk, curd, jaggery, or yogurt after being immersed in warm water for a few minutes.



***Fig-3:Kumol Rice Jalpan***

*Sandoh*: Kola bora, ghuu bora, pakhi bora, or rong bora are fried with it. They soak their rice for three and four days before frying it. In Assam, the fried rice is ground in a homemade wooden mill called a *dheki*, and the grains are then emptied in a dehusk.



**Fig-4: Sandoh Jolpan**

(iv) *Hurum*: *Hurum* is now prepared with beaten sand. Curd, salt, sugar, or jaggery are served with it. One of the Tai-Ahom's traditional treats is *hurum*. This is a traditional dish prepared by *Bora Dhan*. Assam is home to regional sticky rice known as *bora dhan*. After five to six days, it is soaked in water to form *bora dhan*. It is dried in a large utensil after being kept in the water and it is then all ready to pound *dheki*, which is a pounding of wood and rice used to pour the dry fried grain. When pulse-beating and cleansing of the grains were completed, it was finally cooked in a hot pan and transformed to puffed rice prepared of *Bora dhan* .*Hurum*.



**Fig-5: Hurum**

(v) *Chira*: It is dehusked rice that has been flattened into light, dry flakes. These rice flakes also expand when they are added to liquids, including water, milk, and other liquids, whether they are hot or cold. It may be eaten raw by immersing it in milk or clean water and adding salt, sugar, or jaggery to make it sweeter, or it can be gently cooked in it.

(vi) *Sunga Rice*: Marinated *bora soul* peeled 2/3 hours. After that, it is placed inside an immature bamboo tube and given a small amount of water or occasionally milk. *Sunga choul* is made when it is grilled over a fire. By taking out the tube, the food is given with curd, goat milk, heated milk, yogurt, sugar, etc.



*Fig-6: Sunga Jalpan*

### Religious and Festivals Food Items:

Tai Ahom is also making various types of food to gods. There are rules of offering foods to deities in all rituals. The Assamese Bihus are three events of immeasurable significance. The primary section of these three bihus is the ancestor (dam) worship. At the post before the Dam, it is offered a number of offerings and Tai Ahoms hymns were sung by the classes of priests. One of them is called *chickchak*, and it is served to the dam and prepared with *sukuta pata* and chicken or pork meat.



*Fig-7: Chicken offered on religious ceremonies*

Tai Ahom people are consuming *Amroli poruar tup*, *luk lao*, or rice beer, nu-pet or duck meat, chicken, goat meat, and *eri polu leta*, and *handoh guri* with *gahori mansho* during the Bihu festival.

Red ant eggs (*Amroli poruar tup*): One will first find the ant nest in the trees. When they discover it they cut it and open the nest in a dola. The entire thing is dipped in a bucket of water and then the egg of the ant goes down and the ants up surface. The separated eggs are then fried in oil and combined with poultry eggs in order to have a dish to enjoy. This is a soft, tangy, white ant with its eggs being full of nutrition and rich in protein according to an Ahom informant.

Another vital traditional food cuisine of Tai Ahom people is *amroli poruar tup*. It is a reddish-brown ant. It is fried with duck egg. The Tai Ahoms in this village partake in it during their traditional dishes during the Bohag Bihu occasion. This is observed during the month of April.



**Fig-8: Raw red ant egg**



**Fried red ant egg**

(ii) Rice beer or *luk Lao*: Rice wine named *xaj* was also a common practice and it remains popular among most of the Ahoms of the villages within Upper Assam. The rice wine is a part of every ceremony within a family, and rice wine offering to the ancestors is a custom and mandatory among the Ahom who continue to practice traditional rituals.

Tai Ahom believes that the *luk-Lao* is a god in their society and a holy drink. The *Luk-Lao* is the major item that is utilized by the Tai Ahom people in every religious ceremony and celebration. During any religious events and celebrations, they serve *Luk-Lao* to their ancestors and to the divine gods. Giving rice beer to the ancestors is widespread and is essential in the Ahom who go through rituals in the traditional way; otherwise, Ahom ritual is not complete without *Luk-Lao*.



*Fig-9: Luk lao with pork*



*Luk lao served in ban bati*

### **P.R.T.Gurdon's Observation**

The Ahams are inordinate drinkers, and they drink a lot of rice beer, which they call in their language lao, which they do in their villages. The Bihus are marked by still greater potations than usual. The deodhais or Ahom priests purify a spirit out of rice' (P.R Gurdon in Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, Vol I, edited by James Hastings, 1st impression, 4th impression 1959, New York, p.235).

*Luk-lao* is made out of a mixture of different types of rice. The rice must be boiled half, that it is not completely soft in two fingers. Cooking is done in a dola that is spread with the boiled rice. Once it has been cooled, the yeast cake is added to it. It is then fermented in an earthen pot. It can be served after 5-10 days. To be prepared as a beverage, water is put in topping the fermented rice in an earthen pot. At this point it is prepared to be served to the guests pouring the liquid in the earthen pot.

*Lao* is a cultural alcoholic drink of the Ahom people that is made by fermentation of cooked rice using a starter caked with herbs known as *Xajor-Pitha*. The Xajor pitha is a dish that is made by blending herbs such as *Tezmui* (*Zanthoxylum nitidum*), *Manimuni* (*Centella asiatica*), *Kopou dhekia* (*Lygodium microphyllum*), soft leaves of pineapple and sugarcane, *Pani Madhuri*, *bon jaluk*, *phutkola*, *jetulipoka*, and *huwalota* with freshly pounded rice flour.

It is worth noting that all the herbs which are included with the yeast cake are medicinal in nature. These herbs are gathered, washed and dried in sun to ensure that they are easily incorporated. After the flour and the herbs are combined in a mix, they are rolled into dumplings/cakes and put into a *saloni* (traditional bamboo sieve). The saloni is smothered in a store of an herb known as *bihlongoni* and the cakes are put there and covered with a blanket of hay and banana leaves over it, 3 days. The cakes will be dried by placing them after 3 days on a chula. The dried cakes are not heavy and they are all set to use.

The cooking of the *Lao*, *bora*, traditional gluttonous rice produced in Assam is done, and then banana leaves are laid over the dish to cool. In the meantime the dry cakes are rapped and beaten into a fine pulp. This is mixed with the

cooked rice and then spread over in some time. The mixture is then placed in an earthen pot (koloh), with its lid closed off and allowed to ferment. It is these Lao koloh, or pots, which are now kept in a separate place, where the few are only permitted to come. The Lao should be ready to be consumed after 3-5 days. Once the fermentation process has been completed, water is mixed into the fermented mixture and filtered. The Luk-Lao that had just been made is now ready.

(iii)Pork items: The most common food item of the Ahom is Pork. The Ahom people have the most conventional food item, which is pork. Pork can be prepared in many ways e.g. roasting, boiling, and frying. *Gahori pitha* is a pork dish that is famous among people of the village. Initially, pork is fried in which *pithaguri* (rice flour) is added once it has been boiled. Some of the ingredients present are the garlic, onion, turmeric, coriander, and cumin, and chili pepper. It is a local product that is cooked together with the pork. Pork is also roasted along with *Maati mah* (urad bean), *Pitha guri* (rice powder), *Lai xaak* (mustard green), *Aalu* (potato), *Korisa* (fermented bamboo carrot), *Outenga* (elephant apple) and so on.

### Preparation of pork

#### (i) Pork with *marapat* (*chickchak*)

Pork is cut into cubes. Pork is then fried in a cauldron combined with turmeric, ginger, garlic, onions, chili, and salt. Ginger, onion, turmeric and garlic are smashed roughly. The fried pork becomes oily. The amount of pork is then mixed with proportional amounts of dry *marapat* leaves. A mixture of the fried pork and boiled Maganga brings out the tasty product.



**Fig-10: Chickchak served in kalpat**

The half-boiling of pork takes place in a half-hour. It is mixed with smashed onion, ginger, garlic and chili. It is mixed with boiled pork, salt and turmeric. This should be stirred with a lot of frequency till the meat becomes tender. *Lai Xaak* is not cut up, it is torn up by the hands and it is added. A cauldron or a saucepan should be covered in a few minutes over low heat or a few minutes over low heat is needed on the sauce pan.



**Fig-11: Pork with *Lai xaak***

The pork is fried and outenga is mashed and added to the same amount of water to ensure that the taste of outenga and sour test is mixed with fried pork. This dish is cooked without the use of any spice and oil.



**Fig-12: Pork with *Outenga* (elephant apple)**

*Tiptang Pitha guri*, preparation of pork involves boiling of pork with a specific mixture of time, with the addition of garlic and ginger. The other customary method of pork pitha guri cooking is by first roasting the pitha guri and frying the pork with garlic and ginger; the roasted pitha guri is then combined with it and water is added. Turmeric is not used.



**Fig-13: Pork with *Pitha guri***

(iv) *Eri Polu Leta*: Leta is among the phases of life cycle of a butterfly where eri and muga silk thread are extracted. The worm in the cocoon is boiled and Leta is extracted out of the cocoon. Then it is cut into half or in some cases whole and fried in oil.



**Fig-14: Raw *Eri paluleta*, fried *eri palu leta***

(v) *Hukoti*: It is a paste-like semi-smoked product that is made by combining fish.

The preparation of the product is done using small economic fish species, all of different sizes, and found in abundance during the southwest monsoon season in the study area and petioles of elephant ear or arum, which is locally referred to as *kola kasu*. It is a broad leaf perennial herbaceous plant with a big rhizome or root under the ground. The fish is washed with lean water after being disemboweled to remove its gills, scales, and guts. The edible portion of the arum is separated, skinned, and chopped using a kitchen knife. The specially made bamboo rack is used to dry fish. It is a type of bamboo and is 3-4 feet high and the bottom is a fireplace. It is coated with fish and smoked by rekindling a fire-free fire that is created by burning dry bamboo or firewood in the fireplace, usually at night. The fish is dried and smoked over a low flame until it reaches a reasonable firmness. The arum petiole slices are sun-dried for one day. The ratio of sun-dried arum petiole pieces to dried fish is 4:1. The other spices, which can be used, depending on the taste, are red pepper and green chili. However, no salt is used. A coarse paste is now made, and the ground mixture is packed into a bamboo container to the full and a cavity of approximately 10-15 cm is left to allow sequence sealing. The stuffed bamboo containers are also filled as the re-packed main packaging of the product with re-packaged raw leaves of the bladder fern locally known as the Biholongoni, a genus of the *Cystopteris* sp. bathed and lined; there exists a vacuum or a space of about 5 to 10 cm. above the lining; secondary sealing is done with dry paddy straw. The fine straws are washed, dried and then forced down the interior of the bamboo vessel leaving a filling area of about 25cm-5cm. The fermentation and intermittent heating: The wooden disks used to ferment the meal are then hung either 2-3 feet above the

traditional mud oven in the kitchen or a fireplace, and the Ahom people prepare the food using the bamboo dishes as an outdoor kitchen. . When this has been done, when the period of fermentation has elapsed, and some intervals of heating occur, then the product is ready to be consumed. It is customary in this case to allow the product to be stored in the fermenting bamboo container itself in order to increase further storage. After all the sealing materials are removed, small portions are removed out of the container to cook. To make it easy, the end product is something that has been extracted out of the container through a cut that has been made over it and stored in a glass jar so as to be used later. It has a shelf life of approximately 2 -3 years.



*Fig-15:Hukoti*

## **Conclusion**

Conservation of the cultural identity of the Tai Ahom community is highly dependent on the traditional food practices. These are the practices, which are closely associated with the history of the community, the tradition of agriculture and religious beliefs.

Food products, including luk lao, pork foods, amroli tup and different rice-based recipes, are significant facts of Tai Ahom culture background. In addition to being nutritious, such foods are potent identity and social cohesion icons.

The Tai Ahom community has a strong linkage with the past by catering to the shared culinary practices that reinstate continuity of its culture even in the present. With the context of globalization and cultural transformation, such traditional food practices need to be documented and preserved to maintain the rich cultural heritage of Tai Ahom people. According to field observations, there is a strong relationship between food preparation and food consumption and social interaction and ritual activity among the Tai Ahom community. Food is usually prepared social-wise during festivals and ceremonies by the relatives and other community members and this acts as a bonding factor between the social

members and helps to strengthen collective cooperation.

Foodstuffs and alcoholic drinks with rice are also significantly taken up in rituals. An example of this includes the luk lao, a customary rice beer, whose production is made at home level through indigenous fermentation process. It is then after the drink is offered to ancestors before it is consumed as part of ritual observation.

Likewise, the food items like amroli tup (red ant eggs) and eri polu leta (eri silkworm larvae) demonstrate how the community knows the natural resources found in their immediate locality. Such food customs indicate that the Tai Ahom people are in close contact with the environment surrounding them, which shows that ecological knowledge is incursive in their food preparations.

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# **Reclaiming The Royal Dragon: Symbol, Cultural Constrction and Ethnic Identity Among The Tai-Ahoms of Assam**

**Anupal Saikia**

## **Abstract**

The motif of dragon known as *Ngì Ngao Kham* of Ahom kingdom of medieval Assam functioned as the sovereign symbol during the days of their rule. This paper explores the place of *Ngì Ngao Khamin* Ahom kingdom and its transformation from a royal emblem to a contemporary symbol of ethnic identity among the Tai Ahom community of Assam. Historically associated with kingship, sovereignty, and divine legitimacy, the dragon appeared in Ahom royal insignia, coins, sculptural works and ceremonial objects. However, in the post-colonial political landscape, the symbol has been reinterpreted in the context of cultural revival movements and identity politics. This study examines how the dragon motif functions today as a marker of ethnic memory and identity. Drawing on historical sources, visual culture, and contemporary community discourse, the paper argues that the royal dragon has shifted from a symbol of monarchical authority to a collective emblem of Tai Ahom identity. This transformation reflects broader processes of cultural reconstruction and symbolic nationalism in Northeast India.

**Key Words:** Dragon, Symbol, Culture, Ethnic Identity, Tai-Ahom

## **Introduction**

While we use the term ‘symbol’ in cultural and anthropological context, it refers to an object, sign, image or practice that represents ideas, values, or beliefs beyond its immediate form. Unlike simple signs that point to a direct

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function, symbols operate through cultural interpretation, the meanings of which are collectively produced and sustained within social contexts<sup>1</sup>. Because of this capacity to store and communicate layered meanings, symbols become powerful tools through which individuals and communities express who they are and articulate shared cultural understandings<sup>2</sup>. They communicate histories, values, and affiliations in a form that is immediately recognizable and emotionally resonant. Through repeated use in rituals, narratives, institutions, and everyday life, symbols help stabilize meaning and create a sense of continuity across time<sup>3</sup>. They also enable people to create distinctions between groups and more particularly to differentiate “us” from “others,” thereby contributing to the formation of collective belonging<sup>4</sup>. Thus, personal and collective identities are constructed, performed, and recognized through symbolic forms such as language, clothing, flags, religious icons, and cultural practices. These symbols function as visible markers of affiliation and as interpretive frameworks through which individuals understand themselves and are understood by others within social interactions. The examination of symbol, thus, provides a crucial lens for analysing how identities are formed, negotiated, and communicated within social and cultural systems. In the historical process of identity assertion, the communities particularly in post-colonial India initiated cultural reconstruction of past and symbols associated with it. The Tai-Ahoms of Assam who ruled almost six hundred years in medieval Assam had rich cultural tradition and heritage on the basis of which their post-colonial history of identity construction has been evolved. The ruling authority and elite class of the Ahom kingdom, though originally Tai-speaking people of Mongoloid origin, did not historically identify themselves as ‘Tai-Ahom.’ Instead, they consistently referred to themselves simply as ‘Ahom,’ a term that gradually evolved into a political and cultural identity within Assam. The composite label ‘Tai-Ahom’ is a relatively recent construct, gaining prominence in the post-colonial period as part of broader efforts toward ethnic identity formation and revival. This modern terminology reflects a conscious attempt to reconnect with ancestral roots and linguistic heritage, rather than a continuation of historical self-identification. Scholars like Padmeswar Gogoi<sup>5</sup>, J. N. Phukan<sup>6</sup>, and Yasmin Saikia<sup>7</sup> have contextualized the emergence of the term ‘Tai-Ahom’ within the broader trajectory of the Tai-Ahom identity movement, interpreting it as a modern articulation shaped by cultural revivalism, historical reinterpretation, and the politics of identity in post-colonial Assam. In this present paper, attempt has been made to address the royal emblem of the Ahom which is a dragon, a mythical creature and rearticulation of the symbol as maker of Tai-Ahom identity. The paper argues that the dragon of the Tai-Ahom which represented sovereignty, legitimacy, and divine rule of the Ahoms in Assam in medieval period transforms to a repository of historical memory and as a potent symbolic resource in the ongoing process of identity formation and ethnic self-representation.

The Ahoms who migrated to Assam in early part of thirteenth century and established the Ahom kingdom (1228-1826 A.D.) in Assam belonged to the Tai-speaking groups of South-East Asia and are believed to have originally lived in the region south of the Yangtse-Kiang River in south-western China<sup>8</sup>. Because of conflicts with the Chinese, some of these groups moved towards Yunnan and gradually spread into Upper Burma. In the course of time, they occupied areas extending from the Shweli Valley to the Irrawaddy River and founded a number of Tai states such as Mong-mit and Hsen-wi<sup>9</sup>. From this Tai-inhabited region, Sukapha, along with his followers, migrated to the Brahmaputra valley and established the Ahom kingdom in the upper part of present-day Assam. Although historians differ regarding the exact homeland of the Ahoms, it is generally believed that their migration to Assam took place from the Tai settlements extending between western Yunnan and Upper Burma<sup>10</sup>. The Tai-Ahoms possessed a rich cultural heritage and introduced several new cultural elements to Assam, including their language, history writing, religious traditions, and food habits. They also brought many cultural symbols common among Tai people among which the symbol of dragon is considered as one of the most identical and inclusive symbols of Tai-Ahoms.

### **Dragon-the Royal Emblem of the Ahoms and its Manifestation**

Tai-Ahoms are culturally rich people with a strong aesthetic sensibility and known for their dedication to the artistic expression. The cultural expression is particularly evident in the sculptural tradition found in the walls and architectural components of the palaces, temples and other monuments. These carvings in most cases depict motif of various god and goddess as well as a number of mythological and symbolic animals. One such significant motif is the dragon motif which appears in several sculptures and platforms of the Ahom period. Although, the cultural origin of dragon is believed to be China, dragon like motif and symbolic creatures are found in many civilizations across the world and their cultural expression in different art forms. Since the forefathers of Ahoms came from South China, the Ahom dragon had its resemblance with the dragon found in mythology and folklore of China and the South East Asian countries. It is confirmed by Yasmin Saikia that the flying dragon symbol found in many royal buildings of Assam appears to have been borrowed from regions located to the east of Assam<sup>11</sup>. In China, the *Lungor* dragon stands as one of the most recognizable mythological creatures, occupying a prominent place in both the cultural imagination and the literary tradition. And, the Chinese dragon is generally perceived as a benevolent and auspicious being. It is closely associated with divine power and natural elements such as rain, clouds, and water<sup>12</sup>. The Chinese dragons are long, serpentine, scaled creature with four legs. They symbolised water and rain which are vital for agriculture.

The Ahoms have their own dragon known as *Ngi Ngao Kham* in Tai

language which symbolises the strength, power and goodness and unity. It is found in many monuments and archaeological site as well as imprinted in the inscriptions on the metallic plates, in stone and the coins of the Ahom kings<sup>13</sup>. The use of dragon in these cases reveals that the Tai-Ahom sovereigns once used *Ngì Ngao Kham* as their royal emblem. This mythical creature embodies a composite form symbolizing the combined power of five animals: the serpent, horse, lion, bird, and tortoise. Each element represents a specific attribute—the ability to swim like a serpent, the swiftness of a horse, the strength of a lion, the capacity to fly like a bird, and the capability to move on both land and water like a tortoise. In symbolic terms, the creature further signifies a spectrum of moral and cosmic forces, including peace, anger, violence, mercy, and royal authority<sup>14</sup>. As such, it functions as a powerful cultural emblem representing both physical prowess and the complex balance of spiritual and political power. The Tai-Ahom people traditionally used a national flag known as *Khring Fra*, which bears the symbol *Ngì-Ngao-Kham* at its centre. In the flag's design, *Ngì-Ngao-Kham* occupies the central position, emphasizing its sacred importance. The flag held deep religious, cultural, and political significance in Tai-Ahom society. It was hoisted by the Ahom king and armies before going to war and ambassadors carried it when traveling to other kingdoms as well as displayed during major occasions, including religious ceremonies, cultural events, and royal functions symbolizing royal authority and cultural identity<sup>15</sup>.

The motif of *Ngì Ngao Kham* can be found in several historical sites associated with the Ahom period, including the royal palaces *Rang Ghar*, *Talatal Ghar*, and *Kareng Ghar* at Sivasagar, as well as at the Kamakhya Temple in Guwahati. Representations of this motif are also found in several Vaishnavite monasteries of Assam, such as the Barpeta Satra and Bordowa Than. In addition, the Ahom dragon is depicted in old Ahom manuscripts, often appearing as an illustration at the end of the texts. However, it appears that the Ahoms did not worship the dragon as a deity, as no ritual practices related to this mythical creature are observed in present-day Assam, nor are there references to its worship in known religious texts<sup>16</sup>.

### **Dragan and the Contemporary Tai-Ahom Identity**

As discussed in the introductory part, symbol is considered as a crucial maker of identity. Symbols enable people to communicate (send and receive message) within their own communities first and then with wider world helping them to build connections with larger social environment<sup>17</sup>. From this viewpoint, it can be argued that consciously or unconsciously people convey message and meaning with the help of symbols. At the same time, it can also be remembered that symbols are created by men and revived, reinterpreted and revalued in order to mobilise historical memory with the change of context and time. The motif of *Ngì Ngao Kham* has re-gained popularity among the Tai

Ahom people of contemporary Assam. The prime reason behind the popularity is prevalent use of the symbol by the elements of Tai-Ahom identity movement. In the post-Ahom and post-colonial periods, the Tai-Ahom community of Assam initiated a process of ethnic identity reconstruction in order to assert socio-political recognition and rights. This process involved a conscious revival and rearticulation of various elements of Tai-Ahom cultural heritage which included religion, language, ritual practices, dress, and belief systems<sup>18</sup>. The movement emerged partly from a historical perception among the Ahoms that their community had been neglected and marginalised within the newly established colonial socio-political order in response to which, several Ahom organizations were formed to mobilise cultural and political consciousness<sup>19</sup>. As a part of the movement, among various initiatives, a regeneration of the ritual observance of the *Me-Dam-Me-Pheas* festival<sup>20</sup>, the revitalization of the Tai-Ahom language<sup>21</sup> and the codification and cultural reconstruction of the Tai-Ahom religious tradition known as *Furalung*<sup>22</sup> were particularly started. These initiatives collectively became important instruments in the broader Ahom identity movement, serving both to reclaim historical heritage and to articulate a distinct ethnic identity within the changing socio-political landscape of Assam. A significant example of the cultural rearticulation is the frequent use of the dragon motif of the Ahom Kingdom.

The Ahom dragon is increasingly mobilised in contemporary contexts through a wide range of visual mediums including logos, community flags, clothing, print and digital media platforms. The widespread use of the dragon motif is particularly visible in the programmes of cultural revival organised by various Tai-Ahom organisations. Thus, frequently appears during the celebration of important rituals and festivals such as *Me-Dam-Me-Phi* and *Umpha Puja*, as well as during commemorative events like *Sukapha Divas* and *Lachit Divas*. One prominent arena where the dragon symbol is actively used in organisational and cultural logos. Several Tai-Ahom student and cultural organisations incorporate dragon motifs into their emblems, visually linking contemporary institutions with the imagined grandeur of the Ahom past. These logos circulate widely through banners, pamphlets, and social media profiles, reinforcing a recognizable visual identity for the community. We can take the example of the emblem (fig 1.) of All Tai Ahom Students' Union (ATASU) who use the flying dragon in the centre of the emblem as well as with the tai-Ahom language. The symbol is also incorporated in the flag of different literary, cultural and student organisations who have been rendering their service for the Tai-Ahoms community. Noted historian Yasmin Saikia writes that during the celebration of *Sukapha Divas* in Guwahati on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1994, the ceremony commenced with the hoisting of a flag. The flag, recently designed by the organisers, consisted of a white field bearing a dragon emblem. According to the organizers, the dragon symbol represented their cultural and historical connection with the Tai people<sup>23</sup>. The process

aims to distinguish the Tai Ahoms from the broader Assamese identity while simultaneously articulating a distinct sense of self within the ethnically diverse context of modern-day India<sup>24</sup>. The incorporation of the dragon motif into the traditional attire of the Tai-Ahom community has become an important medium through which cultural identity is visually expressed and reinforced. In recent years, the motif has appeared on garments worn during cultural programmes, festivals, and community gathering. It is interesting to mention here that wearing traditional dress has become more prominent among the Tai-Ahom community in their festivals like *Me-Dam-Me-Phi* where large number of people gathered and even from non-Ahom people also participate in those occasions.



Fig.1-Emblem of ATASU

The visibility of dragon symbol has further amplified while people use it in Digital media. On platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, Tai-Ahom youth and the pages dedicated to the heritage and culture of the Tai-Ahoms frequently use dragon motifs in profile images, event posters, and digital artworks. Facebook pages and groups such as ‘Tai Ahom Culture and Heritage’, ‘Tai Ahom Socio Cultural Development and Historical Research’, ‘Ban-Phe’, and ‘Ujanir -Tai-Ahom- Ami’, among others, function as important digital spaces for promoting Tai-Ahom culture and heritage and raising demands for political rights. In many instances, these platforms incorporate the dragon symbol in their visual content, using it as a marker of Tai-Ahom cultural identity and historical continuity in the digital sphere. Along with promoting different activities and cultural aspects of the community, the Tai Ahom Culture and Heritage Facebook page, for

example, in one post shared sixteen representations of the dragon along with an explanation highlighting the symbolic and cultural significance of the dragon in Tai-Ahom tradition<sup>25</sup>. These online representations allow the symbol to circulate beyond local contexts, connecting dispersed members of the community and contributing to the construction of a shared digital identity.

The motif is increasingly incorporated into the architectural and symbolic designs of various public and community spaces associated with the Tai-Ahom community. It can be prominently seen in the entrance gates of historical sites and memorial parks that commemorate the legacy of the Ahom kingdom such as Sukapha Samannay Kshetra, Jorhat (fig.4), Gamadhar Konwar Memorial Park, Lahing (fig.3), the Tai Museum, Sivasagar. Similarly, the dragon motif is widely used in Tai-Ahom museums, educational institutions and the offices of different Tai-Ahom organisations. The dragon making of different metals are found in the Museums of Assam such as museum of Sukapha Samannay Kshetra, Tai Museum of Sivasagar and even in private museums also<sup>26</sup>. Though, the images of dragon are different size and colour, with the embodiment of the symbol within institutional and commemorative spaces, the Tai-Ahom community felt an active reinforcement of a shared sense of history and cultural pride.



Fig.3-Entrance of Gamdhar Konwar Memorial Park(Photograph by author)



Fig.4-The entrance of Sukapha Samannay Kshetra, Jorhat (Photograph by author)

The flying dragon motif has also found significant expression within the print culture which can be seen as a simultaneous revival of Tai-Ahom language. Tai-Ahom authors and cultural activists frequently incorporate the dragon symbol in the covers and visual designs of books, novels, commemorative volumes, souvenirs, flyer, invitation letter produced for community events and cultural programmes along with the use of Tai language<sup>27</sup>. The dragon symbol is prominently used by Tai-Ahom organizations in their official works, notice and other printed materials. For instance, the *All Assam Ahom Association* includes the dragon emblem in the official memoranda submitted to various government authority, indicating its symbolic significance within contemporary Tai-Ahom institutional representation<sup>28</sup>. And, from the such documents, one can noticed how artistically various symbolic elements—such as octagonal coins featuring

a flying dragon, the architectural structure of entrance gates, flags, and the backdrop of the ritual house erected during the observance of the Me-Dam-Me-Phi are designed. These designs draw upon older cultural forms in order to visually represent and reinforce Tai-Ahom heritage in contemporary ceremonial and institutional contexts. Thus, the recurring presence of the dragon in printed materials not only enhances the symbolic value of these publications but also contributes to the circulation of cultural memory.

The dragon symbol, as stated above, has gained renewed prominence in the visual culture of the Tai-Ahom community, functioning as a powerful marker of ethnic identity and cultural revival. This has been considered as transformation of the motif of dragon from the emblem of sovereignty of medieval period to a symbol of contemporary ethnic identity for the Tai-Ahoms. Historically, the dragon was associated with the sovereignty and royal authority of the Ahom rulers for which the symbol got limited exposure and even discussion in historical works on the Ahoms. It appeared in royal regalia, coins, architecture, and ceremonial contexts, signifying the divine legitimacy and political supremacy of the Ahom monarchy. And in contemporary context, the flying dragon motif has transformed to a common symbol of identity.

## Conclusion

The story of the royal dragon among the Tai-Ahoms of Assam shows how a symbol of *Swardadeo* (king) and his authority became a symbol for all people. This has been considered as transformation of the motif of dragon from the emblem of sovereignty of medieval period to a symbol of contemporary ethnic identity for the Tai-Ahoms. Historically, the dragon was associated with the sovereignty and royal authority of the Ahom rulers for which the symbol got partial exposure and even limited discussion in historical works on the Ahoms. It appeared only in royal regalia, coins, architecture and ceremonial contexts, signifying the divine legitimacy and political supremacy of the Ahom monarchy. And, it in contemporary context, the symbol has gained prominence among the Tai-Ahom community as powerful identity maker. As a symbolic form, the dragon demonstrates a dynamic revival in contemporary visual culture of the Tai-Ahoms. Inscribing the symbol in the public spaces and buildings such as heritage gate, office of Tai-Ahom organisations and institutions visually communicate power, memory and collective identity without relying on written language. This visual expression is reinforced through print platforms by placing the symbol in books, pamphlets, and leaflets where it is documented, standardized and circulated to a wider audience. At the same time, adding the symbol in fashion and textiles, particularly in traditional attire functions as everyday visual markers of identity of the community and social values. More recently, the digital imagery has further expanded the circulation of the symbol. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram enable rapid circulation and reinterpretation of these symbols. These

new developments facilitated the Tai-Ahoms to actively perform and negotiate identity in highly visible and interactive ways.

The discussion on the transformation of the royal dragon illustrates a broader process of symbolic reinterpretation in which historical elements are selectively revived and reshaped to support modern identity formation. In this context, the dragon functions not merely as a decorative motif but as a visual expression of historical continuity and ethnic distinctiveness. By invoking a symbol that was once central to the Ahom polity, contemporary Tai-Ahom organisations and cultural activists seek to establish a link between the community's present identity claims and its historical past. This shift reflects how communities strategically reinterpret their past to construct meaningful identities in the present. Thus, the paper demonstrates the dynamic relationship between history, symbolism, and contemporary identity assertion.

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# **Transformation of Folk Culture of Tai-Ahom in New Media: An Analysis**

**Sehnaz Begum**

## **Abstract**

In the modern era of fastest growing technologies, gadgets, and digital platforms have led to many changes in society be it food habits, dress, medical treatments, or job profiles, new social customs have evolved, and there has been a shift from traditional work processes to digital modes of working and like. The Ahom community has been patronizing various religious faiths of native people of Assam including Vaishnavism of the Brahmanical order, Saivism, and Saktism. By the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, majority of Tai-Ahoms except for its three priestly classes had converted to Hinduism. But in the post-colonial period, scholars of the Ahom community are trying to revive their traditional heritage. In order to promote, popularize, and preserve their own culture, they have been using audio-visual media including digital platforms. In the process of cultural communication through such mediums, some changes or transformations have taken place. In this paper the present researcher has tried to bring up such transformation in new media or the internet.

**Keywords:** Tai Ahoms, Folk culture, media, audio-visual media, Assam

## **Introduction**

Tai Ahom is the largest folk group of Assam. A leader Chaolung Suikapha along with his companions and army marched to this region in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century and gradually occupied various parts of this land (Gait, 1926). He and

his descendants ruled over Assam, mainly the Brahmaputra Valley for a period of approximately 600 years. According to historical documents, they had arrived in this golden land from upper Burma by crossing the Patkai Ranges. Historians stated that they originally hailed from a village in Yunan Province of Southern China (Basu, 1970). Due to some reasons they had to move from their birthplace in different directions (mainly Asian countries) along the rivers, crossing many states including Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam, and finally reached Assam. They came, settled, and established their kingdom by building their first capital at Cheraidoi (Charaideo). Gradually, they extended their territory by conquering the native folk groups of Assam who occupied small areas. Over time, the Tai Ahom territory extended towards the west and covered the entire Brahmaputra valley as far west as the Manah River. (Gait, 1926)

Tai Ahom rulers had been respectful towards other faiths or traditions. Historical evidence reflects that when a king won a battle, he imposed his culture on the conquered people. Contrary to this, Tai Ahom rulers instead absorbed some practices or culture of conquered people in order to maintain unity and harmony in their kingdom. In course of time, the Tai Ahoms formed a new Assamese culture with the native people of Assam. During the Ahom rule in Assam, acculturation took place. According to chronicles and other records, initially for about two hundred years of their settlement in Assam, Tai Ahom culture remained unchanged. But with time, for socio-political reasons, modifications in their culture had started (Gogoi, Dutta, & Bhuyan, 2023). Intermarriages between Ahoms and other native people had been encouraged; in course of time, Tai Ahom rulers patronised the culture and religion of those groups in order to become one among the local people. Later, they adopted Hinduism fully, the religion followed by the majority of people of the region, so as to form an integrated Assamese society (Gogoi P. , 1976). According to the comment by German scholar Eric Seidenfaden, Ahoms are completely Hinduised. There came a period when Tai Ahom culture and traditional practices lessened and were shadowed under the submerged culture of the greater Ahom Kingdom. Also, the society and culture of the Tai Ahoms faced changes during the colonial and post-colonial periods due to the impact of modernism. They had faced identity issues to some extent. The society formed by the Tai Ahoms came from different social groups consisting of tribes and castes incorporating heterogeneous culture and religious belief (Gogoi P. , 1976). Some Ahom rulers followed specific religious policies both for the welfare of rulers and their states or people due to increased interactions between religious faiths and customs of folk groups of Assam. In the present era, many scholars from the community have been trying to revive the culture and tradition of their ancestors. In this revival process a number of folk songs and dances have been recovered to date by taking help from their ancestors, the Shans of Myanmar. Also, the modern generation has composed many modern songs in the Tai Ahom language and

redesigned dance steps inspired by their praying style and the dance style of the Shans. The idea behind producing or making such modern songs is to promote the culture and tradition of Tai Ahoms.

In the process of revival of age-old Tai Ahom folk culture, there may be some transformation of its culture or folklore, i.e., it goes through some transformation or a little change of their cultural practices. There are some songs and dances as audio-visual albums available on YouTube that reflect the revived Tai Ahom folk culture, which may have faced slight transformations from its original one. It may be due to filming of folklore for the purpose of entertainment as well as to attract masses; directors or concerned persons modify it in order to fit their content as per the taste of their targeted audience. Music and the tone used to sing their revived folk songs are influenced by the music of other Tai branches.

### **Objective of The Study**

- To observe the transformation of Tai Ahom folk culture in new media during its revival process.
- To analyse the impact of cultural transformations on the ethnicity of the Tai Ahom.

### **Methodology of the Study**

The researcher has adopted the content analysis method for systematically identifying specific elements of folk culture within audio-visuals available on the subject. Also, to understand the authentic folk culture of Tai Ahoms, its representation in audio-visual media and to identify changes, secondary sources like chronicles, scholarly articles on the subject have been meticulously studied.

### **Review of Literature**

This research is based on the folklore of Tai Ahoms, their change and continuity at the present time as well as their revival phase. For effective research on the subject, the present researcher has studied various historical books or chronicles of Assam including 'History of Assam' by Sir Edward Gait, 'Ahom Din' by Hiteswar Barbaruah, 'Assam in the Ahom Age' by Nirmal Kumar Basu, and 'An Account of Assam' by Francis Hamilton. These books deal with various incidents associated with the Tai Ahoms and give insights into the political, economic, religious, cultural and other information related to them. A book titled 'The Tais of Assam and Ancient Tai Ritual' by B.J. Terwiel helps the researcher to understand ancient Tai rituals and the origin of Tai Ahom and the like. Apart from these, the researcher has thoroughly studied a book titled 'Tai-Ahom Religion and Customs' written by Dr. Padmeswar Gogoi to understand the religion, faith and culture of Tai-Ahoms. In addition, Gogoi's another book titled 'The Tai and The Tai Kingdoms' is a great source of knowledge for this paper. Furthermore, the researcher of this paper has studied various research articles

and documents on the revival of Tai-Ahom culture and its preservation through various means, including new media.

### **Revival of Folk Culture of Tai Ahoms**

Tai Ahom rulers appointed scribes to record major incidents, the life of the king and his people, their socio-economic status, political-religious movements, and related things in the form of historical chronicles (Gait, 1926). It is from historical writings on the Tai Ahom, their culture and tradition are known to people today. As per various sources, the Tai Ahoms are believed to have originated from the Shan group of Myanmar. A group of Tai Shan came to Assam, who were identified by the native people of then Assam as Tai Ahoms. Like any other folk group, the Tai Ahoms had their own folk songs, folk dances, folk practices etc. Since, Tai Ahoms in their way to build a greater Assamese society had merged or amalgamated with native groups of then Assam. As a result, many folk groups had completely submerged to Ahom. Similarly, the Tai Ahoms lost some of their folk cultural and traditional practices in order to adapt others. Acculturation, patronization, and adoption of Hinduism and other cultural faiths of native folk groups resulted in the decline of religious and other Tai Ahom cultural practices, and the use of their language had been gradually reduced to a very high rate. In the Postcolonial period people of the Tai Ahom community have realised the need for their own religious practices and folklore. Many institutions were formed for the purpose of reviving the folk culture of the Tai Ahoms.

Tai Ahoms believe their ancestors were Shans of Myanmar whose culture must have been similar to theirs (Terwiel, 1981). That is the reason why Tai Ahoms in the revival process have taken help from Shan scholars and their cultural or religious practices. Apart from reintegrating traditional aspects from Shans, Tai Ahoms have taken help from their religious practices like their prayers, mantras and like. Recreations of some religious and a few folk songs have been done. Also, many modern songs have been composed in the Tai Ahom language by people belonging to the community. Words of Tai Ahom religious songs have been taken from their religious books or manuscripts. Again, some of those songs have been picturised by some members from the community. The form of dance is also redesigned or revived taking help from praying motions of their rituals, and the folk dance of the Shans might be their source of inspiration or idea.

According to their chronicles, the Tai Ahoms used to wear cloths black in colour when they entered into this land (Terwiel, 1981). But the colour of their traditional dress changed to golden with red motifs woven on the golden silk base. In present time they are identified with golden dress, and it has become a part of their culture. Today, audio-visual songs published on new media platforms reflect the Ahom people wearing golden-coloured dresses.

Language is the most important factor; it is the base identity of a community.

Professor Stephen Morey, a linguist, is one of the revivalists of the Tai language on whose studious efforts the Tai Ahom script is now available in Unicode 8.0 (Sharma, 2020). The Ahom language was at the phase of critical extinction till its revival process got started. Experts or speakers of the Tai Ahom language have been working to teach the language to its people. Apart from priests, certain other members of the community can also read, write and speak the language to some extent.

Religious practices have been followed or practiced by Tai Ahoms from time immemorial. They were originally animist, like the majority of folk groups that exists today. This can be known from their religious sacrificial rituals, traces of which still can be seen in the Ahom Hindu culture of present time (Terwiel, 1981). It is assumed that with time they came in contact with the concept of Buddhism that was followed in the regions they might have crossed before reaching Assam. After the Tai Ahoms reached the Brahmaputra valley, they were introduced to Vaishnavism, Hinduism (mainly Brahmanism), Shaktism, and Saivism in course of time. Idol worship became a part of the new Ahom Hindu religion (Gogoi P. , 1976). After Srimanta Shankardeva introduced Neo-Vaishnavism to the people of Assam, some Tai Ahoms accepted Neo-Vaishnavite traditions, started participating in Naam (praising words to god), and regularly visited Naamghar (a religious assembly with no idol) (Ghosh L. ). The majority of Ahoms in present time follow Hinduism, including Saivism or Shaktism, and some animistic rituals like *Me-Dam Me-Phi*, *Rik Khwan*, *Umpha*, and *Saipha*. Modern Ahom people take part in Hindu festivals. In the modern era, the majority of Ahoms, irrespective of their religious faith marry following the *Chaklong* ceremony. Presently, many Hinduised Ahoms are realising their need to revive and retain their folk cultures. In this process Ahoms are revisiting their ethnical identity through chronicles written by their ancestors, manuscripts, and religious scriptures preserved by the priestly classes Mohan, Deodhai, and Bailung.

In such a process of revival of Tai Ahom folk culture, people from the community have been documenting their sacred traditional rituals and their practices. Some songs were recreated as community songs, religious songs, state songs, and other songs on various themes. Also, they have regenerated the folk dance of the Tai Ahoms on these songs, recording them in an audio-visual format. These revived folk performances are available on the internet today either as albums or individual tracks. There are many Tai Ahom songs available on new media platforms including YouTube, but the picturisations of these songs or music videos contain elements that cannot be considered authentic Tai Ahoms folk elements. For example- the use of drums, the wind instrument *bin*, and umbrellas by female artists in select music videos on new media platforms that resembling to the traditional umbrellas of the Tais or Shans, etc. These can be considered transformative elements of Tai Ahom folk culture in new media.

### Findings and Analysis

The Tai Ahoms brought with them their religious practices to Assam but gradually became inclined towards the religion of the native people of Assam. Their religion and culture became obsolete at some point, mainly after the 17<sup>th</sup> century as a result of acculturation. In the Postcolonial period, Tai Ahom scholars have been working on the revival of their ethnic identity, which is critically endangered today. It is very difficult to trace their ethnic identity prior to their advancement into Assam. Their chronicles or manuscripts document almost every historical incident that occurred after their arrival in Assam and the creation of their own historical narrative, but in between there is no documentation regarding their life found or available. Many historians claim the Tai Ahom clan originated from the Shans of Myanmar. Therefore, it can be assumed that both Tai branches share cultural similarities, and hence, revivalists of Tai Ahom culture may have adopted some cultural traits from Shans. All Tai branches share some commonality, with little or no changes. Therefore, it cannot be asserted that the Tai Ahoms were earlier Shans or that they offshoot from the Shans.

As of the present date, songs in the Tai Ahom language have been recorded for the purpose of reviving Tai Ahom ethnic culture. Some special songs, some folk songs, and various modern Tai Ahom songs have been recorded and filmed with the aim of revitalizing or popularizing the Tai Ahom language among its people. The ancestor who composed songs and introduced instruments, rhythm, tone, music, etc. inspired by nature and shared this musical tradition with the Tai Ahom people; a religious song named *Lai Lung Kham* is dedicated to that ancestor. But Tai Ahom songs available today may not be the same as the original ones that might have existed in the past. Words and contents of newly revived songs may differ from the original folksongs, if they ever existed. The picturisation of those songs in an audio-visual format cannot be regarded as completely authentic. Some transformations were applied to these new compositions, which were produced for the modern Ahom people disconnected from traditional folk knowledge and filmed to align with their modern understanding. Singers or dancers wear stitched, golden Tai Ahom folk dress (headgear). The researcher of this paper has found during her fieldwork that Tai Ahoms never wore stitched headgear; instead, they tied it over the head and tucked its end(s) inside the turban. Traditional unstitched turbans have been replaced by pre-stitched, ready-to-wear headgear for convenience during modern dance performances. Stitched headgear is being largely used by Tai Ahoms, which is reflected in audio-visuals available in new media. People from other religions or folk groups will be introduced to this new style of ready-to-wear headgear, rather than the unstitched turban.

The style of propitiating ancestors and god is now transformed or being adopted to greet elders or respect people. The style of greeting in audio-visual

songs has been taken from the praying style of Tai Ahoms. Me-Dam Me-Phi is one of the rituals to propitiate ancestors of the village or society. It has never been a large affair that is being celebrated today. It became a social festival of the state and is largely celebrated in different parts of Assam.

### Conclusion

It is very difficult to identify traces of the ancient folk culture of the Tai Ahoms as in the course of time they gradually accepted the religion of other native people. The Tai Ahoms maintained marriage relations with native folk groups, which led to a cultural and traditional shift to some extent. The Tai Ahoms, when married to a girl of Brahmin, Kachari, Chutia, Moran, or any other folk group, the bride carries her parent's religion or cultural traits along with her, which leads to acculturation. Therefore, Tai Ahoms have different cultural practices within themselves. Some Tai Ahoms follow Neo-Vaishnavism, some may be idol worshippers, and some are still animists. So, it is very difficult to find out about the ancient Tai Ahom folk culture. In present time, many Ahom people have been adapting various techniques to regenerate their folklore, mainly folk performances, and working for its reintroduction as well as promotion within and outside the community. In the modern era of the internet, it is the easiest, most suitable, fastest and most reachable medium for communicating anything and everything. Therefore, many artists are using this platform to share their part of the work. Tai Ahom songs and dance performances are filmed and these albums or singles pieces are uploaded to various platforms on the internet such as YouTube and Facebook. The reason behind choosing various platforms on the internet is to easily reach diversified, large audience as well as to reintroduce and promote the revived folk culture of Tai Ahoms in a cost-effective way.

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# Changing Patterns of *Khring Khring Baitho Puja* Among the Sonowal Kacharis of Assam: A Comparative Study in Rural and Urban Contexts

Saepha Swamma

## Abstract

The Sonowal Kacharis of Assam are one of the earliest inhabitants of northeast India. Their religious practices, customs, art-artifacts, language, culture, beliefs and faiths, are closely associated with the broader *Kirata* cultural heritage. Among their important religious observances, *Khring Khring Baitho Puja* is performed in honour of *Khring Raja*, a supreme spiritual entity. This ritual is not merely a religious ceremony, but also a collective religious practice deeply connected with community identity, social relations, oral traditions and customary values. Every year, a large number of Sonowal Kacharis gather in Na-Pathar, Tinsukia district, for this community ritual. But in recent decades, a sizable population of Sonowal Kachari has dispersed to urban areas, they have started celebrating their communal ritual in Guwahati city. In doing so, an effort is made to promote their original faith among the people living away from their native spaces. In this context an effort has been undertaken to assess whether or not the core of the original culture is preserved in the observance of *Khring Khring Baitho Puja*. In the light of geographical changes, two locales are used for this field-based study: Na-Pathar in Tinsukia District and Sonaighuli in Guwahati.

**Keywords:** Sonowal Kachari; *Khring Khring Baitho Puja*; Cultural Adaption; Rural- Urban Comparison

## Introduction

Religion and culture are closely related, and religious landscape reflects its culture through both tangible and intangible practices (Yu 2011). Religious

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rituals evolve across time and space in response to social change, migration, urbanization and changing economic conditions. According to Kong (2005) and Brzozowski (2013), the religious landscape serves as a conduit for the interchange of beliefs and growth of religion. Geography influences religious practices by shaping access to resources, patterns of social interaction, architecture and design of ritual spaces.

Religious activities in both rural and urban contexts are deeply ingrained in culture and society. They are a major source of identity maintenance and community cohesiveness. In rural areas rituals, religious ceremonies, seasonal celebrations, and agricultural traditions, serve as a bridge between the past and the present, ensuring that the essence of community's culture continues to thrive. While in urban settings, religious institutions play a vital role in helping immigrant communities preserve their culture and build their identity. Gurdwaras, mosques, churches, and temples act as hubs for celebrating cultural festivals, and sustaining community connections. These establishments assist urban inhabitants in staying linked to their roots while adjusting to the challenges of city life.

Kapur (2022) in *Understanding Characteristics of Religion within Urban, Rural and Tribal societies* indicates that the features of religion exhibit both similarities and differences among people belonging to urban, rural and tribal communities. Li, Huang, and Yuan (2023) in *Territory Identity and Ritual Life of Religious Spaces in Urbanized Communities: A Case Study of Jiangsu* discusses that while holding ceremonies, the major function and goal of a community is to give its members a way to stay in touch through religious spaces. A number of studies have been carried out in vernacular language on Sonowal Kacharis about their religious philosophy, the *Baitho* religion, a form of animism or the *Kirata* religion.

The Sonowal Kacharis are one of the oldest inhabitants of North East India and are followers of ancient *Kiratas*. The term *Kiratas* was used by Vedic Aryans to refer to the aborigines, who had lived in caves, mountains, and forests, especially in the Northern and Eastern Himalayan regions, from prehistoric times (Rai, 2019). The supreme God of the Sonowal Kacharis is *Khring Raja*, he is also known as '*Bathow*,' and '*Brai-Sibrai*'. (Sonowal, 2000). Their ways of worshipping various Gods and Goddesses, beliefs and faiths trace their religious and cultural roots to the ancient *Kiratas* (Barooah, 1998). The *Khring Khring Baitho Puja* is one of the most important ritual-occasion of the Sonowal Kacharis, which they observe with respect to *Khring raja*.

The Sonowal Kacharis are one of the sub-tribes of the great Kachari race who are spread across the entire north-eastern region of India. (Endle, 1911). They are concentrated mainly in the eastern part of Brahmaputra Valley and constitute one of the largest plain ethnic groups of Assam. Presently they are primarily disseminated in upper Assam covering districts like Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Golaghat. Furthermore,

a sizable portion of their population is said to have travelled to Guwahati as occupational migrants and have been permanently residing there in recent decades. Although, a considerable size of their population has relocated from rural to urban setting, they have remained ardent followers of *Khring Raja*, and observe *Khring Khring Baitho Puja* annually.

*Khring Khring Baitho Puja* being a community worship is observed not merely as a celebration but as a connection with various aspects of Sonowal Kachari society and culture. Thus, it provides an opportunity to develop a cultural integrity among themselves which is very important to keep their identity intact. The paper therefore focuses on changing patterns of observances, organisation, participation and ritual adaptation in two geographical settings:

1. Baitho Thaan, Na-pathar, Tinsukia (Rural setting)
2. Baitho Thaan, Sonaighuli, Guwahati (Urban setting)

### Objective

The study aims to examine the changing patterns of *Khring Khring Baitho Puja* among the Sonowal Kacharis in rural and urban settings to understand how urbanisation, migration and socio-spatial conditions influence the organisation and observance of the ritual.

### Methodology

The study is based on qualitative fieldwork conducted at *Baitho Thaan*, Na-Pathar, Tinsukia district during February 2023 and *Baitho Thaan*, Sonaighuli, Guwahati during March 2024 coinciding the annual observance of *Khring Khring Baitho Puja*. The primary data were collected through interviews, case study, participant observation and focus group discussion mainly from priests, temple committee members, elderly people and devotees familiar with the ritual traditions. Structured questionnaire was used during interviews. Secondary sources such as books, journals, articles, magazines etc. were also consulted for data collection.

### Findings

#### **Traditional Framework: *Khring Khring Baitho Puja* in Rural setting: Baitho Thaan, Na-Pathar, Tinsukia**

The beginning of observance of *Khring Khring Baitho Puja* at *Baitho Thaan*, Na-Pathar, Tinsukia is also not specifically known. Every year the ritual is observed on the second Monday during *Shukla Paksha* during *Doul Purnima* (the bright lunar fortnight), that is preceded by *Shivaratri* (February- March) and succeeded by *Bohag Bihu/ Rongali Bihu* (the Assamese New Year festival celebrated in mid-April). It is a three days ceremony held in a schedule in the *Baitho Thaan*.

The *Baitho Thaan* is situated in Na-pathar, Tinsukia district includes the *Baitho mandir*, also known as the *Mool Mandir*, the *Bhuruli Haal* (a place of worship), the *Borghor* (residence of the priest), the *Soraghor* (rest house), a platform for conducting meetings and functions, a *puthibhoral* (library) which is under construction, and a concrete model of a big white crane with a boat. The boat was constructed in the memory of preceding late *Rajaguru* (Priest) and *Deodhai* (his wife) signifying their journey to heaven. This temple was newly built in the year 1981 before which the rituals were practiced in a nearby forest.

The *Baitho Thaan* is known as the Central *Baitho Mandir*. It includes the *Mool Mandir* or *Baitho Mandir* which is built with a specific design. The architecture of the temple signifies the religious philosophies of the Sonowal Kacharis. There are seven main structural posts. The six posts surround the middle post and they altogether stand signifying the seven *khels* (clans) of the Sonowal Kacharis, whereas the other fourteen posts supporting the structure of the temple symbolizes the fourteen *bangshas* (sub-clans). The mid-post of the temple is made of wood from *Gondhoro*i (Prosopis cineraria) tree and atop of this post, above the roof of the temple, a banana inflorescence shaped edifice made from *Gondhoro*i tree is fixed. This particular wooden post is thinly layered with concrete in order to avoid damage caused by rain water. The provision for performance of sacrifice is made under this post.

### **Priesthood**

Among the Sonowal Kacharis, the priest of the *Baitho* Temple is known as *Baitho* or *Rajaguru*. The person chosen to be the priest must belong to the *Baithori* clan. This position is usually an inherited one. If no suitable hereditary successor is available, the temple committee appoints someone from the *Baithori* clan. The wife of the priest is known as *Deodhai*. (Sonowal, 2011)

### **Communal Solidarity**

The *Khring Khring Baitho Puja* ceremony is held in a three days schedule annually. Planning for the observances begin well in advance. The temple committee meets several times to discuss the issues related to the upcoming event. The youths are vested with the responsibility of decorations and collections of required items. Outside the temple premises, villagers set up street stalls offering balloons, food and treats, as well as the wares of local artisans. There is a tremendous zeal among all the age groups; they assemble, chat, and enjoy themselves on the temple grounds at all hours of the day and night.

### **Ritual strictness**

Entry to the *Baitho* Temple in modern versatile clothesis fully restricted. Men mustwear *dhoti-kurta* and women *mekhela chadar* only during temple visits. No one is allowed to wear any kind of footwear in the *Baitho Thaan*

premises. These restrictions are applied to all individuals belonging to all age-groups. The norms are clearly printed and pasted in the gateway.

A feast is hosted at the *Borghor* of the priest at the end of *Puja* for seven *Bhakats* (ardent worshippers) belonging to seven *khels* (clans) of the Sonowal Kacharis. The other devotees and villagers arrange their own food at guest house set up in the temple campus. The *Haidang* songs are sung with traditional instruments inside the *Baitho* temple. The singing of *Haidang* folksongs begins from the *Baitho* temple. The Sonowal Kacharis sing *Haidang* geet recounting the story of creation. After this they move out of the temple and perform *Husari* welcoming *Bihu* for the year. (Swamma and Devi, 2026)

### **The Urban Adaption: *Khring Khring Baitho Puja* in Urban setting: *Baitho Thaan, Sonaighuli, Guwahati***

The first *Khring Khring Baitho Puja* among the Sonowal Kacharis living in Guwahati city was observed in 1993 at the Dispur Complex. From the year 1993 to 1997, the community members conducted the ritual ceremoniously in different parts of the city. In the year 1998, a plot of land was purchased in Sonaighuli area at Dhakhin Gaon, Guwahati by the members of the community, and a permanent *Baitho Thaan* has been constructed here. This shrine hosts the *Khring Khring Baitho Puja* each year. Through annual donations and contributions to the *Khring Khring Baitho Puja*, the Sonowal Kachari people who reside in various parts of Guwahati have been supporting their culture, literature and cultural history.

The architecture of the temple is similar to that of the main temple situated in, Tinsukia but the total area in comparison to the original temple is very less. Since *Bhurulixaal puja* is not allowed in sub branches, it is not seen there. Since *Bhurulixaal* rituals are not allowed to be performed other than in the Central *Baitho Mandir*, all other branches of *Baitho Thaan* observe *Khring Khring Baitho Puja* for one day. Hence, in Sonaighuli, Dhakhin Gaon, Guwahati, *Khring Khring Baitho Puja* is observed as a day long programme.

### **Role of Priest**

The role of the priest in Sonaighuli *Baitho Thaan* is not played by someone who is a fulltime priest but by the one who is vested upon this duty. The person considered is an experienced one and had taken his initiation and participated several times in the works of the *Baitho Thaan* situated at Na- Pathar, Tinsukia. Similarly, for other activities relating to *Khring Khring Baitho Puja*, the members involved are also the ones who had taken initiation from *Baitho Thaan* of Na-Pathar, Tinsukia.

### **Community interconnectedness**

Donations specifically made for the ritual are according to their free will. Money is collected as a form of membership from the community members all

around the year is utilized for organization of *Khring Khring Baitho Puja*

Unlike the communal labour seen in rural areas, urban organisers seek paid professional help for catering and decoration. Most members of the Sonowal Kachari community who reside in Guwahati are involved in formal occupation and therefore have time constraints. The arrangements are done with the help of professional third party, the organizers talk over the phones to ensure that arrangements are carried out smoothly. A formal invitation is circulated through social networking sites, cordially inviting the community members to join the ritual. Cleaning, decoration and other requirements of the ceremony are met from a day or two ahead in the temple premises.

**Inclusivity and Flexibility**

There is no restriction in dressing pattern. It is absolutely a personal choice in terms of clothing and accessories in urban space. Food and catering arrangements are made for all the visitors from time to time. As starter they serve with curd, flattened rice, roasted rice powder. Rice with pork, chicken and other items along with rice beer are served in lunch.

**Cultural Hybridity**

Instead of community-led performances, *Bihu* dancers’ troupe is hired to dance on folksongs that day. Community members also participate in the performance of their free will. There are other cultural activities performed by the community members and activists also who manages the event. People gather at a specific given time unlike the rural setting where devotees are available all around the time during those days. Here devotees gather, meet people of the community, enjoy for some time and leave within an hour or two. The reason for this is that it is not declared as a holiday rather it is a working day. Time investment lacks in urban spaces and participation are seen in a flexible manner.

From the above findings, the spatial changes that has been observed between two geographical locations are listed below in the following table:

**Table: 1 Comparative Patterns of Celebration of *Khring Khring Baitho Puja***

	Rural	Urban
<b>Place</b>	<i>Baitho Thaan</i> , Na-Pathar, Tinsukia	<i>Baitho Thaan</i> , Sonaighuli, Guwahati
<b>Infra-structure</b>	The <i>Baitho</i> temple is built with a specific design and the architecture and the campus includes other buildings.	The architecture of the temple is similar to that of the main temple situated in, Tinsukia but the total area in comparison to the original temple is very less.

<b>Days of observance</b>	3 (three) days	1 (one) day
<b>Religious activists</b>	Full time priest known as <i>Raja Guru</i> belonging to the <i>Baithori</i> clan.	The role of the priest is not played by someone who is a fulltime priest but one who is vested upon this duty and is also involved in formal service sector.
<b>Donations</b>	Donation from the previous year is used.	Donations are also specifically made for the ritual according to their free will.
<b>People involved</b>	The planning for the ritual begins in advance with multiple sittings, the temple committee gathers together to discussion the issues related to the upcoming event.	The arrangements are done with the help of professional third party, the organizers talk over the phones, look after their responsibilities at the given time to make sure the arrangements are done in a smooth manner
<b>Dress pattern</b>	Entry to the <i>Baitho</i> Temple in western wear is fully restricted. Men wear dhoti-kurta and women wear <i>mekhela chadar</i> only.	There is no restriction in dressing pattern. It is absolutely a personal choice in urban space.
<b>Food and drinks</b>	A feast is hosted at the <i>Borghor</i> for seven <i>Bhakats</i> . The devotees arrange their own food.	Food and catering arrangements are made for all the visitors from time to time.
<b>Performances</b>	The <i>Haidang</i> songs are sung with the instruments inside the <i>Baitho</i> temple.	<i>Bihu</i> dancers' troupe is hired to dance on folksongs that day. Community members also perform during the event.

## Discussion

Cultural festivals are manifestations of “traditional” or “local” customs, which frequently stem from the social life or beliefs of ancestors. It also encourages community participation along cultural and ethno-religious lines developing bonds and communication across community members. The comparative study of *Khring Khring Baitho Puja* in Na-Pathar and Sonaighuli, Guwahati reveals that the ritual has undergone significant contextual adaptations yet continuing to retain its religious and cultural importance among the Sonowal Kacharis. The differences observed between rural and urban settings are not indicators of cultural loss alone, but reflect changing social realities shaped by migration, occupational patterns, spatial limitations and urban lifestyles.

In Na-Pathar, the ritual remains closely connected with traditional community structures. The three-day observance, participation of clan based religious functionaries, strict dress codes, collective preparations, and performance of

*Haidang* songs reflect the strong integration of ritual with everyday social life. This ritual also functions as a space for intergenerational interaction, community bonding and transmission of cultural knowledge.

In Sonaighuli, Guwahati, however, the observance has adapted to the demands of urban life. Due to occupational commitments and limited time, the ritual is organised with greater managerial planning and external assistance. Communication through social media, flexible participation, catering arrangements indicated the incorporation of modern organizational practices into traditional rituals. At the same time, the establishment of *Baitho Thaan* at Sonaighuli demonstrates the community's effort to preserve collective identity with a multicultural urban environment. The urban ritual space serves not only as religious centre but also as a social and cultural platform where dispersed members of the community reconnect with one another. Thus, adaptation becomes a strategy of continuity rather than of complete departure from tradition.

The study also suggests that rituals are dynamics social practices rather than fixed cultural forms. The changing patterns of *Khring Khring Baitho Puja* illustrate how indigenous communities negotiate between tradition and modernity in response to spatial and social transformation. While some ritual elements are modified in urban settings, the symbolic significance of the ritual as a marker of Sonowal Kachari identity continues to remain strong.

### **Forces of spatial and social change**

The shift in *Khring Khring Baitho Puja* patterns is not a loss of culture but a resilient adaptation to several urban forces:

1. **Diversity and Secularization:** People from a wide range of backgrounds visit cities, which results in a mingling of religious practices and beliefs and sometimes loosens the rigidity of one's own religious views and increases secularisation.
2. **Innovation and Adaptation:** Urban religious organizations frequently include contemporary aspects into their rituals in order to adjust to the shifting environment. They incorporate modern features into traditional customs in order to adapt to the changing environment.
3. **Spatial and Economic Constraints:** The construction of big religious structures may be restricted by the high cost of land and space in metropolitan settings. Time constraints are another drawback that reduces participation in these events, leading to smaller gatherings and less community interaction.
4. **Temporal Constraints and Community Involvement:** Community engagement is an important mechanism to maintain as it includes active involvement in religious observances and cultural festivals. They can serve as a means for social integration, peace, and harmony, as evidenced in various events. Time constrains due to urbanization

reshapes religious practices and sometimes have adverse effect on it. In rural areas, rituals often play a central role in community life, providing social support and a sense of belonging.

5. Religious Education: Shared religious practices can build family relationships and improve communication within them. Participating in religious groups also gives children with opportunities to engage with adults beyond their immediate family, which helps them develop social skills. Urban locations can provide a variety of religious experiences, but they also provide obstacles, such as less time for conventional activities owing to hectic schedules. Encouraging a balanced approach that encompasses both religious and secular activities can aid children's overall development.

## Conclusion

In heterogeneous and multicultural urban spaces, active community participation in religious events is a crucial strategy for maintaining social relations and preserving peaceful coexistence. The study highlights that *Khring Khring Baitho Puja* continues to play an important role in maintaining the cultural and religious identity of the Sonowal Kacharis in both rural and urban settings. However, the manner of observance differs according to the socio-economic and spatial conditions of each location.

In Na-Pathar, the ritual is embedded within a traditional rural community structure where collective participation, customary norms and extended ceremonial practices remain prominent. In contrast, the urban observance in Guwahati reflects adaptations shaped by migration. Rather than interpreting these differences as a decline from the traditional form, the study argues that *Khring Khring Baitho Puja* is a dynamic cultural practice that continuously adapt to changing contexts. The urban celebration in Sonaighuli, Guwahati represents an important effort by the Sonowal Kachari community to sustain social relations, cultural memory and religious identity within a heterogeneous urban environment.

The study therefore concludes that continuity and change co-exist within the observance of *Khring Khring Baitho Puja*. The ritual remains culturally meaningfully not because it is static, but because it has the capacity to adapt while preserving its collective significance for the community. Such religious gatherings may be viewed as an instrument for promoting social harmony, peace, and integration.

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# A Study of the Symbolism in the Selected Poems of Anju

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## Abstract

Anju (1963) is a pseudonym of *Anjalee Basumatary*, an eminent modern Bodo woman poet. She began writing poetry at a young age. Her first poetry book, *Nwngni Zew Angni Bibungthi*, was published in 1982; she was only 19 years old then, and it was the first poetry book by a woman in the Bodo community. Anju is a great academician, writer, editor, translator and poet. She has written many articles, prose, poetry, and short stories. Much of her poetry is translated into many Indian languages, like *Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, Telugu, Odia, English*, etc. The present study employed a descriptive analytical methodology, and the data have been collected from both the primary and secondary sources. Over the years, she has authored seven poetry books, three collections of essays and criticisms, and a short story book. She has received many awards, such as the *Sahitya Akademi* and *Rangsar Bantha*. The current study seeks to examine the symbolism in Anju's poetry. It assesses its role and significance using a descriptive methodology, and both primary and secondary sources of data are employed. Anju's poetry is full of rich symbols that deal with identity, struggle, and strength. Some of the main symbols are water, death, the colours, trees etc., and these stand for helplessness and the passage of time; a lover and a force for acceptance; and cultural identity and sacrifice. The city's images stand for a group of hurt hearts, and nature and things like rivers and jungles stand for healing and a safe place for emotions. In her poetry, the phoenix bird symbolises rebirth

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from ashes. Her poetry also talks about the conflict between tradition and modernity. The *Sabarimala* symbolism in her poem shows how women are suppressed and oppressed and how they can fight back against oppressive systems to regain their rights and identities. *Avniya Thwibai* used the story of the tigress *Avni* to criticise the justice system for being unfair. It shows how humans get away with things while animals' nature is punished harshly. *Gwithang* uses the grasshopper as a symbol of greed and environmental damage to warn people about the dangers of overconsumption. *Hambura Daini Nongamwn* uses the image of a woman branded as a witch to show how society rejects outcasts, which is a sign of the decline of human morality. The *Luwar*, or leech, is symbolised as a parasite, a corrupt political leader of our society. This implies that those in power are the real parasites as they hurt society for their gain.

**Keywords:** *Bodo, Anjalee Basumatary, Symbolism, Gandhiji, Avni, Hambur, Luwar*

### 1.1 Introduction

Anju (1963) is a pseudonym of Anjalee Basumatary, an eminent modern Bodo woman poet. She is from the *Tengapara, Kokrajhar*, the heart of the *Bodoland Territorial Region*, Assam, which nestles in the middle of nature and the foothills of *Bhutan* and the *Himalaya* and is the gateway to Northeast India. From schooling at her village's lower primary school, she completed her Master of Science degree at the Department of Physical Sciences, North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), in 1988. She has served as an associate professor in the Department of Physics at Kokrajhar Government College and vice principal of Kokrajhar Government College, now upgraded to Kokrajhar University. After her retirement, she is now living in their hometown, Kokrajhar, along with her family and also currently serving as the president of the Bodo Women Writers Association (BWWA). She started her poetry writing at the very young age and her first poetry book, *Nwngni Zew Angni Bibungthi* [Your Life: My Opinion] was published in 1982, she was only 19 years old then, and it was the first poetry book by a woman in the Bodo community. So far, she has created seven poetry books, three books of essays and criticism, and a short story book ranging from 1982 to 2026. For her contribution to Bodo literature, she was nominated as a member of the University Court by the Governor of Assam for 3 years from 2013. In 1995, she was chosen for the *Rangsar Bantha* of *Bodo Sahitya Sabha* for her second book of poems, *Phasini Dowlengao Okhaphwr* (The Moon in a Noose). She won the *Sahitya Akademi Award* in 2016 for her fifth book of poems, *Ang Mabwrwi Dong Daswng* [Ask me not how I am]. In the following year, 2017, she was honoured with the *Pramod Chandra Brahma Thunlayari Bantha* by the *Bodoland Territorial Council* for her literary contributions. She received the *SPARROW-R Thyagarajan* Literary Award

in 2022 recently. Anju is a great academician, writer, editor, translator and poet. She has written many articles, prose, poetry, and short stories. Much of her poetry is translated into many Indian languages, like Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, Telugu, Odia, English, etc.

Symbolism in Bodo poetry began to bloom in the early phase of the 20<sup>th</sup> century during the *Bibar* and *Alongbar* era of Bodo literature. The initial phase emerged with the publication of the *Bibar* magazine in 1920, with poems containing elements of mysticism, romanticism, patriotism, and Bodo nationalism and a focus on nature, up to *Khonthai Bijab* and *Konthai Bihung* of *Kali Kumar Lahary* and a few poems like *Ang Thwiya* of *Prasenjit Brahma* and many others of *Okhaphwr* magazine. The Modern Symbolism period, which represents a stronger trend of symbolism along with imagery and modernistic themes, became prominent through the works of noteworthy poets. The key turning point of the Bodos may be taken from *Brajendra Kumar Brahma's Okhrang Gongse Nanggou* (In Search of a Sky, 1975), which is highlighted as a significant development characterised by a high degree of symbolism and novelty in imagery. Modern poets like *Gunesswar Mwshahary*, *Anju*, *Aurobindo Uzir*, *Bijoy Baglary*, *Anil Boro* etc. are further developed symbolic and metaphorical styles in the later years.

## 1.2 Objectives of the study

- (a) To identify and analyse the symbolism in the poetry of Anju.
- (b) To evaluate the role of symbolism in her poetry.
- (c) To explore the symbolism and its significant in her poetry.

## 1.3 Methodology and data collection

The present study employed a descriptive analytical methodology. The poems of the Anju's are studied using the close reading method and the MLA latest 9<sup>th</sup> edition has been followed for the citations. The data for the present study have been collected from both the primary and secondary sources. The seven poetry books of the Anju are the primary source of data, and related books, journals, etc., are secondary sources for this study. The poet Anju and her contemporary are also interviewed for the study.

## 1.4 Discussion

The poem *Thwinai: Swinai* becomes one of the deepest symbolic pieces. Death is here not fear but a lover. Death becomes a symbol of truth beyond human conflict. Anju asks death not to come early. She wants more time to fight for meaning. She sees death as a border keeper between worlds. She promises that one day she will embrace death like a darling and asking not to come early. The symbol turns death into purification and it teaches acceptance and dignity.

Thwinai,  
 Angha nwnghkou swinaizwng ruzunw  
 Gwhw gwiya-gwsbw.  
 Nwngho thar thandwi  
 Be arw bwi mulugni sima bengra.

...  
 Nathai, thwinai,  
 Mwnse som phwigwn-  
 Zebla nwnghkou ang boraigwn.

(*Thwinai: Swinai*)

[Death, I do not have the strength to compare you with my darling, but it is also my desire. You are a true representative, the one who sees the border of this and that world. But Death, one day the time will come when I will welcome you.]

The symbol of the yellow flag rises like a living spirit of the land in her *Gwmw Phirphila* poem. The yellow flag flies freely and calls out to the speaker, who says its colour is hers too. The yellow colour was turned into a symbol of the Bodos' identity, unity, and sacrifice. It symbolises sweat, blood, history, and rebirth and embodies the identity and colour of the Bodos skin. She remembers the *Bwisagw* festival, the dance, and the grains of yellow paddy that grow from the soil mixed with drops of blood. Yellow becomes the colour of memories and hope, a flag linking past sacrifices with future possibilities.

Udangwi phwr phwr birnai  
 Gwmw phirphilaya  
 Nwi angkhrou raidaolangw-  
 "Nwngni gababw gwmw!"

(*Gwmw Phirphila*)

[The yellow flag, flying comfortably and freely with a flapping sound. It called out to me; your colour too is yellow.]

The moon and river become symbols of healing. The moon spreads a soft sheet over the dark night. The river listens and carries pain away. The river washes sorrow like jungle wind. Moonlight plays on the water and becomes a mirror for the soul. The moon sees its face in the river and the poet sees herself in that reflection. The symbol says sadness becomes light when shared and connection leads to cleansing.

Okhaphwra bonanwi dwnw gangse sudem sadwr  
 ...  
 Dwimanao dukhu gwiya nonga dong  
 Zerwi dong angnao zerwi dong okhaphwrnao

Nathai dwimaya bwhwigarbai thayw dukhu dahakhou  
 Zerwi bwhwigarw khwsliphana  
 Bikhainw zayw bini bikhaya zwngkhwil srail srail  
 Bikhainw okhaphwra gelepwhiyw amwi zumwi dwimani bikhayao  
 (*Okhaphwr Dwima Arw Ang*)

[The moon spreads and keeps a peaceful sheet... The river is not without sorrow; it is not like that, just as it is in me, just as it is in the moon. But the river flows and cleans its own sorrow and sighs just as the trashes, litters are flow and thrown away by the river; that is why its heart is clean and crystal clear, and that is why the moon comes and plays in the middle of the river, a game of diving and dipping in the water.]

The phoenix bird becomes a symbol of rebirth from ashes. The poet calls to write a poem together. She invites the wounded heart to begin again. Tears become spring water, and sorrow or sigh becomes fertile soil for poetry. The phoenix bird becomes a symbol of rising after destruction. Symbol teaches that poetry heals and provides life to a broken soul. The red rose blooming in the graveyard becomes a symbol of beauty born from pain.

Phwikhonthai dwnge lirmi  
 Zaini mwdwiyao gole gole uzigwn  
 Gwrwni Phoenix dao  
 ...  
 Phwi dangnaini dukhuthiya gwrwbw  
 Aba dukhuni mangkhorsaliyao barhwni barse zahab golap  
 (*Phwi Khontahi Dwnge Lirmi*)

[Come, let us write a poem in whose tears the phoenix bird of the heart will take birth again and again. Come, let us touch and see the heart of the sad, or else in the graveyard of sorrow, come; let us allow a red rose to bloom.]

One of the richest symbolic poems is *Ang Mabwrwi Dong Daswng*, where the red river of pain and purple *Dokhona* become symbols of the collective suffering of women. The poet refuses to disclose her current state of being. Her voice represents every woman from myth to present. The river becomes a symbol of endless struggle. The purple *Dokhona* becomes a symbol of dignity that is kept even in suffering. Weakness becomes an ornament. Tears become ice. The poem turns the body into a battlefield of generational injustice. The symbol teaches that women carry both grief and strength through silence.

Ang mabwrwi dong nwnswr daswng  
 Ang thwiywi thwiywi thanganwi dong na  
 Simang mizingphwrni gwthwi sohophwrkhou gwbackhrobnanwi  
 Gobonanwi dong gwrwni gwza dwimayao

Nwngswr daswngthar

...

Nwngswr mithinanwi la

Ther bether gwrbwa dukhuni phanthaogabni

Dokhona phanpraobnanwi thigwinw somaiyw somaiyw

Arw mithinnwi la

Lwrbangthi onnai baoswmnai swizw somainani gohenaphra

Bese gilir bese gilir

(*Ang Mabwrwi Dong Daswng*)

[Do not ask me how I am, whether I'm alive by dying again and again or I am trapped in the heart's red river while embracing the corpses of dreams and hopes; you all absolutely must not ask. You all should know that a broken heart looks good to me, wearing a sari the colour of sorrowful aubergine; it looks good to me. And you should know how heavy are the ornaments of weakness, love, devotion, endurance, and beauty; how heavy they are.]

Symbolism becomes strong again in *Ang Thwinai Nonga* poem; here death itself metamorphoses into a symbol of freedom. The firing squad serves as a stage for revealing the truth. The poet rejects fear and embraces unstoppable spirit. Life becomes a river that continues after the body falls. The symbol says death cannot kill dignity. It becomes a path of rebirth. Hope becomes a weapon against oppression.

He angni agwma zewma

Gole gole butharlislai

Angkhou dinwinw butharthwngswi

Gwrbwse angw phwthaithi besenthi

Swithw arw zewni hainakhou gwbananwi

Bwlisaliyao ang gwdna phwlaohorgwn

Firing squadao bikha phathigwn

Phasini doulengao dindang zagwn

Theobw ang mwnthigou

Ang thwinai nonga

Ang thwinai nonga

(*Ang Thwinai Nonga*)

[Oh, my precious life, instead of dying repeatedly, let me die today. Embracing my faith, value, honesty, and the beauty of life with a full heart. At the place of sacrifice, I will offer my neck; before the firing squad, I will offer my chest; from the hangman's rope, I will hang; yet I know I will not die; I will not die.]

Another powerful symbolic poem is *Sonalu Barnai Bwthwrao*, where the golden shower flower becomes a symbol of memory, identity and eternal hope.

Yellow becomes a symbol of childhood, dreams, festivals, harvests, and the light hidden in sorrow. The flower blooms even in pain. It becomes a symbol of returning joy. It holds history inside its petals. The poem says memory is golden rain falling into the heart.

Sonalu barnai bwthwrao  
Lwithwse gaba hurlung-hurthung khalamw angni gwrwbw

...

Gwmwa angni angw gab  
Manwna beyw bibarni gab bithoraini gab  
Manwna beyw sikhirini gab daoni gab  
Manwna beyw mai bidangni gab phithai gwmwnni gab  
Gwrwbwni sonasri dengkhwhwrni gab mwndangthini gab

(*Sonalu Barnai Bwthwrao*)

[In the season of the golden shower blooming, the ocean of colour makes my heart and mind restless. Yellow is my favourite colour because it is the colour of flowers, the colour of butterflies, and the colour of birds. It is the colour of the rice spike, the colour of ripe fruits, the colour of the heart's blooming tunes, and the colour of experiences.]

Anju used very important symbols in her poetry to turn a tragic victim into a lasting flame of justice. Violence or conflict took the innocent school girl Priya Basumatary's life. Anju uses her as a poem against oppression to show that her memory still speaks truth to power. *Bala Hama*, which means *desert*, is a symbol of the killers' hearts. This indicates that the killers lack empathy and possess no resources, like water, that could foster kindness. By calling her a flambeau or a torchbearer, the author suggests that her story will light the way for others to see the cruelty of meaningless revolutions, which kill their own people. The dictionary metaphor is particularly striking because it represents how her name will redefine the meaning of identity for those who are neglected. Finally, the lonely night's news represents a haunting conscience that will never allow the heartless to forget their crimes.

Hingsani thalim hwywi hwywi  
Biswrni bikhayao saglwbbai  
Khangkhwrhariya khlung khlung bala hama  
Thwbsebw okha haya beo  
Thwbsebw okha haya

...

Priya Basumatary  
Nwng za thwihabnai zewmaphwrni dikkhkar  
Nwng za bodgwywi gwrwbphwrkhou khengkhub mwnhwgra

Subao gwszlid  
Nwng za hadwrsi horphwrni pherenga radab

(Priya Basumatary)

[Through the constant practice of violences, their hearts have turned into thick jungles and parched deserts, not a single drop of rain falls there, not a single drop. Priya Basumatary, you must be the sigh for those who are living deaths. You must be the sorrow that strikes senseless hearts and the news that breaks in the dark of night.]

Anju employs liquids and agricultural tools as primary symbols to represent the significant sacrifices required for freedom. The single drop of tear is not just a sign of grief but also serves as a cleansing force for a nation's history. By offering this tear to the martyrs of *Jallianwala Bagh* and the *Amla Ram Siba Ram*, the script martyrs of the Bodos, the writer symbolises a bridge between the past sacrifices and the present conscience. The dry, grass-filled heart represents a society that has become indifferent or stagnant over time. The poet suggests ploughing the dry land to fix this. This represents the hard work of self-reflection and struggle needed to make a country peaceful and green. The nacreous sickle is a striking symbol of the power held by the common worker or farmer who works very diligently so the sickle becomes shining. The strong statue of Gandhi symbolises a permanent, unmoving foundation for non-violence that feeds the hungry souls of those seeking liberty.

Thwbse mwdwi Jallianwala Baghni mungkhlongphwrnw  
Thwbse mwdwi Amla Sibamwnnw  
Nathai ang phosora  
Thwbsebw mwdwi Gandhijini mungao  
Mablabanw phozokhabai gwrwbwao  
Udangshri arw ohingsani gwzwr musukha  
Zai khangw udangshri ganghabnai ransrao bikhaphwrni  
Khangkhrhariya simang

(Thwbse Mwdwi)

[One drop of tear for the martyrs of Jalianwala Bagh, one drop of tear for Amla Siba and others, the script martyrs of the Bodos. But I will not let flow a single drop of tear in the name of Gandhiji as I have long ago placed the strong statue of freedom and non-violence in my heart, who nurtures the dreams of hearts thirsty for freedom.]

The poem *Dukhuthiya Yazidi Sikhlyphwr* talks about cruelty. The poet uses sharp contrasts between darkness and light to show how the Yazidi people struggled for dignity during a violent genocide in the *Sinjar* region of northern Iraq by ISIS. She describes captors appearing as animals. Anju portrays these

figures as parasites to reveal a complete loss of humanity among those who live through violence and try to hide the light of freedom. The burqa is a cage. It represents a physical wall meant to silence women until their suffering eventually transforms into a powerful force for revolution. Knowledge brings new strength. Symbols like the getting waistband ready represent a preparation for battle against ignorance, while specific survivors become the collective roots that will eventually destroy the parasitic system.

Swr belai  
 Santrashni gswm thandwi duthang bagdadi  
 Khonzi zinaharizwng aizwphwrkhou islam khalamgra  
 Gwhw gwlwndang kapher thogaisula  
 Thuwa thuwa muzuphurw zwng nwnghkou nwnghwrkhou  
 (*Dukhuthiya Yazidi sikhlyphwr*)

[Who is that dark representative of terror, the evil Baghdadi? With ten times rapewomen are converts to Islam. You weak, feeble, and treacherous infidels; we spit upon you and all of your kind.]

The poem *Gwsw Thawa Thawa* depicts a tranquil transition from day evening to night darkness, which is illustrating the monotony and futility of our existence. Shadows signify the conclusion of a journey or the passage of time; what the cows represent in the poem is the restless human spirit. By focusing on the animals which are still eating grass in the paddy fields as evening approaches, the writer highlights a hunger which cannot be satisfied by physical food for some people. Chewing is a metaphor for the boring but necessary things we do every day to stay alive. Just as the cows continue their repetitive motion even as the light fades, humans continue their life journey without ever feeling truly complete. The long road is representing the challenging path that everyone must take in life, regardless of what they want. Our hearts are never full because our wants are never-ending, just like the never-ending cycle of the sun setting and animals still grazing even after it's time to go home.

Oblasimbw  
 Manwisw mwsou mukhubmwn gangsw zanayao  
 Zanangou zwbakhwimwn ukhwinai-lubwinai  
 Zanangou mablababw ohaya  
 Sanphrwmwni baruru nunaibadi zanai arw saolenai  
 Thig zerwi hanthilamayao zewni hanthinai daobainai  
 (*Gwsw thawa thawa*)

[Even until then, some cows were busy eating grass. Perhaps the hunger-desire was not finished; it is possible this never ends. Like the boring sight of eating and chewing every day, it is exactly like walking the journey on the path of life.]

Anju's poem *Nwng Gosongthanw Hagwnne* functions as a moral interrogation that transforms the act of writing into a physical and spiritual battle for justice. The poet is using a pen and asking whether it can stand strong enough and hold history through writings. By using the chain as a symbol of systemic oppression, the author challenges the reader to break the bonds of silence and move toward the road of collective progress. The pen serves as the central symbol of a firm conscience; it is not merely a tool but a living witness that must stand up when others bow to conspiracy. Through the imagery of wiping tears and writing history in the poem, the author conveys that the true revolution lies in giving a voice to the suffering and refusing to flee from the truth.

Nwng gosongthanw hagwnne  
Swithwkhon gwbananwi  
Ositkhon swngkharinanwi

...

Nwng sagthikhonw hagwnne  
Bwnsrwdnaini berekhaywi  
Khoron dwikhangnw hagwnne  
Swbkhonaini berekhaywi  
Dophthainaini zinzri  
Nwng bwsonw hagwnne  
Ukhrangnw hagwnne zengnaphwrkhon hengthaphwrkhon

(*Nwng gosongthanw hagwnne*)

[Pen, will you be able to stand by embracing the truth and rejecting the false? Will you be able to break free in opposition of the being bound or shackled? Will you be able to raise your head against the exploitation? Can you break the chain of suppression and oppression, can you uproot the obstacles and the problems?]

The poem *Dinwi Gandhi Jayantini Mwntham Selfie Saogari* features three generations. These different age groups show how the perception of a historical legacy changes and often becomes distorted through time. The bathroom scene represents raw reality. This unfinished space with the little girl removes the image of a cold marble statue to show a leader who was once a living human being. Young people focus on physical strengths. It's intriguing that the young man was interested in a six-pack and the gym. He stated that he must have frequented the gym extensively, as that was the only way he could have undertaken the journey for the Dandi March. This modern obsession with hero looks misses the spiritual strength behind the event. The octogenarian father stands for tradition. His handmade silk jacket creates a direct material link to the values of self-reliance and truth held by previous generations. These selfies mirror the observer as they demonstrate that a single figure can be a playmate to a child or a fitness icon to a young man while serving as a moral compass for the old.

Phoraisalimani langwna gazennai sengrasaya  
 Gandhijizwng selfie lanw thanganwi bungbai:  
 Wow! Mr. Gandhi  
 Nwngnao dongsolid six pack  
 Nwng gymao regular thangwmwdang  
 Nongablakhi be bwiswaobw  
 385 km Dandi march khalamnw hagoumwn

(*Dinwi Gandhi Jayantini mwntham selfie saogari*)

[The young student of college went to take a selfie with Gandhiji and said: Wow! Mr. Gandhiji, you have a solid six-pack. You probably went to the gym regularly; otherwise, how could you do the 385 km Dandi March even at this age?]

The poem *Sabarimala-1* reimagine sacred space and symbolise the dismantling of ancient gender barriers. By focusing on the 18 steps, the writer uses a physical ascent to represent the spiritual and social elevation of women who have been historically excluded. The closed door serves as a central symbol for the man-made laws and blind beliefs that attempt to block a soul's access to the divine. When the poet asks who is entitled to open or shut these doors, it represents a challenge to the priestly authority that uses the natural process of menstruation as a tool for suppression. Carrying the *Irumudi* on their heads is showing they are spiritually equal and ready for the journey just like any male worshipper. By using the story of a demon turning into a goddess, the writer shows that it is possible to turn shame or badness into sacred power.

Beo nathai athwnni bathra thanw haya  
 Sibiraini mwnthaikhou raobw raoniphraibw  
 Sekhonw haya  
 Bikhainw si sunai bwiswni aizwphwr  
 Thu thangni Sabarimalayao gaza gwmza  
 Khorao phujani Irumudi ruzunnanwi  
 Thu gakhwhwini mwnzidain siri  
 Thu khalamhwini iswr Ayyappankhou  
 Arw lwgwao mwdaizw Maalikapurathamkhou  
 Thu sakkhi zani solobathani  
 Raikhosiniphrai mwdaizw zanaini  
 Thu siphaidini aizwni sayao zabsinna hwnai  
 Hama dai phwdw arw mung sunai  
 Thu biswrni bisainaikhou ukhrangni  
 Thu sekhona lanai zwngni mwnthaikhou sadini

(*Sabarimala-1*)

[Gender cannot be a factor in this; no one can snatch the right of worship from anyone. Therefore, all women of menstruation age, let us go to Sabarimala in

a group with the puja Irumudi on our heads. Let us climb the eighteen steps and worship Lord Ayyappa and Goddess Malikapurathamma. Let us witness the story of a demoness becoming a goddess and break the bad faults and stains put on women. Let us uproot their conspiracies and snatch back our rights.]

In *Sabarimala-2*, the author employs the biological reality of the female body to deconstruct the illusory facade of religious purity, transforming a source of societal shame into a symbol of cosmic necessity. The red blood of menstruation is reclaimed as a sacred horizon for creation, symbolising the natural washing of the womb that allows life to begin. The poet shows that traditions are how often used as symbols of oppression by pointing out how hypocritical it is for men to worship goddesses like *Durga* and *Kali* while ignoring living women. The poem goes on to discuss the seed symbol, saying that without women's red blood, there would be no way for humans to move forward. The work challenges the argument of exclusion, demonstrating that the woman's role in *Swrzi* (Creation) is more fundamental than the man-made rituals of the *Irumudi*. By refusing to change their gender or identity to fit the blind beliefs of the establishment, the women symbolise an uncompromising demand for absolute equality.

Biswrni swrba bungwne  
 Aizwphra swrzini musukha nonga  
 Biswrni swrba zwgarnw hagwnne  
 Swrzini swithwkhau  
 Aba bungnw hagwnne  
 Zwlwi phehernaya mithingayari bikhangthi nonga  
 ...  
 Bikhainw zwng gwrwbw gwrbwao  
 Phosongnanwi lagwn baibrus Sabarimala  
 Ma iswr Ayyappanlo  
 Sothobphwithwng gaswi iswr arw mwdai

(*Sabarimala-2*)

[Can anyone from them will tell that women are not the idols of creation? Can anyone repudiate the truth of creation or say that continuing the generation is not the law of nature? ...Therefore, we will establish many Sabarimalas within our hearts, let not only Lord Ayyappa come; let all the gods and deities come.]

Anju uses the true story of a tigress to symbolise the violent friction between expanding human civilisations and a shrinking natural world. The story of Tigress T1, popularly known as Avni, is one of India's most controversial wildlife sagas, centring on a massive hunt in the *Yavatmal* district of *Maharashtra*. She represents the sacrificial mother who is forced into evil by circumstances beyond her control. While humans labelled her a man-eater (*Narkhadak*), the poet uses

her as a symbol of the double standards of human justice, where a tiger is shot for hunting to survive while humans commit crimes and walk free. Anju uses the tigress's physical fate to show how people who defy human laws are silenced. These symbols turn a headline into a lesson about right and wrong. The Jungle as a shrinking home represents losing your sense of self and safety. The Orphaned cubs show how violence has ruined the future. Firecrackers and dancing are the celebrations of the villagers, and they symbolise the insensitivity of civilisation. It contrasts sharply with the silent grief of the animal world, where no Michil or procession or *Andolan* protest is held. The human meat taste symbol is a scary sign of how violence keeps happening. The author wonders if people are different, suggesting that once a system human or animal receives a taste of blood or power, it becomes addicted. However, only the animal is punished with death. The symbolism of the bullet versus the bail from jail signifies a ruthless and final form of justice, which is never applied equally. While the tigress is killed instantly, thousands of cases involving human criminals symbolise a leaky and corrupt justice system that protects itself through legal delays. Avni's death symbolises the mercilessness of humanity, which claims to be civilised but celebrates the death of a mother defending her territory. Anju argues that the concept of humanity is inherently selfish, created by people for their benefit, and does not accommodate the voice of nature.

Mansi butharnanwi zinahari khalamnanwi  
 Gotho aba aizw langkharnanwi  
 Aba dangabazi zahwnanwi mansi buthargraphwrha  
 Nathai saza zaya, zaminao goyw

...

Arwibadi mwnw  
 Subungthini gwnangthiya mansiphwrnaolo khathiyw khwma  
 Bikhainw gaoni beraithingra Yavatmalni hagrayerao  
 Gaotharzeyw Avniya ona khana  
 Mansi harini nasoinayao bebadinw  
 Narkhadokao mohor swlailangw Avnimwnha

(*Avniya thwibai*)

[Those who kills, rapes, or abducts children and women, or those who cause riots and conflicts to get people killed, are not punished; they get out on bail. It feels as if the need for humanity is only applied to humans. This is why Avni was killed mercilessly in her own jurisdiction in the Yavatmal jungle. Due to the ignorance of the human race, many like Avni are turned into Narkhadak or man-eaters.]

In the poem *Gwthang, Guma Goyong arw...*, the author uses the grasshopper as a metaphor for how greed can ruin things. The *Gwthang*, meaning greenery which carries life, symbolises life and the heartbeat of the Earth; the transition of

a small insect into a *Danav* (demon) serves as a warning about the consequences of overconsumption. She draws a direct parallel between the natural world and human society to show that both can become parasitic when they lose balance. When the grasshoppers gather, they perform the *Saradu* (funeral rite) of the greenery, representing how a small thing becomes a terrifying force when it multiplies without control. The *Dainanwzwr* (evil eye) of Man is a powerful symbol for human greed. Just as grasshoppers eat the leaves, the evil eye of human progress eats the jungle, symbolising a hunger that does not know when to stop. The use of the human body as a metaphor for the sick environment by saying that its chest, heart, and lungs are on fire or sick. It implies that the Earth is a living entity presently enduring a significant fever induced by human actions. The pandemic/disaster is, hence, sent by the gods for destruction time after time. They represent a violent form of ecological balance intended to cure a sick world by removing the virus of human arrogance. Anju asks a difficult question: if we kill the grasshopper for being an enemy of the crops, what punishment should be given to the demon, the human race?

Guma goyongni phalwa zerao zirayw  
 Beonw gwthangni saradu zayw  
 Mansini daina nwzwra zerao gwglwiyw  
 Beonw gwthang orona zwbsranglangw  
 Mablaba sanphalangw  
 Guma goyong arw mansini gezerao  
 Mathw pharag dongna...?  
 ...  
 Bikhainw som som nuwathari swrba gosaiya  
 Hogarhorw nama mansini gezerao  
 Plague, markhi, zibsa arw baidi aphwd  
 Abhawani somanthaikhou rwikha khalamnw  
 Gws gws lwmzanai buhumni zobrakhou swkhanw

(*Gwthang, Guma Goyong Arw...*)

[Wherever group of grasshoppers sits, the funeral of greenery happens. Wherever the greedy eyes of human falls, the green jungle ends. Sometimes I think, what difference is there between grasshoppers and human? ...Therefore, from time to time, a formless God sends plagues, epidemics, and viruses to fix the sickness of this very sick world.]

The poem *Hambura Daini Nongamwn*, Anju used the witch label as a strong symbol for how people who are on the edges of society are often blamed for things and violently rejected. By redefining *Hambura*'s hunger for knowledge and her connection to herbal medicine as signs of evil, the village creates a shield to hide its own *evil heart* and its failure to care for the weak. The killed

and mutilated body floating in the river symbolises the total fragmentation of human morality. The woman's physical appearance, described as thin and rigid, becomes a living map of lifelong neglect and unearned suffering of *Hambur*. Furthermore, the silence of the witnesses serves as a symbol for the paralysis of justice, showing how fear of legal systems allows a collective crime to remain unpunished.

Hambura daini nongamwn  
 Dainamwn bini sibilu gsw  
 Hambura daini nongamwn  
 Dainamwn bini giyanni gangnai  
 Hambura daini nongamwn  
 Dainamwn bini mithinga mwzang mwnnai  
 Hambura daini nongamwn  
 Dainamwn bini thangnanwi thanaini zuzinai  
 ...  
 Dinwi phungao  
 Laokhar gotho sase  
 Hawasi dwisayao gwzaonanwi thanai nudwng  
 Hamburni dankhlab sukhlab soho

(*Hambura Daini Nongamwn*)

[Hambur was not a witch; her service was, Hambur was not a witch but her thirst for knowledge was, Hambur was not a witch; her love for nature was witch. Hambur was not a witch; her struggle and fight to stay alive was... Just this morning, a cowherd boy saw a corpse floating in the Hawasi river, The mutilated body of Hambur, covered in cuts in all directions.]

The poem *Luwar*[leech] uses a parasitic insect as a powerful symbol of how people are used, and it ends by saying that the real parasites are in the halls of political power. By describing the leech's *soft trunk* and its ability to smell blood even while sleeping, the writer illustrates how corrupt leaders behave during elections: they act greedily yet lack integrity. The poet starts by killing the bug with salt, which is a basic human desire for revenge against those who cause us *itching* or pain. But then he changes her mind and shows how honest the leech is compared to people. Unlike the human *parasites* who steal an entire community's resources and *vomit poison* to the social system, the leech acts out of simple biological necessity without breaking the *rules of the heart*. Ultimately, the transformation of the leech into medicine for some diseases symbolises the complex truth that even the most hated creatures have a purpose in God's creation, highlighting the hypocrisy of a human race that destroys everything, and practicing far more destructive forms of bloodsucking for profit.

Mwsa-lokhra, mwi-mwider, sigun-sila, daobo bwrai  
 Arw mwkhra sikhirphwrnilo nonga  
 Khwnasongou ang luwarni angw bibungthi  
 Bobe sainasaliyao lwgw mwngwn mwnthiya nathai  
 Zathwse mansi garama phederwi phederwi bibungthi lakhinai  
 Bisaikhothini hal zangkhayao gaozwn gao hadri sarlanai  
 Gubunni thwi swbnanwi gegang udwi phedernai arw  
 Raizwni phungkha seglabgra arw  
 Gaoni thakhailo dwnthumagraphwrnikhrui  
 Luwar hariya zanangou beseba gwzousinao  
 Arwtho  
 Luwara makhasa beramnibw muli!

(Luwar)

[I would not only listen to the speeches of the tiger, leopard, deer, elephant, vulture, kite, crane, monkey, and butterfly, but also the speech of the leech. However, I do not know at which stage I can meet them. The leech is far better than those people who give throat-tearing speeches in the elections, throwing dirt at each other, sucking others' blood to grow their own bellies, and snatching people's resources. On contrary, leech is even a medicine for some diseases.]

#### 1.4 Conclusion

Symbolism in Anju's poetry uses natural elements like rivers, trees, water, light, darkness, moonlight Birds, Animals, Colours, to transform individual pain into a collective cry for justice and peace for the Bodo people. Theselfies from three different generations is showing how a single leader like Mahatma Gandhi becomes a raw human to a child or a fitness icon to a young man while remaining a moral compass for the elderly. Cows grazing in the fields represent a restless human spirit that does the same things over and over again without ever feeling truly satisfied. The traditional waistband and the specific names of survivors turn personal trauma into a powerful force that protects human dignity from systemic cruelty. Memory is still a seed in her poetry. Anju shows that every loss has quiet resistance and that every broken bridge is a path that needs to be rebuilt for the future by using these different symbols.

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# **Beliefs and Practices of Tiwa Community of North East India and the Influencing Factors: An Overview**

**Amrita Mishra<sup>1</sup>, Sujay Kumar Mandal<sup>2</sup>**

## **Abstract**

The Tiwa people, previously referred as ‘the Lalung’, is an indigenous ethnic group that is mostly located in the Indian state of Meghalaya and Assam. They share linguistic and cultural connection with other Tibeto-Burman and Austro-Asiatic communities. Mythologically, they find their root back to Hindu dominant mythology. It is said that Lord Shiva created ‘*Lungla Mahadeo*’. He, with *Jayanti Devi* (refers back to Devi Durga) gave birth to three daughters. The ‘*Lalung*’ people were originated from the youngest daughter.

The Tiwas follow a religion which is an amalgamation of animism and Hinduism. There are two major socioeconomic and cultural groups within the community. Tiwas, who live in the hills are matrilineal and speak Tibeto-Burman language. On the other hand, the plain dweller Tiwas are Assamese speaker and mainly patrilineal. The Tiwas of the hill area adhere to their traditional religion, while the plain dwellers are primarily Hindu. Despite a growing number of conversions since 1950, their religion centers on the natural forces. Both of them claim their historical ties to the principality of Gobha, which has been cited in the Buranjis since the early 1700s as an important hub for trade between the kingdoms of Ahom and Jaintia. The Tiwa’s deep reverence for the natural world and its surroundings is emphasized by their beliefs and rituals. In order to worship these natural spirits and ask for the blessing for a plentiful of crop, protection from natural disasters and general wellbeing, they perform rituals and ceremonies. This

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paper will tend to discover their authentic traditional beliefs, customs and rituals that are mostly religion centric. It will also focus on how far Sanatani philosophy and principles have impacted those rituals.

**Key words:** Tiwa, Lulang, Religion, Rituals, Beliefs, Practices, Sanatani, Philosophy.

## Introduction

The Lalungs, another name for the Tiwa community, are an indigenous ethnic group that lives in areas of Meghalaya and Assam. They have strong ties to other hill tribes in Northeast India and are said to have originated from Tibeto-Burman ancestry. While the Assamese word “*Lalung*” implies “migration” or “coming back,” the name “Tiwa” is thought to come from the Tiw, which means “the people who were lifted from below”, symbolizes their mythological migration. Tiwas have different cultural expressions and are separated into Plains Tiwas and Hill Tiwas. Whereas the Plains Tiwas are more integrated into Assamese society, the Hill Tiwas maintain their traditional practices, dialect, and clan-based social systems. Their main livelihood is agriculture, and they are well-known for colorful celebrations like the *Jonbeel Mela*, which represent barter trading and social bonds. The Tiwa community maintains a distinctive cultural identity while fostering peaceful coexistence with nearby communities because to its rich oral traditions, folk dances, and rituals. This paper will tend to discover their authentic traditional beliefs, customs and rituals that are mostly religion centric. It will also focus on how far the principles Sanatani philosophy, mostly of Srimanta Shankaradeva have impacted those rituals.

## Review of Literature

The paper “**The Tiwa Community of assam: A historical and Cultural Study**”(Doloi, Timung & Borodoloi:2024) has discussed in details the cultural practices of Tiwa tribe along with their demographic characteristics. Their incorporation and unity have also been studied. This paper shows how Tiwa community’s socio-cultural activities depend on and change according to their residence on hill and plain areas. Also, the means they have accepted in order to preserve their language and culture has also been under inspection. Prasenjit Paul in his paper “**Tiwa Culture and Education**”(Paul:2020) mentions Pha Poroi who contributed in building the Tiwa society. The basic informations about Tiwa community’s settlement and habitation have been given in this paper. Traditions of matrilineal Tiwa society have been discussed. “**Shankaradeva and the Tribals of North-East India**”(Datta:1998) discusses the brotherhood that Shankaradeva had introduced to the Tiwa society. How he kept his religion simple and less rigorous and how he included everyone beyond caste and creed has been discussed. The socio-cultural transformation of Assam that was

pioneered by Shankaradeva has been discussed in another paper named **“The Role of Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankaradeva in Shaping the Culture of Assam: An Analysis”**(Das:2022). Paper like **“Government Initiatives and their Implications on the Tiwa Tribe of Assam: A Sociological Study”**(Kakati:2024) depicts the initiatives that the government has taken for Tiwa community’s betterment.

### **Religious Beliefs of North-Eastern Tribes: An Overview**

Numerous tribes, including the Nagas, Mizos, Khasis, Garos, Bodos, Tiwas, Dimasas, and others, call northeastern India home. While each has its own customs, they all share some religious characteristics. Their religious life has historically been based on reverence for nature, ancestor worship, and animism. Many tribes think that animals, rivers, hills, and woods are all home to spirits. These spirits, which have an impact on community wellbeing, health, and harvest, are viewed as both good and bad. To please them, sacrifices, offerings, and rituals are carried out. Tribal spirituality places a high value on ancestors. It is said that the dead lead and guard the living. Ancestors are frequently honored with memorial stones, sacrifices, and ceremonial feasts. Although many tribes practice polytheism, others, like the Mizos’ *Pathian*, the Khasis’ *U Basa*, and the Bodos’ *Bathou*, also believe in a Supreme Being or Creator. The life cycle and agriculture are intimately related to rituals. Harvest celebrations that include group feasting, music, and dance include *Nongkrem Dance* (Khasi), *Wangala* (Garo), and *Bihu* (Assamese). Offerings, rice beer, and animal sacrifice are typical. A key function of religious experts like priests, Shamans, or Ojhas is to act as a mediator between the spirit world and people. Over time, numerous tribes were influenced by Christianity (among the Nagas, Mizos, Khasis, and Garos) and Hinduism (particularly in Assam, Tripura, and among the Bodos, Tiwas, and Dimasas). Although the official religion was altered by conversions, many indigenous customs and beliefs still exist today in different forms. Groves, hills, and caverns are frequently used as places of worshipping. For example, the Karbis and Tiwas offer sacrifices on hilltops and riverbanks, while the Khasis honor sacred woods that have been conserved for religious ceremonies.

### **Religious Beliefs of Tiwa Community**

An indigenous tribal group from the hill and plain areas of Assam, the Tiwa society has a unique religious life that is firmly anchored in syncretism customs, nature worship, and reverence for ancestors. The sun, moon, rivers, forests, and other natural deities are important parts of the Tiwas’ spiritual worldview, which is based on animistic beliefs. They also honor local spirits and ancestors, who are said to have an impact on community well-being, harvest, and health. To placate these gods and spirits, ritual experts—referred to as Ojhas or priests—

perform sacrifices and rites, frequently including offerings of rice beer, poultry, or animals.

Hinduism has also influenced the Tiwas over time, particularly as a result of interactions with the nearby Assamese culture and Srimanta Shankaradeva's Neo-Vaishnavite movement. While preserving their own customs, many Tiwas take part in Hindu holidays like Janmashtami and Durga Puja. A combination of ancient animism, agricultural rituals, and more general Assamese religious traditions can be seen in their major festivals, including Wanshuwa and *Jonbeel Mela*. As a result, the Tiwa community's religious life is marked by the peaceful coexistence of Hindu influences and indigenous beliefs, demonstrating their capacity to adapt culturally while maintaining tribal identity.

### **An Overview of Sanatani Philosophy**

One of the oldest philosophical and spiritual traditions in the world is Sanatani philosophy, which is frequently linked to Sanatana Dharma. Sanatana means "eternal," while Dharma denotes the cosmic order, moral obligation, and virtuous lifestyle. Fundamentally, Sanatani philosophy holds that Brahman, the ultimate reality, is an eternal truth that governs and connects the universe. It is thought that humans have an inner self, or Atman, which is essentially linked to Brahman. Moksha, or freedom from the cycle of birth and death, is the ultimate goal of life, which is viewed as a journey of spiritual development through karma (activities and their consequences), dharma (responsibility and ethical conduct), and rebirth. The philosophy embraces various routes to truth, such as devotion (bhakti), knowledge (jnana), disciplined action (karma yoga), and meditation (dhyana), rather than relying on a single prophet or strict doctrine. Compassion, self-control, reverence for the natural world, honesty, non-violence (ahimsa), and harmony among all creatures are examples of core values. Sacred texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, and Bhagavad Gita explain these ideas through philosophy, ethics, and spiritual dialogue. Sanatani thought has historically adapted to different cultures and communities across the Indian subcontinent while retaining its emphasis on spiritual inquiry, moral living, and the search for universal truth.

### **Influence of Srimanta Shankaradeva**

The famous saint, reformer, and cultural symbol of Assam, Srimanta Shankaradeva (1449– 1568), had a huge impact on the region's religious life. By promoting *Ekasarana Dharma*, a monotheistic religion based on devotion (*bhakti*) to Lord Krishna, he was the forerunner of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam. Shankaradeva promoted morality, devotion, and simplicity via prayer, singing, and volunteer work, rejecting complex rituals, caste divisions, and idol worship. His teachings broke down strict social systems and promoted unity among Assamese ethnic groupings. Through the

establishment of *Namghar* (prayer halls) and *Satras* (monastic institutions), which developed into centers of social, cultural, and religious activity, Shankaradeva institutionalized his beliefs. In addition to disseminating the spiritual message, these organizations promoted group involvement and fostered a sense of fraternity and equality. He made religion accessible to the general public in their native tongue by translating texts like the Bhagavata Purana, creating devotional songs (*Borgeet*), and creating dramas (*Ankiya Naat*). His reformist beliefs sparked a moral lifestyle devoid of complicated rituals, animal sacrifice, and superstitions. Rather, he advocated for social peace, discipline, and compassion. The unique identity of Assamese culture, which is firmly anchored in Vaishnavism, was created via the incorporation of art, literature, dance, and music into religious practice. Srimanta Shankaradeva has therefore had an incalculable impact on Assamese religious life. He not only transformed spirituality but also established the groundwork for a unified Assamese community united by a common faith, morals, and sense of cultural pride by fusing devotion with creative cultural expression.

### **Factors that have influenced their cultural practices**

Through a protracted period of interaction with many cultural, social, and historical elements, the Tiwa people of Assam have developed its religious rites and ceremonies. The Tiwas, a community that lives on hills and plains, have preserved their own religion while also assimilating aspects of other social and religious customs. A multi-layered religious identity that reflects both the persistence of ancient customs and adaptation to shifting circumstances is the outcome of this. The Tiwa people's strong bond with nature is one of the first sources of impact on their religion. Like other Northeast Indian tribes, the Tiwas have long engaged in animism. Their worship of local deities, ancestral spirits, and natural forces—that were thought to provide fertility, health, and protection from disasters—was at the heart of their rituals. Most of their festivals and customs, like the well-known Jonbeel Mela, were influenced by agricultural cycles, and communal feasts and deity worship were essential components. Their religious life is still based on this animistic worldview. However, there have been notable changes brought about by historical interaction with nearby villages.

### **Influence of Shankaradeva on Tiwa community's religious Practices**

The Tiwas were exposed to Hinduism, specifically Vaishnavism, which Srimanta Shankaradeva brought to Assam through contact with the Assamese plains. Hindu gods like Durga, Shiva, and Krishna were embraced by many Tiwas and integrated into their religious practices. Though they were frequently combined with native customs, rituals including idol worship, the usage of Brahmin priests in certain rites, and the celebration of Hindu holidays became widespread over time. For example, in many Tiwa homes, worship of

Hindu gods is still combined with sacrifices to ancestor spirits. Their actions were also impacted by social and political considerations. Crucial roles in ceremonial observances were played by the traditional village council (*Loro*) and traditional priestly positions like *Loro* and *Misia*. However, the influence of these organizations waned as state administration and contemporary governance grew, changing the ritual framework. The size and format of community festivals have also been impacted by economic shifts and market system integration. More recently, the Tiwa religious world has also been altered by urbanization, education, and exposure to Christianity. While some Tiwas abandoned their traditional rituals after becoming Christians, others still balance their modern lifestyles with their ancestors' traditions. Instead of performing rituals with the same fervor as previous generations, younger generations frequently reinterpret them figuratively. The Tiwa religious rituals are essentially a dynamic process influenced by Hinduism, indigenous animism, sociopolitical development, and contemporary cultural exchanges. The community's ability to maintain identity while adjusting to larger changes is demonstrated by the fact that many traditional rites have been modified in both form and meaning.

The thought and teachings of Srimanta Shankaradeva, the Vaishnavite saint and reformer who lived in the 15th and 16th centuries, have had a profound influence on the religious life of the Tiwa people in Assam. The Tiwas traditionally practiced animism, worshiping local deities, ancestral spirits, and natural forces associated with agriculture and fertility. Village priests frequently performed the sacrifices and offerings that were part of their rites. However, their theological perspective changed significantly as Neo-Vaishnavism, led by Shankaradeva, expanded. Shankaradeva gave the Tiwas an alternative to polytheistic and animistic worship by emphasizing *bhakti* (devotion) towards a single supreme god, perhaps Vishnu or Krishna. The Tiwa community was drawn to his rejection of animal sacrifice and support of straightforward devotional activities like *bhaona* (religious theater) and *naam-kirtan* (congregational chanting). These were collective, approachable acts that didn't require priestly mediation or complex procedures. A number of Tiwas gradually converted to Vaishnavism, and village *namghars*, or prayer houses, developed into hubs of social and religious activity. Due to this impact, many indigenous ceremonies were either redefined or changed, and Hindu deities like Krishna and Rama were included into Tiwa religious practice. The society also found resonance in the ideas of equality and moral living, which helped to break down strict ritual barriers. The Tiwas, however, kept elements of their native customs while embracing Vaishnavism, combining them into a distinctive syncretic worship style. As a result, Srimanta Shankaradeva's ideology allowed for cultural continuity while transforming the Tiwa religious landscape toward devotional monotheism, non-violence, and community-based worship.

## Conclusion

Srimanta Shankaradev's impact on the Tiwa community's religious customs is indicative of a significant shift in their spiritual and cultural lives. Shankaradev reshaped the Tiwas' ritual practices and social relations while assisting them in moving toward a more structured style of worship that was focused on dedication, simplicity, and moral discipline through the introduction of neo-Vaishnavism. In addition to enriching their religious expression, the integration of *naam-kirtan*, *bhaona*, and *satra* traditions into Tiwa culture gave them a common spiritual identity that linked them to the larger Assamese cultural ethos. The Tiwas, however, preserved some of their native beliefs, resulting in a distinctive fusion of Vaishnavite philosophy and ancient tribal practices. Among the Tiwas, Shankaradev's legacy serves as an illustration of communal integration, religious reform, and cultural negotiation.

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# Lyrical Lamentation Song: A Comparative Analysis of Assamese Zari with Islamic Elegiac Poems or Songs

**Rakibur Rohman**

## **Abstract**

Lamentation songs are found in many religions that express deep sorrow and grief over suffering and loss. The main purpose of composition of lyrical lament is to express grief as well as to honor the deceased. Although Islam prohibits music but Shi'te (Shias) has lament songs. Tradition of mourning and remembrance of the deceased, mainly martyrs of Karbala through poetic form have been prevalent among some Muslims. Martyrdom of Imam Husayn gets expressed in different forms in different parts of the world. In South Asian states short lyrical expression of the tragic Karbala stories get expressed in the form of *Marsiya* and *Nauha*, while verse narratives in the form of *Zari* and *Jarigan*. Thematically *Marsiya*, *Nauha*, *Soaz*, *Ritha*, *Assamese Zari* and *Jarigans* are connected.

**Keywords:** *Zari*, *Assamese Zari*, Lyrical lamentation, Elegy, Sufi Elegy, Songs

## **Introduction**

Lamentation or elegiac songs are prevalent among a specific sect of Muslim, i.e., Shias and the followers of Sufism all over the world. Elegy is a poem or lyrical song of expression of grief, mourning on death of a family member or friend or neighbor. Expression of grief or sorrow in poetic style has been prevalent from time immemorial. It is believed that when Prophet Adam lost his son Abel, he sang a few couplets in elegiac style in grief (Ayyildiz, 2023). Elegy is an essential element of traditional *qasida*, which has been a highly regarded poetry genre.

The format of elegies may vary culture to culture but their underlying theme and content remain the same. In ancient Arabic poetry, there are various elegiac *qasidas* that were composed by individuals to express their grief or lamentation over loss of an individual or an object. This genre transformed from free verse to a structured verse pattern (Ayyildiz, 2023). Elegiac poems highlight the good and positive qualities of the deceased or to honor the deceased, express poet's emotional attachment with the deceased and it acts as a means of consolation. Although Islam prohibits music but Shi'te (Shias) has funeral songs. Elegy songs are found in various traditions that are associated with mourning and remembrance of the deceased and also stories of the Karbala tragedy, which has been prevalent among some Muslims across the world, mainly the Shia sect.

In the Abbasid period poets considered whom they desired to praise or lament in order to describe them with qualities that fit or matched them. Abdullah ibn Mu'utazzu composed an elegy to lament Abdullah ibn Sulaiman bn Wahab el-Katibi, translation goes like

*The death has taken the person  
Whom his opinions are always right  
Who always speaks the truth  
Who always speak the truth  
Who always measures every thing  
With the correct measurement*  
(Sani & Sokoto, 2015)

### **Objective Of The Study**

- To study Assamese Zari as elegy or lamentation song.
- To find out similarities of Assamese Zari with Islamic elegiac poems or songs.

### **Research Methods**

Assamese Zari songs were prevalent in Assam before Sufi saint Azan Peer came to Assam in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as mentioned by various scholars. A comparative analysis framework is employed to find the similarities of Assamese Zari to that of Arabic or other Sufi elegiac poetry as well as songs. The researcher of this paper, using the secondary research method, meticulously studied various texts related to lamentation songs or poems prominent in the Islamic world, mainly among Shia Muslims and Sufis or Sufi believers.

### **Review of Literature**

Music and dance are considered prohibited in Islam. But some scholars argue that music that creates a sense of devotion, it brings people closer to the divine, and a devotional context containing virtuous lyrics can be acceptable.

Music such as the call to prayer, Qira'at (recitation of the holy Quran), and religious chant or *dhikr* are considered legitimate and is permissible. According to the Quran and Hadith, Prophet Dawud used to recite various verses of the Zaboor (divine book revealed upon him) in his melodious voice. Prophet Idris and Prophet Sulaiman in their times used to perform *dhikr* regularly. Whereas music that can lead a person to the extent where they neglect prayers and religious obligations and which can distract them from performing their religious duties or promote a heedless attitude towards the divine is unacceptable in Islam. Music can be considered legitimate if it does not distract people from their religious path and composed for a religious or spiritual context. *Dhikr* performance has evolved over the period of times, and various Sufi *tariqas* perform it in different and modified ways. Gradually, a new form of musical genre emerged in Islamic society (for instance, Arab) to express enduring pain and the sorrow of losing a dear one. Expression of pain and grief over losing an individual transformed into a lyrical expression, the structure of a poem, which was used as a panegyric speech or text and then emerged as a musical or rhythmic lamentation. Such a concept has been discussed in an article titled "The Lamentation Poetry and its Significance in the Şadr al-Islām Period" authored by Esat Ayyildiz that deals with the emergence of lamentation song or music in the early Islamic era. The study explores the themes and content covered in composing Ritha poems and also examines the impact of the social, political, historical and cultural context of the early Islamic era on the emergence and evolution of such a genre. Mostly ancient Arabic poetry was elegiac *qasidas* that serve as a way of expressing grief over the deceased. Another article has been studied to understand the elegy poetry prevalent in the Islamic state is 'Elegy in Classical and Modern Arabic Poetry: Contextual Overview' jointly written by Dr. Abdul Kadir Sani and Dr. Nasiru Ahmad Sokoto. It discusses the changes in content of elegiac poetry in different periods of Islamic history. It states that elegy contains lament over the deceased, similar to eulogy text or speech in the pre-Islamic era. Also, elegy of that era contains praising the deceased and expresses his good deeds. In the Ummayad period, elegy contains praising people with good character that reflects teachings of Islam. Again, praising the deceased with good qualities that tally with their political and social position in the Abbasid period; and contains philosophical expressions that describe the nature of life and death despite individual praising of the deceased in the modern period of elegiac poetry.

Musical expression has become a part of the Sufi tradition to preach the messages of Islam. An article focusing on the influence of folk tradition on folk music has been studied to understand different aspects relevant to the present research. Soumitra Kumar Sinha in his work 'Exploring Little Tradition of Folk Islam in Bengal: A Study of Marefati Folk Songs' investigates how the syncretistic tradition of Islam manifests in Bengal's Sufi songs. Here, the writer focuses on Bengali Muslims' contribution to Bengali folk songs and Sufi devotional songs

like Merefati and Murshidi. Diversity in culture and tradition in Indian society leads to assimilation and growth of syncretistic culture in many regions. Even Sufism in India has emerged as an admixture of mystical philosophy, which is expressed in Sufi devotional songs. The influence of local traditions, customs, non-Aryan elements, Buddhist elements and elements of Sufism can be seen in Sufi devotional songs evolved and prevalent in Bengal. This can also be seen in the case of Assam where Assamese culture and tradition are reflected in Sufi devotional songs.

Elegy has been popular in Islamic regions since pre-Islamic period, and it is known by several names based on varied languages and specific contexts. Marisiya is a Persian-Urdu elegiac poetry composed to lament over the death of a dear one and it later associated with the martyrs of the Karbala battle. Marsiyas on the martyrdom of Imam Hussain and his companions at Karbala came to be known by varying terms in different regions. Kashmiri Marsiya is one such kind. An article titled 'Kashmiri Marsiya (Elegy) Manuscripts: The Valuable Sources for the Dissemination, Reconstruction and Safeguarding the History and Culture-II' by Tawfeeq Nazir discusses variance in Marsiyas of different regions. It focuses on identifying as well as preserving Kashmiri Marsiya, which the writer feels are on the verge of extinction.

An article titled 'Music in Mourning Ceremonies among the Ismaili Muslims in Tajik Badakhshan' written by Chorshanbe Goibnazarov deals with the musical way of expressing grief in mourning ceremonies by a sect of Muslims (Ismailis) in a hilly region of Tajikistan. The paper explores how local musical performances of the region have been incorporated into the mourning ceremonies. Basically, funeral ceremonies of all sects of Islam mainly follow general rituals and chant prayers while performing such rituals. Some sects also sing devotional songs. Although such musical performances are not for entertainment but to express sorrow, they act as social as well as cultural patterns in the death ritual. People believe observing such a custom would bring peace to the soul of the deceased and their family and friends.

Allama Shahida Raza Naimi and Allama Hafiz Ather Hussain al-Azhari's work 'Imam Hussain and the Tragedy of Karbala' was studied for understanding the core themes of lament songs prevalent in Muslim societies. This brief study discusses the life, battle, and everything related to Imam Hussain and his companion's martyrdom at the battlefield. 'Muharram and Jarigaan' is an article written by Epsita Halder that explores Jarigaan as a folk genre of Bengal based on martyrdoms of the Battle of Karbala. It represents the elegiac expression of Jarigan, its origin, structure and style of performance, and themes or contents of Jarigan.

'Jarigan: Muslim Epic Songs of Bangladesh' is a book written by Mary Frances Dunham that focuses on the Jarigaan genre popular in Bangladesh and other Benagli language speaking regions, including West Bengal, Barak Valley,

etc. It explains the theme of Jarigaan, its historical elements (origin), genre, its melodic features (compositional forms), content, etc. This book expresses how the literature compositions on themes of Karbala tragic episodes took the performance or staging of this genre. Also, the writer clarifies the difference of Jarigaan from that of other elegiac songs or poems prevalent in the Islamic states. This extensive work helps understand the formation of Assamese Zari narrative songs, a blend of Assamese culture with that of Islamic legend. Further, an article titled 'The Art of the Urdu Marsiya' by C.M. Naim presents the concept, theme, and structure of the Urdu Marsiya of Lucknow. Urdu Marsiya depicts heroic figures of the Arab state by incorporating indigenous socio-cultural values and practices of Lucknow, India. The present researcher has studied Assamese Zaris that depict heroic figures of Arab (Imam Hassan, Imam Hussain, and other martyrs of the Karbala battle) interweaving indigenous socio-cultural practices of medieval Assamese society.

### **Assamese Zari Songs**

Zari is a kind of Assamese lamentation song that popular among the Muslims in Assam. The word Zari was evolved from Persian language (Dunham, 1997). The meaning of this word is lamentation or weeping. It is a verse lyrical text based on the Karbala story composed in Assamese language, which is sung during the month of Muharram. Zaris are considered as songs that are divergent in nature. It contains legends related to Hassan Ibn Ali, Husayn Ibn Ali, and other family members of Prophet Muhammad at Karbala (Hussain, 1984). It also communicates other themes including social setting of Assam. Assamese Zari songs are sung by both Sunni and Shia sect of Muslims.

Assamese Zari songs are performed within a group where a narrator initiates verse of a particular Zari followed by other performers. Performance of Zari includes dance moves where a group standing in a circle and leaning, roaming in circular motion by beating chest, sways to the rhythm of the enunciation (Malik, 1958). There are other similar versions of elegy or lament songs or poems found across the Islamic world. It is sung in memory of Hassan and Husayn and their family at Karbala, their sacrifices. It is believe that Assamese Zari songs have been prevalent in Assam way before Sufi saint Azan Peer came to Assam in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Malik, 1958). But after his arrival it became popular across the state. Many scholars accept the fact that Assamese Zari was evolved from Bengali Jarigan, later Azan Peer and a few other Sufi saints composed some of Assamese Zaris.

The mourning culture that started in 11<sup>th</sup> century in Iran is known as *Azadari* from where Zari practice originated (Halder). It is a practice or ritual of mourning and commemorating martyrdoms of Karbala tragedy during the month of Muharram. This cult of mourning traversing through places, it might assume the name of Jarigan in Bengal (east and west) and as Zari in Assam.

A Zari collected by Syed Abdul Malik, transliteration of a few lines goes like-

*Karbalar Ron  
Senehor Syed, Jujor Sahid, Haire Hai!  
Hasen Husayn dubhai,  
Kandise Binai,  
Arosot lagil gulmal.  
Hasene pindhibo  
pagobor jama;  
Husayne pindhibo lal.*  
(Malik, 1958)

### **Ritha Poetry**

Poems of this repertoire were composed during early Islamic periods i.e. Sadr al-Islam. Origin of elegies can be traced back to *ritha* poetry. Prophet Muhammad delivered a discourse similar to *ritha* style upon the death of his son Ibrahim (Suleiman, 2021) (Ayyildiz, 2023). *Ritha* poem express grief over the death of a relative, family member, or heroic figure killed in a battle. In view of Prophet's effort to establish Islamic principles as well as to secure harmony among people, poets include Islamic contents in *ritha* poems. In Pre-Islamic era, themes of *ritha* poetry include lamenting the deceased with tears, profound sorrow for their loss and praising their good qualities in the world. *Ritha* may incorporate other themes like Tahrid i.e. stimulation of vengeance (Rithā', 2024). A few lines of *ritha* by poet al-Khansa dedicating her brother Sakhr who was killed in tribal war, its English translation goes like,

*I was sleepless and I passed the night  
Keeping vigil, as if my eyes had been anointed with pus,  
For I had heard- and it was not news to rejoice me- one making a report,  
who had come repeating intelligence  
Saying, 'Sakhr is dwelling there in a tomb,  
struck to the ground beside the grave,  
between certain stones.'*  
(Rithā', 2024)

### **Marsiya**

It is rooted to Arabic-Persian literature (Nazir & Bhat, 2014). The word *Marsiya* or *marthiyya* derived from an Arabic word '*r-th-y*', which means lamentation for a departed soul (Naqvi, 2023). *Marsiyas* are *dirge*, a lament song expresses grief at a funeral having in literary quality. In India it was first appeared in Urdu language in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Naim, 1984). Urdu-Persian *Marsiya* is a poetry composed to lament and commemorate the death of Imam Husayn and

all martyrs at Karbala through recitation. Generally, *Marsiya* is a short narrative verse consisting six lines unit with rhythmic quatrain and rhymed couplets. These were written either in *qasida* form of two-line unit or *musadda* form of four-line unit. Later, *musadda* form becomes the most suitable form of *Marsiya* where each stanza has a distinct unit called ‘bands’ within it i.e. first four lines of stanza have one rhyme scheme, and the remaining two lines referred as ‘tip’ have different rhyme scheme (Naim, 1984).

A Marthiya or *Marsiya* of Mir Babar Ali Anis titled ‘The Battle of Karbala’ having 197 stanzas is in *musadda* form, a few lines of its English translation by David Matthews goes like,

*The sun had run his journey o'er the night;  
Unveiled, the Dawn revealed her glorious face.  
The King who rides the heaven saw her light  
And called his brave companions to their place.  
'The time has come at last; to God give praise;  
Arise! In fitting prayer your voices raise.*  
(“The Battle of Karbala, a Marthiyaa of Anis”)

*Marsiyas* are generally performed at the mourning ceremonies i.e. *majlis* held during Muharram month by *Marsiya-Khwani* or sung by *Marsiya-Soz*. Urdu *Marsiya* has flavor and touch of Indian subcontinent apart from having Arabic and Persian vocabulary (Nazir & Bhat, 2014). It expresses high moral values of the people from the Ahl al-Bayt, heroic skills of Hussain and his companions, and description of battlefield, pain, valour and bereavement. Assamese *Zari* songs are based on similar theme like *Marsiya*. It starts with a prologue or *Chehra* that gives insights into the subject of that particular *Marsiya* following with description of the praise of Allah, Muhammad, or Ali and the Imams (Nazir & Bhat, 2014). Kashmiri *Marsiya* is a blend of Kashmiri and Sanskrit words. Similarly, *Zari* in Assam is a blend of Assamese, Urdu, Arabic and Bengali words.

In Assam, *Marsiya* with Karbala lamentation theme are often confused with *Zari*. But it can be assume as Assamese *Zaris* are Assamese version of Persian-Arabic *Marsiyas* with local flavor or touch based on its subject, structure or pattern. *Marsiyas* are short compositions, not sequential narratives containing five or six stanzas set to melodies whereas *Zaris* are long narrative verses. *Marsiya* is more lyrical, poetic and concise and its oral expression is more personal than Assamese *Zari*. Unlike *Marsiya*, repetition of words is not a feature of *Zari* songs.

### Soaz

It is an elegiac poem composed to honor and commemorate Husayn and his family who martyred in the Karbala battle (Soaz (Poetry)). A *soaz* is a specific part of *Marsiya*, which deals with the emotional and spiritual pain experienced

by the person who mourns. It emphasizes burning of the heart with grief. It is a sub-genre within the long *Marsiya* poem. Each genre consist a rhyming quatrain and couplet on a different rhyme. One example of Soaz from a *Marsiya* composed by Mir Anis is as follows-

*'Hussain jab ke chale baad-e-dopahar ran ko,  
koi na tha ke jo sambhale rakabe tausan ko  
Sakeena pakade khadee theen gaba ke daaman ko  
hussain chupake khade the jhukaye gardan ko'*

### **Nauha**

Nauha or Noha or Nowheh is an elegy or lamentation poetry commemorating the martyrs of Karbala tragedy. It is a part of *Marsiya* similar like soaz but it emphasizes lamentation having musical expression of grief.

Safar-e-Imam Hussain is a *noha* that translates to 'the journey of Imam Hussain' to Karbala.

*Jab Karbala ki simt barha haq ka rehnuma  
kuch agaya khayal jo maan kay mazar ka  
Aya sue baqeeh woh Zahra ka laadla  
Rukhsaar rakh kay sadr-e-lahad par yeh di sada  
Chutta hai ab madina meray dil ko thaam lo  
Ammaa ghareeb betay ka aakhir salam lo.*

(Naqvi, 2023)

Assamese Zari is thematically similar to Nohas as well as Soaz. Zaris like these genres express grief and lament over martyrs of Karbala battle in musical form.

### **Jarigan**

Jarigans are Bengali lamentation songs popular in Barak Valley of Assam, West Bengal and Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, Jarigans are performed by male members of Shia sects to commemorate the death of Imam Husayn. Jarigan are long, expository narratives and it depicts a dire situation and anguish (Dunham, 1997). It exposes information without any repetition of word in order to advance the story, which is similar to Assamese Zari. Jarigan is completely Muharram centric but it also incorporates other themes like social issues, events, etc.

Jarigan were composed in traditional couplet verse versions (Dunham, 1997). Traditionally, Jarigan performance involves one chief singer, the *boyati* who is accompanied by supporting singers called *dohras*, instrumentalist, and musical accompaniments. There can be minimum two or maximum twelve *dohras* in a Jarigan performance depending upon the strength of the group. Assamese Zari songs are also performed by an initiator and his followers. Although several musical instruments are used in Jarigan performance but some groups sing Jarigan by beating their chest in rhythm (Dunham, 1997). Unlike Jarigan, musical

instruments are not use in Assamese Zari performance. A Bengali Jarigan titled 'Kasem-Sokhinar Jari' by Abdul Gani Boyati from Jasimuddin's collection; a few lines are mentioned here-

*At Karbala Hosein, weeping said to Malek Shai (Allah)  
In the present danger, no one but you is (left as) a friend  
As many relatives and followers as I have had  
Each one (of us) has died, without food, without water  
Deprived of water, (our people) in the camp cry, Alas! Alas!  
There is no friend (left) who will fetch water  
Saying this Hosein cried bitterly.  
He began to bathe his breast with the water of his tears.  
Kasem said: uncle, let me speak to you.  
Command me, I will go to fetch water from the bank of the Forat.*

(Dunham, 1997)

## Conclusions

Zari, Marsiya, Soaz, Nuhas, Ritha, and Jarigan are different genres of songs or poems based on similar theme of Karbala story. Marsiya, Jarigan and Zari can be considered as lamentation songs or Muharram songs. Assamese Zari songs are expository in nature like Jarigan but other Islamic lament songs are short narrative songs. Zari composition does not follow a rhyming pattern like other Islamic lament songs. Although a few Zari songs contains other themes but those revolves around Karbala stories. Other Islamic lament songs apart from mourning the Karbala tragedy, also expresses grief or mourning on death of a family member or friend or neighbor and praise their good qualities in the world that is not a feature of Zari song. Like other Islamic lamentation songs discussed above, Zari composition follows the pattern of one prologue followed by main text. No musical instruments are used to perform Zari songs and instead chest beating is practiced during its performance. It is difficult to say whether Islamic theme of Zari developed directly from Middle Eastern sources or whether they came indirectly through Islamic literature of India. From above discussions it can be concluded that Zaris are thematically similar to available Islamic lamentation poems or songs and Karbala stories set around the context of Assam.

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# Coalfields as “Contact Zones”: Language, Migration and Miner Solidarity in Margherita and Ledo

**Kaushik Dutta**

## **Abstract**

This article examines the historical formation of miner solidarity in the Margherita and Ledo coalfields of Upper Assam. Driven by the British Empire’s need for energy, administrators coercively imported a diverse workforce from regions like Chotanagpur, Nepal, and Balochistan. Utilising Pratt’s “contact zones” and Durkheim’s “organic solidarity,” the study argues that shared displacement and perilous underground extraction compelled these disparate groups to forge a unified social identity. Drawing on colonial archives and oral histories, the paper demonstrates how practical interdependence led to a syncretic lingua franca, Manbhoom Sadri, and shared cultural practices. Ultimately, this research challenges prevailing narratives of ethnic fragmentation in Northeast India, highlighting the durable, multi-ethnic alliances that originated in the colonial coalfields and continue to shape contemporary socio-political mobilisations in the region.

**Keywords:** Contact Zones, Assam coalfields, Organic Solidarity, Margherita, Ledo

## **Introduction**

Histories of modern Assam mostly revolve around the expansion of tea plantations across the Brahmaputra Valley, but the region’s coalfields were equally important to colonial industrial development. In the second half of the nineteenth century, coal was the primary energy source for steam navigation, railways, and industrial production, making its extraction highly profitable (Pain,

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2017). Despite the identification of coal deposits in Upper Assam in 1825, the main challenge lay in procuring labour. Local populations, including Nagas, Singphos, and Ahoms, showed limited willingness to engage in hazardous underground wage labour, prompting the colonial administration to import workers from distant regions (Barbora & Phukan, 2022). Consequently, Adivasi labourers from Chotanagpur, Makrani migrants from present-day Iran and Pakistan, Nepalese workers, and Chinese labourers were brought together in the collieries of Margherita and Ledo (Englishman's Overland Mail, 1918; Clow, 1926; Bhattacharjee, 2014). The arrival of such diverse migrant communities transformed the coalfields into multi-ethnic industrial settlements where different linguistic and cultural groups interacted through the necessities of everyday work and social life. Such spaces bear a resemblance to what Mary Louise Pratt terms "contact zones," places of interaction between culturally distinct groups brought together under conditions of asymmetrical power (Pratt, 1992). Within these risky mining environments, survival depended heavily on cooperation and mutual trust, irrespective of linguistic and ethnic boundaries, gradually producing what Émile Durkheim described as organic solidarity, which is a form of social cohesion based on practical interdependence rather than shared ancestry (Durkheim, 1893).

Over time, this interdependence contributed to the emergence of new collective practices, including the development of Manbhoom Sadri as a distinct lingua franca in the vicinity of the mining settlements through shared cultural expressions (K. Bania, personal communication, January 21, 2026). By linking colonial archives, the oral histories of mining descendants in colliery towns, and recent developments in Margherita and Ledo, this study argues that the coalfields of Upper Assam produced a diverse and distinctive society. While much of the historical scholarship on Northeast India emphasises ethnic conflicts, the lived reality of these mining settlements demonstrates how the shared difficulties of underground mining promoted durable, multi-ethnic alliances that continue to persist today.

### **Imperial Infrastructure and the Making of the "Contact Zones"**

Coal mining in Upper Assam began as part of the British Empire's search for reliable energy sources. Coal was required to power steam navigation, which became increasingly important for imperial transportation and trade (Kanda, 2010). These steamers were essential to the functioning of the expanding tea industry in the Brahmaputra Valley. Early attempts to locate coal deposits in the region date back to 1825, when Lt. R. Wilcox discovered coal at Safrai (Mallet, 1876, p. 2). A few years later, during C. A. Bruce's expedition in 1828, approximately 5,000 maunds of coal were quarried. However, the canoes transporting the coal overturned during transit, and the entire shipment was lost (Borah, Sonowal, & Borah, 2023, p. 3585). Such logistical difficulties showed the infrastructural

challenges that limited the early development of coal extraction in the region.

Even though tests in the 1850s suggested that Assam coke was more efficient than English coke (“Assam Coal,” 1850, p. 288), the industrial potential of the resource could not be realised due to the region’s weak transportation network. By the late 1860s, long-distance transport infrastructure remained extremely limited. Contemporary observers described the region’s infrastructure as a “fragmentary road” that “springs from nowhere and leads nowhere” (“Assam and Its Resources,” 1867, p. 818). While distance and transport posed major obstacles, the biggest challenge for the colonial administration was the procurement of labour. As Rana P. Behal observes, the British often framed the problem as a labour shortage when in reality it was a shortage of workers willing to accept the low wages and unsafe conditions offered in colonial industries (Behal, 2014, pp. 28–35). Local communities in Upper Assam, many of whom were self-sufficient landholders, had little incentive to engage in dangerous underground mining work. Like many indigenous populations in other colonial regions after emancipation, they preferred subsistence agriculture to poorly paid industrial labour.

Because locals such as the Nagas resisted incorporation into this emerging mining economy (“The Coal and Mineral Resources of India,” 1868, p. 2), the colonial administration turned to organised labour recruitment. In order to justify the large capital investments required for railway construction and mining infrastructure, the coalfields had to become economically productive, which in turn required a stable and controllable workforce. Similar labour recruitment systems had already been implemented in other colonial economies, such as the use of indentured labour in Fiji’s sugar plantations (Tinker, 1974). In Assam, the colonial state enacted the Labour Districts Emigration Act of 1873, which enabled the recruitment and transportation of workers from distant regions to Assam’s expanding plantation and mining industries (Government of Bengal, 1874, pp. 1–15).

This combination of imperial demand for coal, infrastructural limitations, and resistance from local populations ultimately transformed Margherita and Ledo into what Mary Louise Pratt describes as “contact zones”, which are spaces where culturally distinct groups were brought together under conditions of unequal power. This emerging multi-ethnic landscape was therefore not accidental, but the result of deliberate colonial policies aimed at securing both mineral resources and a cheap labour force.

A decisive step in this process came in 1881 with the establishment of the Assam Railways and Trading Company (AR&T Co.). Working with private capital, the company constructed the Dibru–Sadiya Railway, which connected the Makum coalfields to the Brahmaputra River and improved the transportation of coal (Hilaly, 2007, pp. 45–48). The railways not only enabled the commercial expansion of mining but also created the infrastructural conditions through which

diverse migrant communities would come into continuous contact, laying the foundations for the social and cultural interactions that developed in the coalfield settlements in the decades that followed.

### **Extraction and the Shared Trauma of Migration**

The recruitment method sought economically weak districts. Official inland emigration records from 1877-78 show that the colonial administration extracted labour from regions such as Manbhoom, Lohardugga, and Shahabad, later categorising the workforce into either Contractor's coolies (Class A) or Sirdari coolies (Classes B and C) (Richards, 1878, pp 6-7). However, this labour migration depended on local agrarian conditions. When harvests in the recruiting districts were good, labourers avoided the pressure to emigrate. Driven by a desperation to meet quotas, recruiters resorted to sending physically unfit individuals. This practice resulted in complaints from employers in Assam, who protested the importation of an "inferior type of coolies" suffering from illnesses such as leprosy, insanity, and blindness (General Department, Government of Bengal, 1880, pp 1-2).

The journey to Assam produced shared experiences of hardship. Colonial records describe high death rates during overcrowded river transport, notably among Adivasi migrants from Chotanagpur who encountered cholera along the route (Richards, 1878, pp. 16-17). These conditions meant that many workers reached the coalfields already bound by a shared experience of displacement, illness, and loss. By 1880, colonial officials admitted that recruitment from Chotanagpur had reached its limits, noting that the region had already supplied as much labour as it could spare. As a result, recruiters turned to Bihar, which increased the ethnic diversity of the workforce arriving in Assam (General Department, Government of Bengal, 1879-80 p 3). Labour shortages led recruiters to draw workers from a large geographical area (Varma, 2017, pp. 110-115; Behal, 2014, pp. 68-70; Banerjee, 1999; Hilaly, 2007, pp. 120-125). Therefore, the mining settlements of Margherita and Ledo brought together migrants from multiple regions within and beyond eastern India.

The Assam Railways and Trading Company (ARTC) relied on a coercive and fraudulent labour recruitment system managed by *sirdars* (labour intermediaries). Samita Sen's 2010 study shows that the *sirdars* targeted susceptible tribal and lower-caste groups, misleading them about pay and employment conditions. Railway transport conditions for migrant labourers were equally harsh. Workers were crowded into fourth-class compartments, often 60-70 per carriage and were not allowed to disembark even for basic needs (Mukhopadhyay, 2018, pp. 50-56). These experiences of recruitment, migration, and transit meant that many labourers entered the coalfields already shaped by shared hardship and displacement.

### Archival Silence and Tea-Coal Divide

Colonial records on the coalfields of Upper Assam, such as the *Imperial Gazetteer* (1908), focused largely on production statistics and administrative concerns, often reducing migrant labourers to units within an extractive system. Post-colonial historiography has also tended to prioritise political developments and elite lineages, leaving the nineteenth-century influx of migrant labour relatively underexplored. As Yasmin Saikia (2004, p. 101) observes:

“The Directorate of Historical and Antiquarian Studies (DHAS) was established in 1904 with this purpose in mind. Public space and memory in Assam from that time on would belong only to the Assamese but not the peasant society—only the Assamese that the British had constructed.”

This suggests that elite-centred historical narratives may have marginalised the lived experiences of the mining communities.

The contrast between Assam’s tea estates and its more localised coalfields likely produced different linguistic dynamics. *Assam Sadri*, commonly described as the lingua franca of tea plantation communities, varies across regions. Because tea plantations were spread across the Brahmaputra Valley, workers probably incorporated linguistic elements from surrounding areas. In Lower Assam, the garden lingua franca appears to have absorbed influences from Kamrupi dialects, while in Central and Upper Assam, it may have been shaped by neighbouring Ahom, Kachari, and Bodo vernaculars. But the Margherita coal belt appears to have developed somewhat different patterns. Rather than adopting nearby indigenous languages to the same degree, miners may have formed a local speech variety shaped by everyday interaction in the mines and surrounding settlements. Oral testimonies recall a dialect drawing largely from Assamese and Hindi.

Migration and settlement patterns may partly explain this difference. Tea workers were recruited mainly from Chotanagpur, Central India, Odisha, and parts of Bengal, and lived within relatively enclosed plantation labour lines. Their lingua franca, therefore, appears to have retained a Sadri or Nagpuri base with Bhojpuri, Kurmali, Mundari, and Odia influences, while Assamese vocabulary entered more gradually. Coal miners, however, seem to have interacted more frequently with nearby villages and markets. This environment likely encouraged the incorporation of Assamese grammatical structures alongside Bengali and Hindi vocabulary. Such linguistic blending may explain why coal mining communities remain less visible as a distinct cultural group compared with tea plantation communities. The presence of migrant groups such as Telanga labourers from present-day Andhra Pradesh and Telangana may also have introduced Dravidian influences, while Makrani communities may have contributed Persianised elements. Historical accounts also suggest the presence of Chinese and Punjabis in the region, whose speech patterns likely added additional vocabulary and syntactic elements to the evolving miner’s dialect.

## Social Integration in a Multilingual Workforce

The linguistic diversity discussed in the previous section shows the diverse composition of the coalfield workforce. The mining camps of Margherita and Ledo developed into highly diverse labour settlements in British India. Workers from different parts of South Asia and beyond were brought together and required to live and work in close proximity. Contemporary records indicate that Adivasi labourers from Central India worked alongside Nepali migrants and Makrani workers from Balochistan, while later correspondence confirms the presence of Chinese labourers in the coalfields (Englishman's Overland Mail, 1918; Clow, 1926). Colonial authorities also structured the workforce by assigning particular communities to specific forms of labour. As Tejimala Gurung (2009) notes, the British extended their concept of the “martial race” initially used to recruit Gorkhas into the army, to employment in the coal mines. By portraying Nepali labourers as naturally strong and disciplined, colonial administrators channelled them into mining work.



Figure 1A tribute board honouring four generations of the Virdi family in Margherita for over a century of service is displayed at the Coal Heritage and Museum, Margherita. Photograph by author, 2026.

Newspaper reports also provide evidence of women’s participation in coalfields. A report in *The Weekly Dispatch* (6 December 1914) describes an Indian Muslim woman, Mulka Renti Gwalin, who had worked in the Assam coalfields as early as 1895. The presence of multiple linguistic groups made communication a practical necessity. A 1931 report describing a gathering at Margherita colliery attended by nearly 5,000 workers noted that speeches were delivered in four languages: English, Hindi, Nepalese, and Urdu, proving the linguistic diversity of the workforce (“Presentation in Four Tongues,” 1931).

Viewed through the theoretical lens of Émile Durkheim, the Margherita and Ledo coalfields represent a rare platform for community formation. Because this diverse workforce lacked a shared ancestral background, religion, or traditional

kinship network, what Durkheim terms “mechanical solidarity” (Durkheim, 1969, pp 105-110), they were forced to construct a new social identity. To work flawlessly, it required cooperation across ethnic lines, initiating a form of “organic solidarity” based on complementary differences and functional interdependence (Durkheim, 1969, pp. 227–228). However, as Peter Thijssen notes in his reformulation of Durkheimian theory, purely utilitarian or instrumental reliance is insufficient to create long-lasting unity, as without a moral component, such self-interest would merely result in a “state of war”. Instead, true organic solidarity requires a dialectical synthesis between instrumental cooperation and “empathic solidarity”. This empathic solidarity is characterised by intersubjective encounters where individuals recognise and respect each other despite their differences (Thijssen, 2012, pp. 17-24). The miners needed to survive, which created mutual dependence, trust and collective identity.

### **Living Archives, Memory and Language**

Colonial archives only show a top-down view of colliery life, but oral histories from the region’s descendants tell how nineteenth century survival bonds set into a permanent, multiethnic society. Kalunarayan Bania, a resident of Ledo Kalpara, notes that while the Assam Railways and Trading Company attempted to segregate workers into distinct neighbourhoods such as the Newar, Telugu, and Makrani lines, the hazards of coal mining overthrew these divisions. His grandfather, Hiralal, extracted coal using raw dynamite, a task that demanded absolute trust. Thus, descendants of over a hundred distinct migrant groups established shared communal spaces and schools alongside indigenous Tansa communities (K. Bania, personal communication, January 21, 2026).

The ultimate binding agent of the coal community was the evolution of a syncretic language. Unlike the Brahmaputra Valley tea estates, where the broad umbrella lingua franca of Assam Sadri absorbed surrounding dialects, the localised coalfields of Margherita and Ledo became home to unique linguistic variations within. The necessity for coordination underground led to a distinct dialect locally identified as Manbhoom Sadri, characterised by a heavier Hindi, Bengali and Assamese influence. Vernacular expressions such as *atsi*, *jatsi*, and *ki kortasi* remain concentrated in mining settlements like Ledo, Margherita, and Jeypore (K. Bania, personal communication, January 21, 2026).



*Figure 2: Interview with Sarat Debnath (Left) and Kalunarayan Bania (Centre)*

Oral testimonials from Sarat Debnath, an 89-year-old retired miner who worked in the pits of Ledo since 1955, explained that the sense of togetherness changed shape as new political and demographic pressures appeared. When new groups arrived, including members of the Halba community from Maharashtra and Chakma refugees after the India-China conflict, the settlements more or less absorbed them into everyday life, though not always smoothly at first. Debnath's memories suggest a society that was organised yet closely connected, linking Arkatia, meaning locally recruited labourers, with Giritmia workers who had come from outside. While Giritmia historically refers to overseas indentured labourers bound by an agreement, the term was adapted locally in the coalfields to describe workers arriving under external or separate contract arrangements. Work followed gender divisions but depended on cooperation in practice, since men cut coal underground while women carried loads on the surface in heavy head baskets, and both roles were exhausting in different ways.

Shared labour gradually produced shared customs. Older ethnic separations weakened as miners celebrated Kali Puja, Karam Puja, and Lakshmi Puja together on small farming plots provided by the company. Over time, these festivals felt less like someone else's tradition and more like something common, though Debnath did mention occasional tensions that he could not fully explain. Living and working under the same harsh conditions also encouraged a collective political awareness, which can be seen in figures like Kalidas, a miner associated with communist activism who was suspended after demanding better conditions for workers from many backgrounds (S. Debnath, personal communication, January 2026). This does not mean the community was perfectly unified; there were disagreements, but there was still a noticeable sense that survival depended on cooperation rather than division.

## **Conclusion**

The history of the Upper Assam coalfields displays that the mines of Margherita and Ledo were far more than mere sites of resource extraction; they were highly functioning contact zones where unrelated ethnic groups

collaborated for survival. Pressed by the coercion of colonial demographic engineering, labourers from Chotanagpur, Nepal, Balochistan, and beyond could not rely on the mechanical solidarity of shared ancestry, evident in the creation of Manbhoom Sadri and shared cultural festivals. Recent developments in the coal belt around Margherita and Ledo display the continuity of intercommunity cohesion shaped by industrial migration. Settlements affected by dumping grounds are inhabited by Tansa, Gorkha, Adivasi, Bengali, Manipuri, Hindu, and Muslim populations, yet protest mobilisation occurred collectively rather than along ethnic lines. Large demonstrations organised with the support of Satra Mukti Sangram Samiti brought together thousands of residents, including men and women from multiple communities, showing the presence of a shared identity through the coal economy. Mobilisation occurred within a broader multicomunity coalition responding to actions by Coal India Limited (Sinha, 2024). This solidarity suggests that the coalfields continue to function as strong contact zones in which mechanical solidarity was replaced by organic solidarity.

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# **Analysing Assamese Historical Ballads (*Nahoror Geet* and *Maniram Dewanor Geet*) for the Construction and Comparison of Folk Culture Across Two Time Periods**

**Runjun Devi**

## **Abstract**

Folklore and oral narratives have long served as one of the oldest media of communication, through which the acquired knowledge and memory of important events were transmitted from one generation to the next. As such, the oral history and oral narratives are an efficient tool to gauge the culture of the people whose voices echoed in these lore for generations. Among these narratives, we find historical ballads, which often rise from a place of collective grief, formed when a tragic event shakes the mass psyche. Because of this, they hold traces of the cultural anxieties and emotional landscape of the people who created them and passed them down through the generations to remember. Thus, with an analysis of these ballads, it is possible to understand the culture and worldview of their time.

This paper attempts to analyse two Assamese historical ballads—*Nahoror geet*, which describes an event during the reign of Sukhmpha (1552–1603), and *Maniram Dewanor geet*, which tells the tale of the execution of Maniram Dewan in 1858 at the beginning of British rule in Assam. Both ballads come from moments in collective history that sent a wave of powerful grief through the mass psyche, and it is reflected in the words as well as the music. Both ballads are laments of a tragic loss, and their narratives preserve the folk response to loss, the injustice committed by the authorities, and a hint of rebellion. Through a study of their themes, imagery, and social context, the paper aims to glimpse the folk culture of these two different periods and to compare how communities in each era used oral narrative to express fear,

resistance, and cultural identity. By placing these songs side by side, the paper hopes to show how historical memory survives in folk expression and how oral tradition becomes a guide to understanding two distant yet connected moments in Assamese history.

**Keywords:** *Historical ballad, Nahoror Geet, Maniram Dewanor Geet, oral history, cultural anxiety.*

## Introduction

Folklore and oral narratives have long served as one of the oldest and most vital mediums of communication, enabling societies to transmit acquired knowledge and the memory of important events from one generation to the next. Among cultures with limited textual evidence, such oral traditions act as essential repositories of the past and present culture and its evolution among the folk, thus preserving histories, social norms, and worldviews even in the absence of formal records. Through oral history and narratives, we can efficiently gauge the culture and psyche of people whose voices echoed in these lore for centuries.

Such oral traditions, which reflect the history of the people, transmit the experiences of groups frequently excluded from written archives, like marginalized, non-literate, rural, and sometimes oppressed communities. Oral history is especially adept at giving voice to minority groups, since they reflect and capture stories and perspectives that formal written histories overlook. For these communities, oral tradition is more than a mere social practice; instead, it is a recurring performance in which collective memory is socially reinforced and continually interpreted, thereby making sure that the next generations remember their struggles. As Walter Ong observes, the persistent retelling of stories in oral cultures forges a living connection between past and present, making memory a communal act that shapes culture, values, and worldview over time. (Ong, 1982, p. 37)

Among the many forms of oral narratives, historical ballads occupy a unique space. Rising often from a place of collective grief, when a society is shaken by tragic, traumatic, or transformative events, ballads reflect the collective emotions of the people (A. Saikia, personal communication, October 23, 2025). These ballads serve three purposes. First of all, they tell a story of an event that sank into the mass psyche so deeply that they wished for the knowledge to resonate through generations. Second, they communicate the pain of loss and function as warnings for future generations. Through poetic stories of grief, heroism, or betrayal, communities cultivate a sense of shared identity and continuity, using narrative to confront and process trauma. Third, and most importantly, ballads also retain traces of the cultural anxieties and emotional landscape of the people who created them, thus encoding values, moral boundaries, and remembered histories in artful form.

Ballads and other oral traditions transmit the experiences of groups frequently excluded from written archives—marginalized, non-literate, or rural communities. Oral history is especially adept at giving voice to minority groups, capturing stories and perspectives that formal written histories overlook. Oral traditions are also dynamic. In oral tellings and retellings, historical events frequently transform into myths and legends, where the core of historical fact remains but surrounding details adapt to reflect contemporary anxieties, values, or aspirations. Each recounting of a ballad or story, hence, reflects not only the original event but also the evolving social and political tensions of its narrators. The circulation of multiple versions of the same event allows us to trace the shifts in the collective psyche and thus explore the development of group identity.

In this study, we analyse two Assamese historical ballads—*Nahoror geet*, which describes an event during the reign of Sukhmpha (1552–1603), and *Maniram Dewanor geet*, which tells the tale of the execution of Maniram Dewan in 1858 at the beginning of British rule in Assam. Both ballads come from moments in collective history that sent a wave of powerful grief through the mass psyche, and it is reflected in the words as well as the music. Both ballads are laments of a tragic loss, and their narratives preserve the folk response to loss, the injustice committed by the authorities, and a hint of rebellion. Through a study of their themes, imagery, and social context, we steal a glimpse of the folk culture of these two different time periods and compare how communities in each era used oral narrative to express fear, resistance, and cultural identity.

### Objectives

The study was approached with two objectives in mind-

1. To analyse the two historical ballads to understand and reconstruct the folk culture of the time periods described
2. To evaluate by comparison the two time periods and how they are remembered through oral history.

### Methodology

This study is an analytical study that studies the themes, imagery, and social context of two Assamese historical ballads—*Nahoror geet*, which describes an event during the reign of Sukhampha (1552–1603), and *Maniram Dewanor geet*, which tells the tale of the execution of Maniram Dewan in 1858 at the beginning of British rule in Assam. It also analyses the binary oppositions in the structure of the ballads à la Lévi-Strauss, and attempts to glean the deep-rooted cultural anxieties of the folk and the two time periods.

The data is collected from both primary and secondary sources. The texts of the two ballads are mostly from the collection “*Akhyan Geet*” compiled by Bhaba Prasad Chaliha. The music, tone, and some of the text come from a personal interview with Dr. Anil Saikia, who has collected the tunes and text from the

field. The rest of the secondary data comes from journals, articles, and books.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

In this study, we have drawn upon three major theoretical approaches to analyse, reconstruct, and compare the folk culture of the two time periods. Oral narratives often reflect deeper societal concerns and cultural anxieties of a folk, which can be understood from a deep structural analysis of the binary oppositions found in the narratives. The historical ballads also reflect how a real historical event resonated in the collective memory of the people and how they perceived the role played by the individuals (characters of the tale) who were part of the event. Thus, Assmann's Cultural Memory and Propp's Archetypal analysis, together with Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, would help us understand the folk culture reflected in the ballads we are attempting to analyse.

Lévi-Strauss's structuralism starts with the concept that human cultures and minds function through binary oppositions, which are essential to meaning-making processes in narratives, myths, and social practices. According to Lévi-Strauss, "Myth is a language: to be truly grasped, it must be deciphered" (Lévi-Strauss, 1963). This means that stories and narratives from a particular culture, including historical ballads, are constructed through fundamental oppositional pairs, like good/evil, male/female, or loyalty/betrayal, which not only organize the tale into a comprehensible narrative but also reflect the deep-rooted tensions and anxieties that plague the folk who created them.

Historical ballads function as people's narratives – an expression of collective memories of a historical event through storytelling. They are the stories the folk leave behind to educate the next generations about traversing the treacherous waters that are life. Thus, by mapping the binary oppositions within the ballad, we can unveil the deeply rooted cultural anxieties of the people whose narrative we study. We find how the social ethics worked in that time period, what was valued and what was not, and how the folk as an entity reacted to traumatic historical events, including war. The binary framework reveals how communities grapple with contradictions, transforming individual experience into shared social meaning and aiding reconciliation of tensions. The structuralist approach does not prioritize the authenticity of the specific event, but the structural presence within cultural expression.

However, while binary oppositions are integral in this study, the concept of "mythemes", i.e., the smallest units of myth Lévi-Strauss identified to define the structure of a myth, would not quite fit historical ballads. Mythemes pertain to myths, which tend to be products of symbolic imagination rather than a poetic recounting of a historical event. A historical ballad narrates a real event, and although shaped by collective memory, it lacks the imaginative abstraction typical of the narrative structures of myths and folktales. Therefore, structuralist analysis of binary oppositions illuminates cultural anxieties in historically grounded

narratives, but the technique of dissecting mythemes would misrepresent the factual nature of a historical ballad.

On this note, we find the concept of Jan Assmann's Collective memory particularly appropriate.

Jan Assmann's theory of collective memory distinguishes between everyday memory and cultural memory, noting that communities preserve meaningful past events through stories, rituals, symbols, and shared practices. Here, cultural memory is long-lasting, selective, and emotionally charged. It resonates with the moral or emotional truth that a community wishes to preserve for generations to come, which shapes the identity across generations.

As Assmann writes, "The concept of cultural memory comprises that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals... whose 'cultivation' serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image" (Assmann 1995). Historical ballads are powerful carriers of collective memory; they do not merely recount events but crystallize communal emotions, grief for the most part, in the wake of traumatic events. This is particularly true for ballads that mourn and lament loss, as in the case of the two ballads being studied here, which express the collective grief of a people who mourn the loss of a loved figure. Thus, ballads act both as a repository and a ritual expression of collective grief, forging communal bonds through shared mourning and memory, and their analysis lets us inside the psyche of the folk whose culture we study.

This leads us to Vladimir Propp's archetype-based narrative analysis that uncovers recurring character types in folk narratives, such as the hero, villain, donor, helper, princess, dispatcher, and false hero. By scrutinizing how individuals are portrayed within the historical ballads, we gain valuable insight into the social norms and ethics practiced by the culture, for example, what was admired, such as courage, loyalty, or cunning, and what was condemned, such as betrayal or greed, thus reflecting mass perspectives and communal responses to historical events (Propp 1968). This method reveals the undercurrents of mass perspective: a community's collective judgment on the events and actors involved. Thus, Propp's analysis transforms character study into a cultural map, showing how narrative archetypes capture the spirit and anxieties of their time and place. While the tale itself is picked from history and hence has a definite plot, the way the characters were painted tells us not only of how the societal values and ethical perspectives of the culture, but also how the common people felt about the atrocities committed by the authorities.

### **Oral Traditions as Historical Sources**

In contexts where written records are scarce or non-existent, we find oral traditions being recognized as legitimate historical sources. Historians working with societies that have limited textual documentation, such as marginalized, non-literate, or rural communities, are forced to rely on oral traditions of the

communities to access voices and experiences that are often left out of the official archives and written records (Muraina 2011). These oral narratives, such as ballads, legends, songs, proverbs, and stories, collectively shape the lens through which communities understand change, continuity, conflict, and identity and serve as the oral archive that preserves the collective memory and communicates it through the generations. By transmitting such generational experiences, they become vital for reconstructing past realities, serving both social and cultural functions within their groups.

Oral traditions also carry unique historical insights, frequently transforming factual events into myths and legends while preserving core historical truths. These retellings of the account of a historical event reveal cultural anxieties, values, and communal aspirations, foregrounding the ways societies cope with trauma or social change (Wonderley 2009). This process not only tells the story of what happened in the past, but also offers lessons to educate the youth, and validate collective identities, especially for the folk, for whom the process of written documentation was either inaccessible or imposed from outside, and thus controlled and censored.

We can also note that the multiplicity of versions of the record of one historical event, found strewn among oral traditions, allows historians to track shifts in meaning and interpretation across time, exposing evolving political tensions and social relations. Multiple recounts of the same event, each colored by the specific perspective of the storyteller and their take on the historical moment, permit us to reconstruct the response of the people and the community as a whole to the described events, highlighting patterns of continuity and rupture within society. As such, oral histories of a folk are indispensable in the process of constructing a comprehensive history, which would remain incomplete when depending upon only written archives and thus focusing upon only one voice and ignoring the rest.

### **NahororGeet**

Among all known historical ballads of Assam, Nahoror Geet is from the oldest time period (A. Saikia, personal communication, October 23, 2025). The Ahom king *Sukhampha* (1552-1603), who was also known as *Khora Raja*, had two wives – *BorMechlou* and *Xoru Mechlou*. Once the two *kuwori* – queens died, the king married their *ligiri*, the handmaiden, who served the two queens. This handmaiden was in love with a young man named Nahor. This Nahor was a strapping young man who had lost his parents early and was brought up by his grandmother. Upon the urging of his young wife, the king adopted Nahor as his son and gave him enough power. This unearned power corrupted Nahor, and he started committing atrocities in the name of the king. This prompted the *Bor Gohain*, the minister, to take this matter to the king, and finally, with his blessing, Nahor was executed by the bank of the river *Dihing*.

This ballad describes in very touching words how Nahar's early days with his grandmother were, how he was sent to *Mohong or Namchang* to trade for salt by the king and his minister, how he was executed there, and curses the queen who had an affair with Nahor, leading to his death.

### Maniram Dewanor Geet

The historical ballad of Maniram Dewanor Geet is from the time period that witnessed the ascent of the British Raj in Assam. Maniram Dewan was one of the historical figures who welcomed the British to Assam and rose swiftly in the ranks. However, witnessing the unfair taxation, justice system, and administration that the British soon imposed upon the native population, he became disenchanted and attempted a coup. He was arrested in Calcutta (now Kolkata) and tried for treason soon thereafter. Together with some incriminating letters that were seized during the plot and the witness testimony of Haranath Daroga, Maniram was convicted and publicly hanged in Jorhat on 26<sup>th</sup> February 1858.

This ballad describes Maniram's journey to Calcutta till his execution. It describes how he left for Calcutta and laments the fact that he never reached home again. The ballad describes Maniram's wealth and stature, how he instigated rebellion among the people, and how much he was revered by the people. Also interestingly, the ballad acknowledges Maniram's misdeeds on behalf of the British and accuses him of wrongfully killing Piyoli Phukan. The ballad also describes the seizure of the letters and Haranath Daroga's testimony. Finally, the ballad describes the grief the people felt when Dewan was executed.

### Discussion

Assamese ballads mostly follow a certain familiar structure. The songs consist of similarly structured stanzas with two couplets. The end of the two couplets rhyme. An example –

*Atikoi senehor mugare mahura / Atikoi senehor mako*  
*Atikoi senehor Maniram Dewan e / Nekandi kenekoi thako* (Chaliha 2005, p- 127)

(Translation: The golden-threaded weaving tools are dear to me. Yet dearer was Maniram Dewan. How could I not cry? )

The first couplet traditionally consists of a metaphor or *upoma*, sometimes an *alankar*- a couplet added for aesthetic value. For instance,

*Rib rib kori botah jaki marile/ botahot urile dhuli*  
*Maniram morile ghoror ghorowahe /kandile sokulo tuki* (Chaliha 2005, p- 117)

(Translation: the wind is mild, it blew dust around. At the death of Maniram, his kin shed tears and cried.

Here, we see the first couplet doesn't contribute to the story except adding aesthetic value.

Also, sometimes the first couplet consists of lamenting words, rhyming words, or words of the same topic but with less relevance to the topic. Such couplets would recur throughout the ballad.

*Kenekoi marile toke oi Maniram/ Kenekoi marile tok*

*Haranath Darogai xotoru xalile/ fasi di marile tok* (Saikia 2025)

(Translation: how did they kill you, Maniram, how did they kill you. Haranath Daroga betrayed you, and they hanged you to death.

The second couplet, on the other hand, contains the description. This couplet tells the story, and the preceding couplet is only there for the rhyming and tune purposes.

However, this does not hold true for all stanzas of the historical ballads. For the most part, both couplets of the stanza hold some value to the narrative, to varying degrees.

*Jorhatot nurubi eda mor kutum oi/ Golaghatot nurubi eda*

*Xatota gerejor sipahi namile/ Dile Maniramok kheda.* (Chaliha 2005)

(Translation: don't plant ginger in Jorhat and Golaghat, my friends. Seven garrisons from there hunted Maniram )

Here, the first couplet is as vital as the second because it describes how the Assamese people refused to cooperate with the trades of British (the British encouraged the people to plant ginger since it was a valuable commodity) in retaliation for Maniram's death.

The same can be said of Nahoror Geet, which does not follow the traditional structure of Assamese ballads. It gives rise to the speculation that Nahoror Geet predated the prevailing ballad structure.

*Rangoli Modaror paat*

*Eino maje nixaa aahili Nahor oi*

*Khali ki nekahli Bhat* (Chaliha 2005, p- 1)

(Translation: Oh, those tinted leaves of the Modar flower. You left at midnight, oh, Nahar! Did you even eat your dinner?)

This stanza is markedly different from the prevailing structure, as there are only three lines instead of four.

Now, let's look at the binary oppositions that can offer us a glimpse of the cultural anxieties of the time periods. Looking at Nahoror Geet first, we see the binary oppositions mostly deal with order and chaos, and innocence and wrongdoing.

1. Order vs disorder: The entire ballad is one long saga detailing the harmony of Nahor's peaceful life growing up with his grandmother and, in contrast, Nahor's journey to the war-torn area of Mohong and Namchang, where he was executed.

We see this from the text –

*Nahor chenamua olai ratipua/ sokuri kukurar bhar*

*Dihing noire pani kore tolebole/ ghatoi e nokore paar.* (Chaliha 2005, p- 4)  
 (Translation: golden boy Nahor leaves in the morning with 120 roosters. The waters of the Dihing river are turbulent, the ferryman refuses to cross.)

The relative happiness of Nahor and his grandmother is destroyed when he is executed.

2. Peace vs conflict: We see the Ballad describe the relative peace of the Ahom kingdom and their prosperity, and in contrast, the conflict and dangers of traversing the war-torn Namchang.

*Misimi dexoloi najabi Senai oi misimi okora thai*  
*Okora misimi ghokorai katibo/ tor logot kandota nai.* (Chaliha 2005, p- 3)  
 (Translation: Don't go to the land of the Misimi people, my love. They will cut you down, who will cry at your loss?)

3. Duty vs. Cruelty: The ballad deals with the opposition of the duty of the authorities against the common folk and the injustice done to the people (Nahor) with cunning.

*Xoriyoh fulare botor*  
*Borduwaror mukhote Nahorok kotale/ Karno logale jogor.* (Chaliha 2005)  
 (Translation: 'Tis the time of mustard flowers. Nahor got cut down in front of the *Borduwar*, what was his fault?)

From these Binary oppositions that are prevalent in the long ballad, we can determine the cultural anxieties that plagued the folk at that time. We find the prevalent fear that the moral role of the king and the minister, who are supposed to be the protector, guide, and even the father-figure, has been violated. This reflects the underlying anxiety about living under unpredictable power. Cultural fear of social instability and rupture within the kingdom's moral structure can also be gleaned from the oppositions prevalent in the ballad (order/chaos). Another blatant anxiety to be gleaned from mourning Nahor in the ballad is the fear of emotional disconnect between rulers and subjects, which underscores the collective anxiety that the community's pain is invisible to power.

We also see Nahar put forward as the hero, faulted yet dear to the people's hearts. On the other hand, the Queen is judged harshly and found at fault for Nahor's death, despite the fact that both were equally complicit in the ill-fated affair that eventually led to Nahor's death.

*Herou burhi pakhori, moranor jiyori/ nahorok kotale kone*  
*Jali komora hen nahor chenamua/ ki jogorot morale prane*  
*Bukut jui lagoti rojar bor kuwori/ puruxok korili aar*  
*Tai oi xakhini johoni moroti/ nahoror tej khale gaar.* (Chaliha 2005)  
 (Translation: old sly witch, daughter of the Moran people. Who is behind Nahor's death? Golden boy Nahor, what even was his fault? The queen- the evil monster, she killed Nahor and drank his blood.)

Here we see the fault put entirely upon the shoulders of a woman, and

absolving Nahor of any wrongdoing. This highlights the contradiction in the social structure, where only the women are condemned, and the men are absolved for the same sin.

As for the relatively newer historical ballad, Maniram Dewanor Geet, we find the prevalent binary oppositions to be reflective of the turmoil of the time periods-

1. Justice vs injustice: The entire ballad is a testament to this opposition as it details the wrongful execution of Maniram and mourns the injustice done to him.

*Tini aalir murote Maniramok marile/ Ubhoti bolile ba* (Chaliha 2005, p-121)

(Translation: They killed Maniram in the crossroads, even the wind blew wrong)

*Lorakoi tirotak aathanit pelali/ loli jorhatot fasi* (Chaliha 2005, p- 120)

(Translation: You left your woman and children destitute when you got hanged in Jorhaat)

*Gupute gupute dhorile Maniram/ Gupute gupute nile*

*Hawlat sahabe Tokolai paarote/ dingit sipejori dile* (Chaliha 2005, p- 109)

(Translation: Maniram got caught in secret, and hanged near the Tokolai river by Howlat Sahab)

2. Loyalty vs Betrayal: The ballad paints Maniram as loyal to the land and condemns Haranath Daroga for his betrayal. They also tell the people not to collaborate with the British because all they offer is betrayal. In some texts, Maniram's death is painted as just reward because of his betrayal of Piyoli Phukan.

*Haranath Daroga bagi di xaarile/ Maniram porile faandot* (Chaliha 2005, p- 114)

(Translation: Haranath Daroga escaped with trickery, got Maniram caught

*Maniram Dewanok fasi kathot tulile/ karo nalagil betha* (Chaliha 2005, p- 104)

(Translation: Maniram Dewan got hanged, is no one sad?)

*Maniramok marili bahloke korili/ piyolik marili kio*(Chaliha 2005, p- 109)

((Translation: good thing Maniram got killed, why did he kill Piyoli)

These binary oppositions let us determine the prevalent cultural anxieties of the folk, which in turn lets us paint a picture of the people and their worldview. The prevalent opposition of justice and injustice reflects a deep-rooted anxiety about moral order collapsing, exposing the collective fear that rightful values and ethics would no longer protect the community. The other prevalent opposition of loyalty and betrayal reveals a collective anxiety over internal division and people acting out of selfish desires rather than for the collective betterment. This, in turn, reveals the fear that betrayal from within weakens cultural solidarity and thus brings about the eventual collapse of the society.

## Comparisons

From our study of the two ballads, we see that both ballads share some striking similarities, beginning with the protagonists themselves. Both Maniram Dewan and Nahor are depicted as individuals who were representatives of the people in stark contrast to the authorities. Both the protagonists once busked in favour of the authorities, and then they suffered a betrayal and were executed.

The emotional tone of both ballads or the *bhava* powerfully conveys an impression of mass grief. The sorrow felt by the folk over the untimely and tragic death of Nahor and Maniram echoes both in the haunted music and the melancholy lyrics. This shared sense of mourning is not merely personal but communal, illustrating how the folk experience and express loss and trauma on a large scale.

One thing is worth mentioning in this context: there is an underlying current of rebellion that runs through both narratives. The protagonists opposed the authorities, symbolized as oppressive forces who meet with curses or condemnation in the ballads- more in Maniram and less in Nahor, but the drift of resistance is there nonetheless. Their fates, marked by punishment and the suffering of the people left behind, are framed as unjust, underscoring widespread resistance against unfair governance.

The verses vividly depict the turmoil and unrest of their time periods. The ballad of Maniram Dewan narrates the social upheaval, political conflicts, and anxieties prevalent during the advent of the British Raj, presenting a historical landscape filled with strife and struggle. Nahoror Geet tells us of the strife between the Nocte people and the Ahom kingdom over the ownership of the salt wells in *Namchang* and *Mohong*. These depictions preserve the emotional and cultural responses to these chaotic times, offering us a glimpse of how the people dealt with those upheavals in their lives.

Together, these similarities reveal how both ballads function not only as memorials but as testimonies of collective memory and identity, steeped in grief, resistance, and cultural values.

## Conclusion

The analysis undertaken in this study, which saw two historical ballads of Assam studied for the prevalent binary oppositions and as such the cultural anxieties of the time periods, as well as the comparison of the two ballads reveal to us that both ballads were created in a time of conflict, both inside the societal structure and in the overall times. As we witness the two ballads reveal the collective memories of the folk, we come upon the realization that it was the collective grief in the event of the death of the protagonist that was the key inspiration behind the two creations. Despite the extolling of the virtues of the two protagonists – Nahor and Maniram, in the ballads, we see both protagonists are also put up as examples of what not to do. This is the reflection of prevalent cultural anxieties that we glean from the

analysis.

We also get an idea of “what was important” during the period when the events occurred, whether it is culturally, strategically, and economically important, and if it was important for personal betterment or the overall societal betterment. Strategically, their roles symbolize larger power struggles and territorial conflicts. Culturally, their lives and deaths underscore community identity and the resistance to external domination.

It is evident in the analysis that despite changes in specific events or historical contexts, the fundamental cultural anxieties, such as fear of betrayal, loss, and injustice, remain constant. Across time, folk narratives preserve and express these enduring concerns, highlighting the persistence of the human experience through generations. Thus, we conclude with the observation that regardless of the time period, the innate cultural anxieties of a folk, or a culture, stay the same.

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# **Myth and Memory as Cultural Archive: Rewriting Indigenous Folklore in Contemporary North-East Indian English Literature**

**Mridusmita Boro**

## **Abstract**

Myth and memory function as vital modes of cultural preservation in North-East India where oral traditions shape collective identity and social continuity. In contemporary English writing from the region indigenous folklore is increasingly rewritten and recontextualized within literary frameworks. This paper examines how mythic narratives and communal memory are transformed into textual archives through English expression. It analyses select works by North-East Indian writers to explore how oral storytelling techniques symbolic structures and indigenous cosmologies are retained within written forms. The study argues that English operates not merely as a colonial inheritance but as a mediating language that enables the preservation and wider circulation of local traditions. By rewriting folklore in contemporary literary contexts these writers construct a cultural archive that safeguards intangible heritage while affirming plurality. The paper situates such literary practices within debates on memory cultural transmission and narrative identity in order to highlight the role of English literature in sustaining indigenous epistemologies in North-East India.

**Keywords:** Myth, Memory, Indigenous Folklore, Cultural Archive, North-East Indian English Literature

## **Introduction**

North-East India occupies a distinctive position within the cultural and literary map of the nation. The region is characterized by ethnic plurality, linguistic

diversity, and rich traditions of oral storytelling that continue to shape communal life. Myths, folktales, legends, ritual chants, and genealogical narratives function not merely as aesthetic expressions but as repositories of indigenous knowledge systems. They encode cosmological beliefs, ecological ethics, kinship structures, and moral codes. Among the Adi community of Arunachal Pradesh, for instance, myths concerning the origin of the sun and moon articulate relationships between human beings and the natural world. Naga folktales recount ancestral migrations and warrior ethics, while Khasi oral traditions preserve sacred narratives tied to clan identity and ritual practice. In Assam, ballads and devotional narratives circulate through performance during festivals and community gatherings. In many communities, memory is preserved through performance, repetition, and intergenerational transmission rather than through written documentation. Oral narratives therefore constitute living archives that sustain cultural continuity.

The emergence of contemporary English writing from North-East India marks a significant shift in the modes of cultural preservation. English, once associated with colonial administration and institutional authority, has been appropriated by regional writers as a medium of creative articulation. Writers such as Mamang Dai incorporate Adi myths and ancestral legends into English prose in *The Legends of Pensam* (2006), where landscape and memory are inseparable. Easterine Kire's *Son of the Thundercloud* (2016), retells Naga creation narratives within a literary framework that retains ritual symbolism and communal ethos. Temsula Ao's stories draw upon oral memory to situate contemporary experience within inherited cultural structures. Through the rewriting of folklore and myth, these authors transform oral memory into textual form. This movement from spoken narrative to printed literature does not signify the displacement of tradition. Rather, it signals a process of recontextualization in which indigenous epistemologies are negotiated within a modern literary framework. English becomes a space where myth and memory are reimagined without erasing their cultural specificity and allowing regional narratives to circulate beyond the immediate community while preserving their rootedness in local tradition.

To understand this transformation, the paper draws upon cultural memory theory, orality and literacy studies, and postcolonial concepts of cultural translation. Jan Assmann defines cultural memory as “the outer dimension of human memory” that preserves “knowledge which directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society” (Assmann, 2011, p. 36). Cultural memory is sustained through symbolic forms that stabilize meaning across generations, particularly myth and ritual. Assmann further observes that writing converts memory into a durable cultural form that can outlast living communicative exchange. In the context of North-East India, folklore and myth operate as such stabilizing frameworks of remembrance. When these narratives are rendered in English, literature assumes the role of a cultural repository,

safeguarding communal knowledge while reshaping it within the permanence of textual form.

Ong's study of orality and literacy clarifies the implications of this shift. Ong argues that oral cultures depend upon mnemonic patterns because "you know what you can recall" (Ong, 1982, p. 33). Oral expression tends to be "additive rather than subordinative and relies upon repetition and formulaic structure" (Ong, 1982, p. 37). Writing introduces analytic distance and fixes discourse in space, transforming the conditions of memory. Yet Ong also insists that traces of oral consciousness persist in written texts. In Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam*, narrative time unfolds in cyclical movement rather than linear progression. Dai writes, "In the stories we tell there are no endings, only beginnings" (Dai, 2006, p. 2). This formulation reflects the recursive temporality characteristic of oral tradition. The novel's episodic structure and embedded legends mirror communal storytelling practices, demonstrating how written English can retain oral cadence.

Postcolonial theory further illuminates the use of English as a medium of indigenous articulation. Homi Bhabha conceptualizes cultural production within the "Third Space," a site where meaning is negotiated through hybridity rather than fixed identity (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37). English in North-East India operates within such a space. It is neither wholly colonial nor purely indigenous. The rewriting of folklore in English becomes an act of cultural translation that resists erasure. Lawrence Venuti describes a strategy of "foreignization" that deliberately signals the linguistic and cultural difference of the source tradition (Venuti, 1995, p. 20). Many North-East Indian writers preserve indigenous lexicon and cosmological references within English prose. In Easterine Kire's *Son of the Thundercloud*, mythic narrative is presented not as distant legend but as living cosmology. The text asserts continuity between ancestral time and present community life. Similarly, Temsula Aowrites in *These Hills Called Home* (2006), "These hills have been the silent witnesses of our history" (p. 3), foregrounding landscape as mnemonic archive.

Through these strategies, English becomes a medium of preservation rather than displacement. The act of rewriting does not sever folklore from its indigenous matrix. Instead, it relocates oral narratives into a textual space where they acquire durability without surrendering cultural specificity. Cultural memory is textualized without being homogenized because the narrative structures, cosmological references, and linguistic textures of the source traditions remain visible within the English text. Indigenous terms, ritual practices, ecological imagery, and mythic temporality are often retained rather than assimilated into standardized literary conventions. The result is not a neutral transcription of folklore but a dialogic process in which oral memory is recontextualized for wider circulation while preserving its epistemic core.

Literature therefore emerges as a living archive shaped by myth, memory,

and negotiated expression. Unlike colonial archives that historically catalogued indigenous cultures from an external and often ethnographic perspective, this literary archive is internally generated. It is authored by writers who inhabit the cultural worlds they represent. The archive here is not an institutional repository of static records but a dynamic narrative space where memory continues to evolve. Myths are not fossilized relics of a distant past rather they are reactivated as interpretive frameworks that illuminate contemporary realities. In this sense, the archive is performative rather than merely preservative. It sustains continuity while allowing reinterpretation.

By integrating cultural memory theory, orality and literacy studies, and postcolonial frameworks, this study conceptualizes contemporary North-East Indian English literature as a self-conscious cultural archive. The rewriting of folklore becomes an act of collective remembrance. It transforms communicative memory which depends on living transmission into cultural memory embedded in textual form. At the same time, the persistence of oral features within written narratives ensures that the archive does not efface its performative origins. The archive in this context does not replicate colonial modes of documentation that objectified indigenous knowledge as anthropological data. Instead, it operates from within the community and asserts narrative agency. Writers assume the role of custodians rather than subjects of representation. Through the deliberate preservation of mythic structures and indigenous lexicons, they resist cultural erasure and challenge homogenizing national narratives that marginalize the region.

### **Rewriting Myth and Memory in Contemporary Texts**

The rewriting of myth and memory in contemporary North-East Indian English literature must be understood as a complex negotiation between orality and textuality. When indigenous folklore moves into English prose and poetry, the shift is not merely linguistic but epistemological. Oral traditions which are often rooted in ritual performance, communal participation, and ecological belonging enter the domain of print culture. Yet this movement does not signal loss. Rather, it reflects what Ong describes in *Orality and Literacy* (1982) as the transformation of primary orality into literate consciousness. Ong argues that oral cultures think in “additive”, “episodic”, and “participatory modes” (Ong, 1982, pp. 31-49). Many contemporary writers from the North-East deliberately preserve these features within English narrative through cyclical structures, embedded legends, and collective voice ensuring that literacy does not erase the cognitive patterns of orality. This negotiation is further illuminated by Assmann’s theory of cultural memory in *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, where he distinguishes between communicative memory which is sustained through everyday interaction and limited to living generations and cultural memory, which “is exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms”

(Assmann, 2011, p. 37). In indigenous communities of the North-East, myths traditionally function as communicative memory, performed across generations. When rewritten in English, these narratives acquire textual durability and enter the sphere of cultural memory without forfeiting their cosmological coherence. In North-East indigenous writing, storytelling becomes an act of cultural preservation, where myth and memory function as frameworks for reconstructing identity amid socio-political disruption (Nole, 2025).

The works of Mamang Dai, Easterine Kire, and Temsula Ao exemplify this negotiation between orality and textuality. In *The Legends of Pensam*, Dai adopts an episodic structure that privileges memory over linear historiography, shaping the narrative as an interwoven network of voices and recollections. This form echoes oral storytelling traditions in which meaning accrues through repetition and variation rather than chronological sequencing. The landscape emerges as a living repository of memory. The rivers, forests, and mountains embody ancestral presence and sustain an ecological worldview. Dai's statement that "The river has a soul. In the course of time it becomes a witness" (Dai, 2006, p. 45) articulates an ontology that dissolves Western divisions between nature and history. By inscribing this cosmology in English, Dai does not translate myth into mere symbolism rather she allows indigenous epistemology to shape narrative structure itself. The novel thus becomes a counter-archival space where communal memory is preserved within print without surrendering its oral temporality. A similar engagement with memory and myth is evident in *River Poems*, where the river reappears as a living presence that carries ancestral voice and collective history. The poetic form, with its incantatory rhythm and intimate address, mirrors oral invocation, reinforcing the idea of landscape as sentient archive (Dai, 2004). In *River Poems*, the speaker invokes the land in intimate address, "the river's voice is the voice of the hills" (Dai, 2004, p. 10) collapsing distinctions between human utterance and ecological memory. Likewise, in *The Black Hill* (2014), Dai frames colonial encounter through indigenous perception and emphasizes the intimate connection between land and memory. In her nonfiction work *Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land* (2003), she similarly foregrounds oral testimony as a legitimate historical source, privileging community narratives over colonial documentation.

Similarly, Easterine Kire in *Son of the Thundercloud* rearticulates Naga creation mythology without subordinating it to Western realist expectations. The novel begins with the incantatory declaration, "In the beginning there was only darkness..." (Kire, 2016, p. 1), immediately situating myth as primordial knowledge rather than folkloric embellishment. The child at the center of the narrative is marked by prophecy and spiritual intervention, and the unfolding events obey a cosmology in which the spirit world is neither metaphor nor fantasy but lived reality. As the narrative suggests, destiny operates through sacred design rather than secular causality (Kire, 2016). Myth thus determines narrative

logic and ethical order, asserting what may be called narrative sovereignty within the English novel form. A comparable epistemic framework structures *When the River Sleeps* (2014), where the forest is rendered as spiritually animate and the seeker must guard his thoughts because intention itself carries consequence. The quest for the heart-stone unfolds under sacred injunctions, reinforcing the idea that moral law is embedded in landscape rather than imposed externally. In *A Naga Village Remembered* (2003), Kire foregrounds oral testimony as historical source, drawing upon the remembered narratives of elders to reconstruct precolonial Naga life. Through such strategies, Kire indigenizes English itself, ensuring that the expansion of the archive into print does not dilute the epistemic coherence of Naga cosmology.

In *These Hills Called Home*, Temsula Ao brings mythic consciousness into intimate contact with the political turbulence of Nagaland's insurgent decades. The collection does not treat myth as a relic of origin-time rather, it mobilizes mythic structures to interpret the ruptures of lived history. Ao's preface underscores this ethical imperative, noting that the stories are an attempt to bear witness to "the trauma and pain of a people caught in a conflict situation" (Ao, 2006, p. xii). Storytelling here is not ornamental but archival. The "archive" that emerges is neither state-authored nor anthropological but rather it is internally generated through remembered speech, village testimony, and the cadence of oral narration. In stories such as "The Jungle Major," insurgency is not framed merely as geopolitics but as a moral wound inscribed upon the community. The jungle often central to Naga cosmology, emerges as a paradoxical space, serving both as refuge and as a site of violence. Through this layering, Ao demonstrates that cultural memory extends beyond sacred beginnings into the domain of historical suffering. Ao's narrative technique draws from oral storytelling traditions in which the community, rather than the isolated individual, becomes the locus of experience. In "An Old Man Remembers," the narrative voice echoes testimonial performance; memory unfolds as spoken recollection, marked by pauses, emotional restraint, and collective identification. The old man's grief is not solely personal but emblematic of a generation shaped by militarization. Ao writes of villages "grouped together and herded like animals," a stark image that transforms historical counterinsurgency operations into communal trauma (Ao, 2006, p. 34). The metaphor carries mythic resonance; displacement is figured almost as exile from an ancestral landscape imbued with spirit. In this sense, myth functions as an ethical framework rather than escapist nostalgia. It provides interpretive coherence, allowing suffering to be narrated within a moral cosmos that affirms endurance and relational accountability. Ao extends this interplay of myth and memory in *Laburnum for My Head*, where death, burial, and remembrance are treated through culturally embedded symbolism. The titular story revolves around a woman's desire to be buried beneath a laburnum tree. An apparently simple wish that unfolds into a meditation on dignity, land, and

belonging. The tree operates as a living embodiment of cultural memory, echoing indigenous cosmologies in which landscape and ancestry are intertwined. Here again, the sacred and the contemporary coexist; personal mortality is absorbed into communal continuity. Similarly, in *A Naga Village Remembered*, Ao explicitly foregrounds oral testimony, acknowledging that the narrative draws from “the memory of elders who told their stories” (Ao, 2003, p. vii). This admission destabilizes conventional historiography. The text refuses to separate folklore from history, suggesting instead that both are modes of cultural memory.

The tension between continuity and fragmentation becomes particularly visible in the works of Robin S. Ngangom and Janice Pariat. In his poetry collection *Words and the Silence* (1990), Ngangom asserts that history in his hometown survives only as rumor, destabilizing the authority of official archives. By reducing “history” to something circulated, uncertain, and orally transmitted, he exposes the fragility of state-authored narratives in regions shaped by militarization and exile. Memory in his poetry appears fractured rather than cohesive, marked by displacement, silence, and political violence. Rewriting, therefore, becomes an act of interrogation as it reveals the archive as contingent and ideologically constructed. Myth does not restore seamless continuity but instead it coexists with rupture, offering symbolic structures through which trauma and erasure may be articulated. A related yet formally distinct negotiation unfolds in *Boats on Land* (2012) by Janice Pariat. The collection refracts Khasi folklore through non-linear narration and layered temporality, moving across colonial encounter and contemporary urban experience. Mythic motifs and ancestral presences surface within psychologically interior narratives, where communal memory is filtered through individual consciousness. The oral mode is thus reconfigured into fragmented modern subjectivity. Yet this fragmentation does not signal cultural loss. Rather, it reflects what Assmann conceptualizes as cultural memory adapting into new symbolic forms, memory that becomes stabilized beyond living transmission (Assmann, 2011). The archive, therefore, is not erased by modernity but transformed, surviving as interruption and layered temporality within contemporary literary expression.

In contemporary English writing from Assam, the rewriting of myth and memory rarely takes the form of direct folkloric adaptation. Instead, myth persists as structure, residue, and cultural undercurrent within narratives shaped by insurgency, gendered history, and social transformation. The fiction of Aruni Kashyap exemplifies this subtle negotiation. In *The House with a Thousand Stories* (2013), myth is not retold in its canonical form rather, it survives in the grandmother’s oral storytelling, in rumor, and in cyclical narrative patterns that resist linear historiography. The domestic space becomes a living archive where communicative memory is transmitted through everyday speech and transformed into cultural memory through the act of writing. The novel thus rewrites myth not as content but as narrative mode. It preserves communal

consciousness within English prose while simultaneously exposing the fractures produced by political violence. A comparable strategy appears in the works of Indira Goswami, who wrote primarily in Assamese. In *The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker* (2004), Goswami situates her narrative within Vaishnavite ritual culture yet reframes it through a critical lens that interrogates widowhood, sexuality, and social constraint. Mythic frameworks remain present but are neither glorified nor reproduced intact; they are contested and re-signified. Across these writers, therefore, rewriting myth and memory involves a complex process of translating oral tradition into text and communal remembrance into contemporary literary form. Myth endures, but as evolving cultural memory rather than static inheritance.

Across these writers, rewriting myth and memory entails formal experimentation. Episodic narration, embedded legends, ritual cadence, landscape symbolism, and narrative fragmentation function as strategies to preserve oral epistemology within written form. The English language itself is reshaped and inflected with indigenous idiom and cosmological perspective. The archive, therefore, is neither purely oral nor purely textual. It becomes hybrid, dynamic, and dialogic. Rewriting myth in contemporary North-East Indian English literature ultimately redefines the concept of the archive. It challenges colonial assumptions that equate legitimacy with written documentation and asserts that cultural memory can be sustained through adaptive transformation. By relocating indigenous folklore into global literary space without erasing its specificity, these writers affirm myth not as relic but as method and an enduring structure through which communities remember, resist, and reimagine themselves.

Thus, rewriting myth and memory in contemporary North-East Indian English literature enacts a layered transformation rather than a simple act of preservation. Through Ong's orality-literacy paradigm, the persistence of additive structure, ritual cadence, and communal voice demonstrates that literacy restructures but does not erase oral consciousness (Ong, 1982). Bhabha's concept of the "third space" further illuminates this process. English in these texts is neither a transparent colonial residue nor a neutral medium rather it becomes a site of cultural translation where indigenous epistemologies reshape the texture of the novel itself. Native lexicons, sacred temporality, ecological ontology, and testimonial memory are embedded within English syntax, producing hybrid textual forms that resist assimilation into dominant national or realist frameworks. Hybridity here signifies agency as myth is not domesticated into folklore, nor is memory subordinated to state historiography. Literature emerges as a living archive expansive yet culturally situated where indigenous cosmologies negotiate modern literary space without surrendering epistemic authority.

The transformation of English in North-East Indian literature reveals how the language has shifted from a colonial instrument to a medium of cultural enhancement and self-representation. Contemporary writers from the region

indigenize English by incorporating local idioms, oral rhythms, indigenous lexicon, and speech patterns, thereby producing nativized forms that more accurately embody their socio-cultural realities. Alongside this linguistic adaptation, they hybridize literary forms, blending indigenous storytelling traditions rooted in orality, myth, and communal memory with Western narrative structures, resulting in innovative texts that resist rigid generic classification. This process also expands the expressive capacity of English, as it becomes a vehicle for articulating indigenous cosmologies, ecological consciousness, alternative temporalities, and community-centered identities that challenge linear colonial historiography. Through such creative negotiations, English is effectively decolonized and reclaimed as a tool for indigenous assertion and cultural continuity (Dirchi & Bagra, 2021).

### **Preservation and Loss in English Translation and the Digital Afterlife of Indigenous Myth**

The movement of indigenous myth into English textualization acts as a form of preservation that defies disappearance. Translating oral narratives into English creates textual durability and enables myths that were once bound to ritual and communal performance to enter the realm of cultural memory. In doing so, English translation protects these traditions from linguistic marginalization and generational rupture. This function of English as a medium of preservation parallels the work of storytellers such as Nzanmongi Jasmine Patton, whose efforts to collect Lotha Naga folktales stem from a moment of generational silence. As Patton reflected in an interview with *The Northeast Stories*, when she asked her younger cousins to recall the stories she had grown up with, “they did not know any. Not one” (Patton, 2020), prompting her to document and translate these narratives into *A Girl Swallowed by a Tree* (2017), so that they “do not disappear” (Patton, 2020).

Yet even as translation offers preservation, it inevitably entails loss. Oral traditions are embodied practices in which voice, gesture, place, and communal participation are integral to the mythic experience. Patton emphasized how her father, a gifted storyteller, could “hold an evening still with a single tale,” and how stories once shaped the community’s understanding of the world through ritual performance and shared presence (Patton, 2020). In English print, these performative dimensions, cadence, audience interaction, situational immediacy cannot be fully conveyed. Translation stabilizes narrative content but it also attenuates the ritual and participatory qualities that give myth its original power. While English textualization enables broader circulation, it does so by relocating myth into literate modes of cognition that emphasize objectified meaning over embodied performance. Moreover, *A Girl Swallowed by a Tree* itself reflects both the potential and limits of textual preservation. The collection is described as a translation project that endeavors to remain faithful

to oral tradition even as it enters English print, and its introduction underscores how Nagaland “is one place...where orality is still very relevant as well as significant” and where storytelling once helped communities “make sense of the vast universe around them” (Rath, 2019). Despite such efforts, the act of narrating these tales in English necessarily shifts them into a literate modality, where symbolic meaning becomes objectified rather than performed. What is preserved in print may reflect cultural values and worldview, but it cannot fully replicate how these stories functioned within ritual time and communal space.

The contemporary digital turn further highlights both opportunity and tension in preservation. Digital media such as audio recordings, video documentation, online repositories, and community language apps offer new possibilities for safeguarding mythic traditions in forms closer to their original orality. Patton’s own advocacy for initiatives such as Lotha Language Day and the launch of a Lotha-English dictionary app reflects this multimodal approach: “language survives not in archives but in use in stories, songs, children’s books, and everyday speech” (Patton, 2020). Digital formats can preserve not just narrative content but vocal performance, tonal nuance, and spatial context, thereby recuperating some aspects lost in print. However, digital preservation also raises questions about access, representation, and community control, underscoring that preservation always involves negotiation between media, modes of memory, and cultural priorities rather than a simple archival transfer from orality to text.

## Conclusion

Myth and memory continue to constitute the living foundation of cultural identity in North-East India, not as static remnants of the past but as dynamic processes of remembrance and adaptation. Contemporary English writing from the region does not merely reproduce folklore; they recontextualize it within new linguistic, political, and epistemic frameworks. Through the lens of cultural memory theory, these texts can be understood as acts of archival creation transforming oral, performative traditions into durable literary forms while retaining their embeddedness in community histories. The movement from orality to print, as Ong reminds us, is never neutral as it reorganizes consciousness even as it preserves narrative content. Yet this reorganization does not erase indigenous foundations. Rather, it enables myth to inhabit new circuits of circulation and recognition.

At the same time, the act of translation into English reveals the tension between preservation and loss. English operates as a mediating language extending the reach of indigenous narratives beyond regional boundaries while inevitably filtering them through literate structures and global readerships. Homi Bhabha’s notion of cultural translation illuminates this process as one of negotiation rather than assimilation. English in the North-East becomes hybridized, reshaped by local idioms, cosmologies, and memory practices. What emerges is not a

displacement of tradition but its strategic relocation into a space where plurality can be articulated and asserted.

Thus, the rewriting of myth and memory in contemporary North-East Indian English literature should be read as an archival intervention grounded in community rather than imposed authority. These texts do not simply document folklore, they reactivate it within modern consciousness allowing ancestral narratives to converse with contemporary anxieties of displacement, violence, ecological precarity, and cultural erasure. Literature, in this sense becomes both repository and renewal. It becomes a site where intangible heritage is safeguarded while remaining open to reinterpretation. By transforming oral memory into textual and increasingly digital forms, writers from the region affirm that myth is not an obsolete inheritance but a living archive one that sustains cultural continuity even as it adapts to changing historical realities.

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# **Folklore and Ethnic Assertion in Colonial Assam: *Bihu* Song in the Construction of Assamese Selfhood and Othering**

**Leenasri Gogoi**

## **Abstract**

This study explores how *Bihu* songs, as a living form of Assamese folklore, reflect patterns of cultural expression that can be interpreted as acts of ethnic identity assertion during the colonial period (1826–1947). The study examines how these folk songs reflect the process of constructing an Assamese “selfhood” through agricultural life and indigenous cultural expressions while drawing boundaries against the colonial “other,” which included Bengali influences, British administrators (often referred to as “Sahab”), and economic developments such as the establishment of tea gardens and railways. The paper focuses on the textual analysis of a few selected *Bihu* songs, drawn from secondary sources, to trace how, under conditions of colonial dominance and cultural marginalization, Assamese communities found ways to assert and sustain their ethnic identity. The songs reflect resistance through humour, irony, and celebration of local rootedness. The study argues how the *Bihu* song served as performative folklore that strengthened ethnic distinctiveness, aided the development of early sub-national consciousness, and cultivated a sense of collective Assamese identity in the face of colonial hegemony.

**Keywords:** *Bihu* song, Colonialism, Counter-archive, Resistance, folk memory.

## Introduction

The history of colonial Assam is not only written in administrative records and official documents but equally resides in the folklore of those who lived through it. These are in songs, oral traditions, and memory, which communities preserved as their own account of the colonial experience. Through folklore, communities keep memories and traditions alive in customs and oral literature. These cultural sites in early modern times were characterized by a mix of historical experiences that led to both community belonging and differentiation within the same geographical area (Das, 2017). In Assam, colonial influences are evident in its culture, particularly in its folklore. To Dundes, folklore is a “creative dynamic living tradition”. Such traditions offer acceptable means of symbolizing and conveying histories, fears and contested narratives between generations in a society (Bronner, 2007). Folk traditions in this sense do more than preserve the past. They absorb and respond to lived experience, adapting old forms to express new realities. Therefore, in Assam, folk songs hold a particularly significant place in folklore. They are not simply artistic expressions; they preserve lived experiences, reflect social realities, and carry a historical consciousness shaped by colonial rule. *Bihu* songs are selected in this study as “living archives of colonial memory” because they embody experiences of pain, resistance, and negotiation. *Bihu*, a folk song of Assam, is associated with the *Bohag Bihu* festival, which celebrates the arrival of spring and symbolizes love, fertility, unity, and all that is beautiful in nature. *Bihu* is a significant cultural festival in Assam, observed at various stages of the Indian agricultural year (Goswami P. , 1988). *Bihu* cannot be reduced to a festival or a cultural practice alone. It is the accumulated product of generations of folk tradition, songs, dances, tales, and customs that have been carried forward and kept alive by communities across time. The *Bihu* songs, which were passed down through generations without a dedicated focus in ancient times, cover a range of aspects of nature as well as more professional themes, such as love and passion, or social issues with collective aspirations. They are rich in literary elements, such as metaphors and ornamentation. They are coupled with a melodious sweetness that produces a unique and profound emotional experience for both singers and listeners (Hazarika, 2025). The lyrical/musical content of these songs depicts the multifaceted shades of Assamese culture, encompassing political, social, religious, and socio-economic aspects. *Bihu* songs are also called *bihunam* or *bihugeet*. “They are absolutely archetypal Assamese folk tunes. They are mythical ones and have excellent quality, not only in the sense of lyrics, but also for rhythms, tunes, singing patterns, etc.” (Sarmah & Goswami, 2023).

Assam, a state in Northeastern India, underwent significant changes in its everyday lives, administration and education system under British colonialism, including the introduction of new languages and literature. The history of Assam is marked by multiple cultural influences, with climate, geology, and

the environment significantly impacted by human activity from an early period. Assam witnessed the establishment of various empires and dynasties over the centuries. Of these, the Ahom Kingdom, founded in 1228 CE by people of Tai origin from Southeast Asia, is a significant epoch in the history of Assam (Gait, 1906). The Ahoms ruled the region for nearly 600 years and developed a robust administration. The Ahom Kingdom, which lasted for centuries, fell in 1826 due to internal conflicts within the state (Baruah, 1993). Faced with a Burmese invasion, the Ahoms requested help from the British East India Company. As a result, after 1826, it became part of British India following the Treaty of Yandabo, which was signed between the Burmese king and the British East India Company (Guha, 2006).

During the colonial period, *Bihu* songs gave Assamese communities a way to perform and assert their ethnic identity. Through analyzing a few chosen songs from published collections, it investigates how lyrics define boundaries against the colonial “other” (British administrators/” *Sahab*,” Bengali influences, and modernity symbols like tea gardens and railways) while constructing an Assamese “selfhood” that is rooted in indigenous agrarian life. Reading through the lens of Homi Bhabha’s concepts of ambivalence and the “third space,” the songs reveal a process of mutual othering in which neither the colonizer nor the colonized occupies a stable position.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Edward Said explains through his idea of orientalism that colonial power often worked by portraying the colonized as the “Other”, as people who were weak, uncivilized, or in need of guidance. This way of seeing helped the colonizers justify their rule (Said, 1978). But this gaze was not one-directional. If the colonizers viewed colonized as the “Other,” the colonized also developed their own ways of seeing the colonizers as outsiders who did not belong in their world.

*Bihu* songs do show traces of how Assamese people reacted to the British introduction of new ideas and objects into Assamese life, but they do much more than merely reflect colonial notions of backwardness. These songs actually challenge the way the colonized were represented. *Bihu* songs reveal how Assamese people saw themselves with confidence, humor, and pride. Through teasing, flirtation, jokes, and comments on daily life, they present a self-image that resists the idea of weakness. Instead of accepting the colonial gaze, the Assamese folk expressed their own sense of cultural strength. This flips the direction of the gaze: the British are no longer the observers; they become the ones being observed.

Bhabha’s concept of ambivalence is useful here. Colonial relationships, he argues, are never as stable as they appear; the colonized are never simply dominated, because they simultaneously absorb and resist what colonialism brings. *Bihu* songs reflect this kind of ambivalence. They register the changes that

British rule brought to Assamese life, but they respond to those changes through humor, cultural pride, and a sense of self that refuses subordination. What emerges is not passivity but an act of self-definition. Bhabha calls this in-between zone the “third space,” a place where identities are continuously negotiated, where people resist, adapt, or blend different influences (Bhabha, 1994). *Bihu* songs function within this space. They do not just reflect what colonial rule had done to Assamese life; they respond to it. In this sense, the act of singing was itself an act of agency. By using folk songs, Assamese communities refused to let others define their experience for them. By reading *Bihu* songs through this concept, we can understand them as a site where different ways of seeing collided. The mutual “othering” shows that folk expressions, such as *Bihu* songs, carried forms of resistance, power and ethnic assertion during the colonial period.

### Objectives

1. To examine how Bihu songs function as living archives of colonial memory, encoding experiences of exploitation, displacement, and cultural disruption in Assam.
2. To analyze how Assamese communities constructed ethnic selfhood through the representation of colonial “others”

### Methodology

This study takes a qualitative, interpretive approach. The study treats selected *Bihu* songs not just as artistic expressions but as cultural documents that carry the lived experiences and historical consciousness of Assamese communities during the colonial period. The songs are taken from published collections that have gathered and preserved these folk traditions over time. In particular, the songs analyzed here are drawn from two key published collections. These are Dr. Lila Gogoi’s “Bihugeet Aru Bonghosha” and Upen Rabha Hakacham’s compiled work. Both of which serve as important repositories of Assamese folk literature. These works serve as secondary sources for the textual analysis that follows.

The study uses the close reading method. Individual verses are examined for what they reveal about how Assamese communities understood and responded to colonial rule, linguistically, culturally, and symbolically. The study pays close attention to how humor, irony, flirtation, and the celebration of everyday local life appear in these songs, reading them not as incidental features but as deliberate expressions of ethnic identity and resistance. To make sense of this dynamic, the study draws on Homi Bhabha’s concepts of ambivalence and the “third space.”

### **“Bongal” as the Colonial Other: Language, Folk Memory, and the Making of Assamese Ethnic Boundaries**

During British colonial rule, Assamese was initially dismissed as a mere dialect of Bengali, with Bengali imposed as the official language in Assam’s

courts and schools. The British administration's close association with Bengali officials earned them the label "Boga-Bengali" or "white Bengalis" among the Assamese, highlighting the sociopolitical dominance of outsiders (Bhattacharya, 2021). Folk memory crystallizes this foreign intrusion in the term "*Bongal*", derived from "*Bangal*" (people from Bengal), which, through vernacular adaptation, came to signify outsiders, especially colonial administrators and Bengali settlers, disrupting Assamese sociopolitical and cultural life. In Assamese, the term "Bongal" evolved as a local pronunciation of "Bangal", reflecting their adaptation to the Assamese phonetic and linguistic context. These terms suggest colonial outsiders, British officials who imposed foreign governance and undermined indigenous authority. One folk verse recount that:

*Bongal Bongalki nu oi Bongal*  
*Bongaleasilesai*  
*Xatrajmari ek raj korile*  
*Lole Jorhatotthai.* (Gogoi, 2008, p. 85)

English:

*Bongal, Bongal, what is this Bongal?*  
*The Bongal were watching.*  
*They conquered seven kingdoms and established a single rule.*  
*They made Jorhat their seat.*

The verse centers on the growing dominance of outsiders, referred to as "*Bongal*," and marks a clear divide between the indigenous Assamese community and foreign colonial powers. The *Bongal* are portrayed as opportunistic figures, waiting to exploit political fragmentation to overthrow the "seven kingdoms" and consolidate their rule. The reference to Jorhat, the last Ahom capital, symbolizes this historical transition. Its memory acquires greater significance in the aftermath of the Treaty of Yandabo, which marked the beginning of colonial control and disrupted Assam's sociopolitical structures, displacing traditional centers of authority (Goswami P. , 2012). In this sense, the verse registers local anxieties over lost sovereignty while preserving a cultural memory of conquest and dislocation.

The reflection of colonial technology in Bihu songs captures the disruptive nature of the imperial encounter, symbolized by the introduction of ships, railways, roads, and steam engines that transformed Assam's social and economic landscape. The historical introduction of steam navigation on the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, including the Dikhow River, stands as a tangible symbol of colonial modernization in Assam. Previously, transportation primarily relied on indigenous modes, such as elephants, human bearers, and traditional country boats, methods closely tied to local ecological and social systems. The arrival

of steamers, initially operated under government auspices and later by private companies, revolutionized trade and mobility by linking Assam more closely with colonial commercial centers. This technological shift embodied not only infrastructural change but also the colonial reordering of Assamese society, facilitating resource extraction and administrative control (Barpujari, 2018). In Bihu songs, these new infrastructures were remembered with ambivalence:

*Boga bongal ahile bhapkol anile  
Dikhow noit solale nao  
Ami axomiya bihute bolia  
Bihu mariboloi jao.* (Hakacham, p. 166).

English:

The white *Bongal* came, bringing steam engines  
Boats started sailing on the Dikhow River.  
We Assamese, crazy for Bihu  
We are going to celebrate it.

In the song, the figure of the “white *Bongal*” represents the outsider and the colonial agent who arrives carrying unfamiliar machines that symbolize foreign authority and control. However, the verse does more than simply describe the arrival of new technology. It interprets this change through the community’s emotional and cultural language. Steam engines and mechanized boats suggest disruption and the forceful entry of imperial modernity into everyday life, yet the confident assertion, “*Ami Axomiya bihute bolia*,” reaffirms a strong sense of Assamese identity. The community’s response to the outsider is not silence but an almost deliberate turn toward itself. Where the outsider represents alien technology and unwanted change, the insider is defined by Bihu, by the land, and by a shared festivity that no colonial presence could replicate or replace. In contrast, folklore does the work of ethnic assertion through a sense of belonging.

The Bihu song thus performs a dual function. On the one hand, it records the material transformations brought about by colonial rule, the arrival of new technologies, altered mobility routes, and shifting economic structures. On the other hand, it symbolically marks the boundaries between the “*Bongal*” and the Assamese self. The word “*Bongal*” carries more cultural weight than its surface meaning suggests. It is not simply a label for outsiders; it is a way of drawing boundaries, of clarifying who belongs to the community and who does not. In naming the other, the community also names itself, reinforcing its attachment to a shared history, a shared land, and a shared set of cultural practices. Language, in this sense, becomes an instrument of self-definition. Through a word, Assamese communities under colonial rule were sustaining their own identity and keeping their collective consciousness alive.

### **Agrarian Life, Colonial Labour, and Ethnic Selfhood in Bihu Songs**

The Bihu songs that engage with the theme of colonial tea gardens articulate a nuanced social critique of labor exploitation and its profound impact on indigenous life. The tea plantation industry in Assam during the colonial period began in the early 19th century, following the discovery of indigenous tea plants by Robert Bruce in 1823. Captain Jenkins was sent in 1832 to report on Assam's resources, leading to confirmation that the Assam tea plant was a true variety suitable for commercial cultivation. Following this, the British government formed a committee and imported skilled tea makers and Chinese tea plants to improve cultivation techniques. The first government tea plantation was established near the Brahmaputra, but it failed due to poor soil quality. Later, the Assam Company was formed in 1839, establishing commercial tea gardens and expanding plantations across Upper Assam (Gait, 1906). As the tea plantation industry in Assam expanded, the planters faced a significant problem: there were not enough people willing to work in the tea gardens. Because the local population was small and the people were seen as lazy and slow, finding workers for the tea gardens became a challenge in Assam (Akhtar, 1939). With the growing demand for laborers, the search for suitable labor for the tea plantation industry of Assam led to the import of 'Adivasi' tribal people of Jharkhand and Central India, as a large number of them were forcefully brought to Assam in different phases (Kalita, Handique, & Borgohain, 2022). These workers, brought from diverse regions of India, came from varied cultural, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds but were collectively labelled as 'Coolies' by the colonial planters (Jung, 2006). The tensions between colonial labour regimes and indigenous modes of life are powerfully articulated in Bihu songs, where plantation work is portrayed as alien and exploitative, while agrarian labour is affirmed as dignified and rooted in Assamese identity; one such verse explicitly contrasts these worlds while asserting ethnic selfhood:

*Baganor Sakori nokorulahori  
Nalage bongol amuk  
Hatot loi esari halkhoni bamegoi  
Gusibo petore bhuk.* (Hakacham, p. 165).

English:

I will not do the work in the tea garden  
I do not need the bungalow  
I will carry a stick in my hand and go to the paddy field with the plough  
This will erase hunger.

This articulation goes beyond a simple rejection of exploitation or colonial wealth; it also affirms a conscious assertion of ethnic identity. By turning away

from the tea plantation and the colonial bungalow, both symbols of foreign authority, capitalist extraction, and imposed labour, the speaker distances himself from a system associated with the outsider or the “Bongal.” Instead, the speaker embraces the plough and the paddy field, which represent not merely agricultural work but a way of life deeply embedded in Assamese land, ecology, and ancestral practice. Agrarian labour here becomes a marker of belonging, linking the individual to community, territory, and tradition.

In this sense, the verse transforms everyday work choices into statements of identity. Refusing plantation labour is not only an economic decision but a cultural one: it signifies the refusal to participate in colonial hierarchies and to depend on foreign structures of power. The dignity of the self is located in indigenous modes of subsistence rather than in the wages or material privileges offered by the Company. Thus, the song articulates a form of ethnic self-assertion in which attachment to land and traditional livelihoods serves to preserve Assamese distinctiveness.

By declaring that there is no need to work in the tea garden or seek money from the colonial establishment, the speaker symbolically rejects the economic order imposed by imperial rule and reclaims autonomy through local practices. Folklore, therefore, functions not simply as commentary but as a subtle expression of resistance, constructing ethnicity through everyday acts of labour, belonging, and self-reliance.

Another such verse declares:

*Bagisar sakori nalage koribo*  
*Nelage Company dhan*  
*Ghaarte thakiba ramayan pohiba*  
*Xuni thakibore mon.* (Gogoi, 2008, p. 176)

English:

No need to work in the tea garden  
 No need for the money from the Company  
 Stay at home and read the Ramayana  
 I find joy in listening to it.

The lines rejecting work in the tea garden and the colonial Company’s money extend beyond an economic refusal; they articulate a conscious reaffirmation of cultural and ethnic belonging. By choosing to “stay at home and read the Ramayana,” the speaker symbolically turns away from the material world structured by colonial capitalism and returns instead to an indigenous moral and spiritual universe. The Ramayana is an admired creation of the great seer Rishi Valmiki, a renowned figure in Indian literature (Johari, 2023). The epic represents not only religious devotion but also a shared cultural memory that binds the community through values and ethical ideals.

In this context, reading and listening to the Ramayana become more than a personal act of piety; they function as a cultural statement. It affirms continuity with ancestral traditions and locates dignity within indigenous knowledge systems rather than in the wages and rewards offered by foreign rulers. The verse, therefore, contrasts two worlds: the colonial economy of profit and extraction, and the local world of home, memory, and shared heritage. By privileging the latter, the song asserts that true fulfilment lies in cultural rootedness rather than colonial employment.

Thus, the refusal of plantation labour and Company money is simultaneously a refusal of colonial assimilation. Through this everyday choice, the speaker reinforces ethnic boundaries and reclaims a distinctly Assamese selfhood grounded in tradition, spirituality, and community life. The verse reveals that colonial memory was experienced not only as economic exploitation but also as an emotional and cultural rupture, against which folklore became a means of preserving identity and asserting belonging.

### **The *Sahab* in the Song: Colonial Authority, Exploitation, and Assamese Social Memory**

The figure of the “*Sahab*,” frequently referenced in Assamese Bihu songs, serves as a potent cultural symbol embodying colonial authority, social hierarchy, and societal upheaval. Linguistically and culturally, the term “*Sahab*,” used in Bihu songs, is synonymous with “*Sahib*,” the honorific title given to European colonial masters in Assam’s tea plantations. Both terms signify the colonial power whose presence profoundly shaped local social structures and cultural memory. In folk expressions, “*Sahab*” emerges as a motif, symbolizing both the dominance and disruption brought about by colonial rule. The term “*Sahib*” in the context of colonial Assam tea plantations refers to the European colonial masters who wielded both economic and social power over the tea garden workers. These *Sahibs* not only controlled the labor and production processes but also exercised patriarchal and racial domination, often sexually exploiting the women workers in the plantations. The bodies of women were doubly exploited as laborers and as objects to fulfil the sexual desires of the *Sahibs*. Many such relations were forced and non-consensual, reflecting the harsh realities of colonial capitalist patriarchy in Assam’s tea estates. At the same time, native women resisted and participated in freedom struggles, challenging the oppressive colonial order. (Kalita, Handique, & Borgohain, 2022). Thus, in *Bihu* songs, the “*Sahab*” emerges not merely as an employer or administrator but as a disruptive and intrusive force that reshaped intimate, familial, and social relations within Assamese society. One such *Bihu* verse captures this presence:

*Sahab ahi ahi Bagisa khulile*  
*Murot soru hen tupi*

*Cooliere sualik memoni korile*  
*Mukhote seleudal hupi.* (Hakacham, 2017, p. 166)

English:

The *sahabs* came one by one and opened the tea garden  
 Wearing hats shaped like a *soru* (rice vessel)  
 They made the coolie girls their wives  
 Smoked a hookah in their mouth.

In this verse, the *Sahab* is not only portrayed as an abstract entity standing in for “the Company” or a foreign colonial government. He manifests as a tangible, embodied presence, identifiable by standard indicators such as his clothes, daily habits, and lifestyle. His characteristic hat, easygoing smoking, and unquestionable command of labor made him stand out, indicating both cultural foreignness and social superiority. Significantly, the *Sahab*’s hat is not described in its own colonial terms but is instead compared to a *soru*, a locally familiar rice vessel used in everyday Assamese domestic life. This comparison is telling: the foreign object is perceived, understood, and articulated through the lens of indigenous material culture. The unfamiliar is made sense of through the familiar, revealing how colonial presence was processed and interpreted by the Assamese folk imagination rather than accepted on its own terms. Instead of being remote or impersonal, colonial authority is made immediate and tangible through these behavioural and visual indications. As a result, the *Sahab* becomes the empire’s visible face, an outsider whose presence disturbs the established social structure. In this way, the song personalizes power, turning colonial dominance into a recognizable “other” that implicitly shapes and perceives Assamese identity.

This portrayal of marginality and displacement is amplified by the term “coolie girl.” Through colonial recruitment networks, plantation laborers were primarily transported from far-off places, separated from their native communities, and thrust into an unfamiliar social setting. As a result, the coolie figure also conveys feelings of vulnerability and alienation. Due to her dual marginalization by gender and class, the coolie girl is especially vulnerable to the *Sahab*’s power and exploitation. The intimate violence of colonial capitalism, where control transcends labor into the home and personal realms, is reflected in her experience. In this way, she also holds the status of an outsider, trapped in the plantation’s manufactured environment and not entirely part of the land or the local community’s cultural safety.

The song subtly contrasts the more natural rhythms of native Assamese life with this alien and coercive world by placing both the *Sahab* and the coolie in the tea garden. While local customs, agricultural ties, and cultural festivals like *Bihu* symbolize continuity, belonging, and communal stability, the plantation appears as a place characterized by hierarchy, control, and disruption. The song establishes boundaries between self and other through this contrast. When viewed

in this context, the *Bihu* song interprets and critiques historical facts rather than merely retelling them. Folklore becomes a tool for processing colonial experience and defining identity when these characters are ingrained in collective memory. By doing this, it both defines the boundaries of otherness and contributes to the construction of Assamese selfhood.

### Conclusion

*Bihu* songs demonstrate that the colonial encounter in Assam cannot be understood simply as a story of infrastructural development or socio-economic “progress.” Rather, it unfolded as a complex terrain of cultural negotiation, memory, and emotional upheaval. Institutions associated with British rule—administration, bungalows, steam navigation, and tea plantations—did introduce new forms of mobility and commerce, yet these changes simultaneously unsettled the ecological balance, social relationships, and everyday rhythms that had long structured Assamese life. In the language of folklore, such transformations are not distinguished uncritically; instead, they are remembered through images of displacement and loss.

At the same time, these songs reveal that Assamese society did not respond passively to colonial impositions. Through the celebration of *Bihu*, attachment to land-based livelihoods, and the repeated marking of the outsider as “Bongal,” the community articulated its own terms of belonging and selfhood. Folklore thus becomes a powerful medium of ethnic assertion, where identity is reaffirmed even in moments of disruption. The songs critique colonial structures while simultaneously sustaining indigenous values, practices, and collective memory.

Significantly, these *Bihu* songs also exemplify the folklorization of trauma. Through *Bihu* songs, experiences of exploitation, dispossession, migration, and social fragmentation are transformed into metaphor, rhythm, and performance. This process allows communities to collectively recount pain and pass on memories to future generations by absorbing suffering into song. In other words, trauma is not monumentalized or silenced; rather, it is culturalized and incorporated into everyday expression. As a result, folklore becomes a living archive in which historical traumas are recalled, understood, and symbolically addressed.

*Bihu* songs serve as vernacular records of colonial experience in this way. They preserve viewpoints that are frequently missing from official histories by encoding trauma, resistance, and resilience in symbolic and affective forms. These songs shed light on how communities recalled, understood, and dealt with colonial modernity by giving voice to common anxieties. In the end, they demonstrate how Assamese society actively used folklore to preserve its continuity, claim its identity, and turn memory into cultural power rather than merely reflecting change.

### Declaration of Use of AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author used Perplexity AI (<https://www.perplexity.ai/>) as a supportive tool during the writing process, primarily to refine sentence structure, improve clarity, and correct typographical and grammatical errors. The tool also helped identify instances of passive voice, redundancy, and unnecessary phrasing. All substantive analysis, argumentation, and interpretation remain entirely the author's own. The final manuscript was reviewed and revised to ensure that the original voice, intent, and academic rigour were fully preserved. AI was used solely to polish expression and did not contribute to or influence the intellectual content of this work.

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# Performers at the Interstices: Liminal Social Status and Ritual Authority among the Kamrupia Dhulia Communities

Shantanu Parashar

## Abstract

The *Kamrupia Dhulia* community of Assam represents a distinctive group of traditional drummers whose performances occupy a crucial place in ritual and ceremonial life. Despite their central role in festivals, temple rituals, and marriage ceremonies, these performers often occupy a marginal social position within the everyday village hierarchy. This paper examines the complex relationship between ritual authority and social marginality among the *Kamrupia Dhulia* communities of the undivided Kamrup region of Assam. Drawing upon theoretical perspectives from ritual studies and performance theory, the study engages with the concepts of liminality proposed by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, the notion of restored behaviour articulated by Richard Schechner, and the dramaturgical framework developed by Erving Goffman. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus and Paul Connerton's analysis of bodily memory further help explain how performance knowledge is embodied and transmitted across generations. The study argues that the ritual authority of the *Kamrupia Dhulias* emerges not from institutional power but from their mastery of inherited performance traditions that structure ceremonial space and collective memory. By analysing the *Kamrupia Dhulia* tradition through interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks, the paper highlights how ritual performance mediates cultural identity, social hierarchy, and collective memory within the broader cultural landscape of Assam.

**Keywords:** Kamrupia Dhulia; Performance; Drummer; Liminality; Ritual; Authority.

## Introduction

'Art is a lie that makes us realise the truth,' said Pablo Picasso (Picasso, 1923) in his response to the interview of the New York City periodical. It is indeed a lie when we see the roles of performances and the reality behind the stage. Dr Bhupen Hazarika well sang '*Raiz aji bhaoriya dekhei natghar*' (Hazarika, 1966) as a political satire victimising the actor in the hands of the director. Maybe this is why Erving Goffman (Goffman, 1958) believed that individuals continually perform during everyday interactions and use behavioural sets and costumes to complete their performance. Emerging as a satiric act, the hybrid identity of the performers who live between two cultures or social groups emerged as a thought product of Robert Park (Park, 1928), popularly deduced as the 'marginal performer'. The traditional drummers of Kamrup, known as the *Kamrupia Dhulia*, are the central part of the ritual and cultural life in the ceremonial stages of temple festivals, marriage, and village celebrations. Rather than being a structural learning process, the new generation of dhulias learns orally and through bodily practices. Many historians have written on *Kamrupa*, the place from which the name *Kamrupia Dhulia* emerged. Nonetheless, this study attributes its observations to the undivided district of *Kamrup*, out of which the present district of *Nalbari* has seen many groups of *Kamrupia Dhulia*. In line with the study of anthropologists and performance scholars on how these ritualistic actions have shaped social meaning and cultural identity, the study on *Kamrupia Dhulia* gratifies Arnold van Gennep, Victor Turner, and Richard Schechner for their deep explorations on the subject. The marginal social position of the *Kamrupia Dhulias* and the economic hurdles they face in day-to-day life also picture the differences between their social and cultural life. Entangled in the interstices of the liminal status, these performers find their authority in the expressions of their performances.

## Kamrupia Dhulia: Community and Cultural Context

The term '*Kamrupia*' emerges from the *Kamrup* kingdom, meaning '*from Kamrup*'. And the word '*Dhulia*' means 'one who plays the *dhol* or *dhul* (drum)'. *Kamrupia Dhulias* are the drummers who carry the legacy of the traditional art of playing drums specific to the *Kamrup* region. These drummers are generational, and they practise the art from their day-to-day profession. Practice often begins at an early age, and a young learner observes the performance of senior drummers and gradually learns the rhythmic patterns. Commonly seen, these drummers belong to the marginal social class and thus do petty jobs often regarded as not mainstream. However, during ritualistic performances, they are regarded as sacred. Mohan Chandra Barman, popularly known as Mohan Bhaira, was one of the prominent figures of the *Kamrupia Dhulia* community who shaped the course of recognition for these marginal performers. These *dhulias* form groups of performers consisting of ten to twenty members, sometimes even more. They

not only play the drums but also perform acrobatics and skits, called ‘songs’. One of their key attractions is their unique dress, which is more likely to attract the audience and keep their attention focused.

The *Kamrupia Dhulia* is one of the folk arts carrying heritage in the vast cultural ocean of Assam. These inner elements of the *dhulia* acts include *Bhairami, Song, Acting, Bhaona, Dance, Bardhol, and Khot*. There is a record of a conversation between the Guru of Shankardev and his devotees in the *Katha Guru Charit* that shows that the Kamrupia drums were widely used long before the *Shankari* era. *Madhava Kandali* mentions the drum in his *Ramayana* as follows:

*‘dhol heno dima pare chungar baduli,  
Pipiya chotoke porbotok lowe tuli.’*

The antiquity of the drums and the *Kamarupia dhulias* can be inferred from the *Katha Gurucharita* and the *Ramayana* of *Madhava Kandali*.

### **Liminality and Cultural Authority**

Charles-Arnold Kurr van Gennep, in his finest work, *Les Rites de Passage* (van Gennep, 2004), in the year 1909, compared the stages of ceremonies through which an individual transitions while observing the rituals. As an ethnographer, van Gennep interprets how these stages of transition regenerate social forms in these rites as insignia of death and rebirth. Studying across different cultures and societies, van Gennep explained rituals and rites of birth, adulthood, marriage and death and how an individual witnesses the separation stage first, then the *liminal* stage where the individual stands between interstices. Every society has its own set of rituals to mark this stage. *Incorporation* is the final stage, and through these stages of transition, every society embraces change. The liminal phase lies in the middle, as in the *rites of passage*, where the individual in transition remains external to the ordinary social structure for a very brief time. When the *Kamrupia Dhulia* perform in the religious festivals, they are regarded as sacred, ignoring the fact that they hold a marginal social status and are otherwise not so sacred. This position resembles the liminal stage described by van Gennep.

Victor Turner (Turner, 1982) termed ‘*ritual persona*’ while studying the roles and symbolic figures within the social drama representing the symbolic meaning during ceremonies in contrast to the settings of ordinary life. A more comprehensive situation arises in the case of *Kamrupia Dhulias* while performing during festivals and ceremonies, operating as a *ritual persona* in Turner’s sense. Turner argues that these ritual personas exist only during the ceremonial period. On the other hand, Richard Schechner, in his *performance theory*, depicts these performances as ‘*restored behaviour*’, where a performer deviates from the actions of daily life but repeats them in a learned, structured stage. The pattern of drumming does not change with every other performance

but follows a structured way. The *dhulia* follows established rhythmic cycles and thus restores a behaviour that already exists in the community memory. The drumming patterns, bodily gestures, and ceremonial timing depict actions preserved across generations.

Erving Goffman's *dramaturgical perspective* analyses the performers in two different ways: as being on the *front-stage* and the *back-stage*, visible and managed through dress, gestures and controlled behaviour (Goffman, 1956). The *Kamrupia Dhulias* perform during ritualistic festivals, ceremonies which, otherwise, contrast their parallel perspective of daily social life. These performers use symbols, props and related folk material to support their role and thus mark the authority of the performer within that space. The ritual ground acts as a stage. From the perspective of Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus* (Bourdieu & Nice, 1977), these social practices develop through long experience within the community. Here *habitus* can be attributed to the persistent behaviour acquired from the experiences of daily life, as these performances do not develop from formal rules of performance alone. *Habitus* shaped the *Kamrupia Dhulias* to consciously calculate, judge situations and perform cultural practices and thus sculpted the tradition across generations. Paul Connerton, in his book *How Society Remembers* (Connerton, 1989), examined how society collects memory through actions which do not solely survive on written records or oral narratives. These '*incorporating practices*' use the body as the medium of transferring knowledge from generation to generation. The *dhulias* transfer this performance knowledge from generation to generation through practice and physical learning. He further emphasised that repetitive performance strengthens the collective memory.

### **Ritual Authority and Performance Practices**

Ritual authority among the *Kamrupia Dhulia* drummers emerges through performance practices that the community recognises as essential to ceremonial life. The *dhul* or drum and its rhythmic patterns attract the sole dependency of the village rituals, temple festivals, and seasonal celebrations. It is the performer who takes the responsibility to guide the sequence of ritual phases. Therefore, these particular roles place the performers in a distinctive position within the ceremonial space, and as the community gathers to witness the act, it accepts the rhythmic command of the *dhulias*. This authority does not come from priestly status or formal leadership; indeed, it arises from the inherited performance knowledge and from the social trust placed by the greater audience in that knowledge and within that social sphere. It is understandable through several theoretical perspectives, which in turn help explain how this authority operates. *Arnold van Gennep* identified a transitional stage in rituals wherein, in our case, the *dhulia* performers transition from everyday life into sacred roles. *Victor Turner* noted that these performers represent symbolic meaning through sound and movement, which is here the use of drumming to signal unity

and tradition. *Richard Schechner* called this ‘restored behaviour’. Performers repeat actions from earlier generations and imitate the performance to preserve the culture. *Erving Goffman* viewed the ritual ground as a stage where *dhulias* maintain disciplined rhythm. *Pierre Bourdieu*’s concept of *habitus* explains how these skills become natural through long practice. Performers learn posture and ceremonial awareness within their community. This training allows them to adjust to participants without conscious thought. *Paul Connerton* argued that societies remember the art through such physical actions and movements which keep history alive within the body of the performer. These perspectives show that ritual authority among *Kamrupia Dhulias* emerges through discipline of performance practice. The authority lies in embodied knowledge, inherited rhythm, and public recognition by the community. Through their drumming the performers sustain ritual order and transmit cultural memory across generations.

### **Marginality, Challenges and Transformation**

*Kamrupia Dhulia* drummers hold a significant ritualistic role in the cultural sphere of Assam. Their drums mark the opening of festivals and marriage ceremonies, satisfying the belief of the ancient practice of divinity. The people depend on the *Dhulias* to link the present ceremony with community traditions. This ritual status does not result in a high social position in daily life. To consider the ethnographic evidence, most *Dhulia* families live in modest settlements and rely on multiple petty jobs. Drumming alone does not provide a stable income, which results in performers often working as farmers, carpenters, or daily wage workers. Festivals bring small payments of rice or cash, but the income stays irregular. A drummer might lead a temple festival and then return to manual labour the next morning. Social attitudes also show this marginality, thus implying the dual role within the same social sphere. People respect the drummer during the ceremony and request specific rhythms. This recognition fades once the ritual ends. The *dhulia* moves between two worlds. He commands the rhythm of the gathering but shares the economic struggles of rural workers. Education now affects the path of younger members. Some families send children to school to find work outside traditional professions.

### **Conclusion**

This study of *Kamrupia Dhulia* drummers attempts to reveal a complex relationship between ritual performance, social identity, and cultural memory in Assamese village life. *Dhulia* performers occupy a central place during ceremonial gatherings, where their drum rhythm organises ritual movement and signals important moments within festivals and temple events. Through this performance the *Dhulias* hold symbolic authority within the ceremonial space. Their performance connects the present celebration with earlier traditions preserved by the community. The theoretical perspectives discussed in this paper

help explain this role, where Van Gennep's idea of ritual transition shows how performers enter a special ceremonial position during the event, and Turner's concept of ritual persona highlights the symbolic identity that the drummer represents. Schechner's explanation of restored behaviour shows how rhythmic patterns pass from one generation to the next. Goffman's dramaturgical view clarifies how performance unfolds before a public audience. Bourdieu's concept of habitus explains the embodied skill that experienced drummers display. Connerton's work on bodily memory reveals how repeated performance preserves cultural knowledge. Despite their ritual importance, *Dhulia* performers often face modest economic conditions and limited social prestige in everyday life. Many depend on agriculture and manual labour outside the festival season. Modern media and urban employment create new pressures on the continuity of the tradition, and they are often seen avoiding them in search of modern entertainment. Nonetheless, the practice continues through community attachment, informal learning, and repeated performance. The *Kamrupia Dhulia* tradition thus represents a living cultural practice that carries ritual knowledge, collective memory, and regional identity across generations in Assam.

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# **Influence of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata on the Life of the Gorkha Community with Special Reference to North-East India**

**Dr. Lalit Shrestha**

## **Abstract**

The civilizational continuity of South Asia has been deeply influenced by classical epic traditions that have transcended geographical, linguistic and ethnic boundaries. Among these traditions, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have functioned not only as literary masterpieces but also as normative texts guiding ethical conduct and social organization. While their influence on mainstream Hindu society has been widely examined, their role in shaping the socio-cultural life of minority diasporic communities remains comparatively underexplored. One such community is the Gorkha population residing in the North-Eastern region of India.

The Gorkhas, primarily Nepali-speaking people who migrated to various parts of North-East India during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, have retained a distinct cultural identity despite living in a multicultural environment characterized by diverse indigenous traditions. This research paper examines how epic narratives derived from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have influenced the religious practices, moral frameworks, social organization, oral traditions and identity formation of the Gorkha community in states such as Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Manipur.

Through qualitative analysis of ritual practices, folklore narratives, literary expressions and everyday social behaviour, the study argues that the epics function as frameworks for ethical living and communal cohesion within the Gorkha diaspora. The findings suggest that epic-inspired ideals such as

duty, loyalty, sacrifice, justice and righteousness continue to inform social norms and interpersonal relationships among Gorkhas in North-East India. Furthermore, the localization of epic traditions within indigenous cultural contexts has contributed to the development of a hybridized identity that integrates Himalayan heritage with regional values.

The study concludes that the Ramayana and the Mahabharata serve as vital instruments of cultural continuity and identity preservation within diasporic communities, enabling the Gorkhas of North-East India to maintain connections with their ancestral traditions while adapting to new socio-cultural environments.

### **Keywords**

Gorkha Community, North-East India, Epic Tradition, Cultural Identity, Oral Tradition,

## **1. Introduction**

Epic literature occupies a central position in the cultural and philosophical history of India. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata, composed over several centuries, represent foundational texts that articulate moral values, social responsibilities and metaphysical insights central to Indic civilization. These epics have shaped collective consciousness across diverse communities by providing models of ethical behaviour and social governance.

In the context of North-East India, a region characterized by ethnic plurality and historical migration, epic traditions have played a significant role in facilitating cultural integration. The Gorkha community, which settled in this region during the colonial period, represents a diasporic population that has preserved its cultural heritage through sustained engagement with epic narratives. Despite geographical displacement from their ancestral homeland, the Gorkhas have maintained continuity with their religious and philosophical traditions through ritual practices, oral storytelling and literary production inspired by these epics.

This paper seeks to examine the influence of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata on the socio-cultural life of the Gorkha community in North-East India. By analysing religious practices, ethical frameworks, literary expressions and processes of cultural assimilation, the study aims to demonstrate how epic traditions contribute to identity formation and social cohesion within diasporic settings.

## **2. Historical Background of Gorkha Settlement in North-East India**

The historical settlement of the Gorkha community in North-East India represents a significant chapter in the socio-cultural transformation of the region. The migration of Nepali-speaking populations—now collectively identified as Gorkhas—into the North-Eastern frontier of the Indian subcontinent can be

traced primarily to the nineteenth century, although earlier movements across the Indo-Himalayan corridor cannot be entirely ruled out. These migrations were influenced by a combination of political, economic and strategic factors that reshaped demographic patterns across the Eastern Himalayan belt.

A major turning point in the movement of Gorkha populations occurred during the colonial period, particularly after the Anglo-Nepalese War (1814–1816), which culminated in the signing of the Treaty of Sugauli between the Kingdom of Nepal and the British East India Company. This treaty not only redefined territorial boundaries but also facilitated the recruitment of Nepali soldiers into the British Indian Army. Recognizing the military capabilities of these hill communities, the colonial administration began employing Gorkhas extensively in frontier security operations across the North-Eastern region. Consequently, several Gorkha regiments were stationed in strategic locations in Assam and adjoining hill areas, leading to the gradual establishment of permanent settlements.

In addition to military recruitment, economic opportunities played a crucial role in attracting Gorkha migrants to North-East India. The expansion of tea plantations in Assam during the nineteenth century created a demand for skilled labour in agriculture, livestock management and plantation maintenance. Many Gorkha families migrated to the Brahmaputra Valley to engage in pastoralism, dairy farming and subsistence agriculture. Their expertise in animal husbandry, particularly cattle rearing, enabled them to integrate into the agrarian economy of the region with relative ease.

The colonial administration also encouraged the settlement of Gorkhas in sparsely populated frontier areas as part of its strategy to consolidate territorial control. Migrants were often granted land for cultivation in districts such as Sonitpur, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia and North Lakhimpur in Assam. Similar patterns of settlement emerged in present-day Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Nagaland, where Gorkha communities established villages engaged in farming, forestry and trade.

Over time, these settlements evolved into stable socio-cultural units characterized by shared linguistic and religious practices. Despite being geographically distant from their ancestral homeland, the Gorkhas retained strong cultural ties through the preservation of traditional customs, festivals and belief systems. The Nepali language functioned as a unifying medium of communication, while religious observances rooted in Hindu mythology reinforced communal solidarity.

Interaction with indigenous ethnic groups in North-East India facilitated processes of cultural exchange and adaptation. The Gorkhas adopted certain local customs while simultaneously introducing elements of their own cultural heritage into the regional milieu. This reciprocal relationship contributed to the emergence of a hybrid cultural identity that reflects both Himalayan and North-

Eastern influences.

The post-independence period witnessed further consolidation of Gorkha settlements in the region. Access to education and employment opportunities enabled members of the community to participate in administrative, military and professional sectors. However, challenges related to citizenship recognition and socio-political representation also emerged, prompting the formation of community organizations aimed at safeguarding cultural and legal rights.

Today, the Gorkha community constitutes an integral component of the demographic landscape of North-East India. Their historical migration and settlement patterns have significantly influenced the socio-economic development of the region while contributing to its cultural diversity. Understanding this historical background is essential for analysing the subsequent impact of classical epic traditions on the community's religious practices, ethical values and collective identity.

### **3. Religious Influence of Epic Traditions**

Religion constitutes one of the most fundamental dimensions of social organization within the Gorkha community of North-East India, and its practices are deeply influenced by classical Hindu epic traditions. The religious worldview of the community is significantly shaped by philosophical and ethical teachings derived from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, which serve as primary sources of spiritual guidance and ritual symbolism. These epics are not merely regarded as literary texts but are perceived as sacred narratives that define moral conduct and religious duty in everyday life.

The worship of deities prominently featured in epic traditions—such as Lord Rama, Lord Krishna, Shiva and Goddess Durga—forms an integral part of the religious practices observed by the Gorkha community. Temples and household shrines often house images or symbolic representations of these deities, reflecting the community's devotional orientation. Regular recitation of sacred verses, devotional singing (bhajans) and performance of ritual ceremonies based on epic narratives contribute to the preservation of spiritual traditions across generations.

Festivals inspired by events described in the epics occupy a central position in the religious calendar of the Gorkha community in North-East India. Celebrations such as Dussehra (Vijayadashami) commemorate the victory of righteousness over evil as symbolized by the triumph of Rama over Ravana in the Ramayana. Similarly, Diwali is observed as a celebration of the return of Rama to Ayodhya after his exile, representing the restoration of moral order and social harmony. These festivals are marked by elaborate rituals, community feasts and cultural performances that reinforce collective values of justice, devotion and ethical responsibility.

The influence of epic traditions is also evident in life-cycle rituals such

as birth ceremonies, marriage rites and funeral practices. Many of these rituals incorporate prayers and symbolic gestures derived from epic mythology, emphasizing concepts such as duty (dharma), action (karma) and devotion (bhakti). Marriage ceremonies, for instance, often invoke the ideals of marital fidelity and mutual respect exemplified by epic characters, thereby reinforcing social norms within the community.

Oral storytelling constitutes another important medium through which epic influences are transmitted. Elders frequently narrate episodes from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata during religious gatherings and family events, ensuring the continuity of spiritual teachings. These narratives are often adapted to local contexts, integrating indigenous cultural elements of North-East India while retaining their core ethical messages.

Furthermore, the epics provide a theological framework that shapes the community's understanding of cosmic order and moral justice. Concepts such as the inevitability of righteous action and the consequences of ethical transgression are internalized through religious discourse, guiding individual behaviour and communal decision-making processes.

In this manner, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata exert a pervasive influence on the religious life of the Gorkha community in North-East India. Their narratives function as instruments of moral instruction, spiritual reflection and cultural continuity, ensuring the transmission of traditional values within a dynamic socio-cultural environment.

#### **4. Epic-Derived Moral and Social Framework**

The ethical and social life of the Gorkha community in North-East India is profoundly influenced by normative values derived from classical epic traditions. The philosophical teachings embedded in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata provide a comprehensive moral framework that governs interpersonal relationships, community responsibilities and social behaviour within the community. These epics articulate principles such as dharma (duty), karma (action), satya (truth) and tyaga (sacrifice), which are widely internalized and reflected in everyday life.

One of the most significant contributions of epic traditions to Gorkha society lies in their role as ethical reference points for social conduct. The characters and narratives portrayed in these texts serve as moral exemplars whose actions illustrate the consequences of righteousness and ethical transgression. Ideals of filial duty, loyalty, courage and justice are often invoked in discussions concerning family obligations and leadership roles. These values are transmitted through oral narratives, religious discourse and community education, thereby reinforcing shared norms of behaviour.

Family structure within the Gorkha community is strongly influenced by epic notions of duty and collective responsibility. Respect for elders, obedience

to parental authority and commitment to familial welfare are regarded as essential virtues. The emphasis on kinship solidarity reflects the epic portrayal of family as the fundamental unit of social organization. In this context, moral obligations toward parents, siblings and extended relatives are perceived not merely as social expectations but as sacred duties integral to personal integrity.

Marriage customs also reflect the influence of epic ethics. Rituals associated with matrimonial ceremonies often emphasize ideals of mutual respect, fidelity and cooperation between spouses. Female figures from epic narratives are frequently regarded as embodiments of resilience, devotion and moral strength, contributing to the formation of gender norms within the community. While contemporary socio-economic changes have led to greater flexibility in gender roles, traditional expectations regarding family responsibility continue to be informed by epic ideals.

Community governance and conflict resolution mechanisms similarly draw upon principles derived from epic traditions. Concepts of justice and fairness articulated in these texts influence decision-making processes within local institutions and social organizations. Leaders are often expected to demonstrate integrity, selflessness and adherence to moral law, reflecting the archetype of righteous leadership depicted in epic narratives.

Furthermore, the epics provide a philosophical foundation for understanding social hierarchy and collective responsibility. The emphasis on righteous action and ethical accountability encourages individuals to contribute to communal welfare while maintaining personal discipline. This moral orientation fosters social cohesion and mutual trust, enabling the community to function as a cohesive unit despite the challenges associated with diasporic existence.

In contemporary Gorkha society in North-East India, epic-derived values continue to inform attitudes toward education, professional conduct and civic engagement. The enduring relevance of these ethical principles underscores the role of classical narratives in shaping social identity and guiding communal life.

## **5. Influence on Literature and Oral Traditions**

Literature and oral traditions constitute vital mediums through which cultural values and historical consciousness are transmitted within the Gorkha community of North-East India. The influence of classical epic traditions is prominently reflected in both written literary production and oral narrative practices among the community. The philosophical and thematic elements derived from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have significantly shaped the evolution of Nepali literature and folklore in diasporic contexts.

In literary expressions, epic motifs often serve as symbolic frameworks for interpreting contemporary socio-political realities. Writers and poets within the Gorkha community frequently draw upon mythological imagery, character archetypes and moral dilemmas presented in these epics to address issues such

as identity, migration, social justice and ethical responsibility. Through such creative adaptations, ancient narratives are recontextualized to resonate with modern experiences, thereby bridging the temporal gap between tradition and modernity.

Oral storytelling traditions represent an equally important avenue for the preservation of epic influences. Folk songs, ballads and narrative performances commonly incorporate episodes and characters inspired by epic literature. These narratives are often transmitted across generations through communal gatherings, religious ceremonies and festive celebrations. Elders and community leaders play a crucial role in narrating epic stories to younger members, ensuring the continuity of moral teachings and cultural memory.

The process of localization further enhances the relevance of epic traditions within the North-Eastern context. Epic narratives are frequently adapted to reflect indigenous cultural landscapes, resulting in the integration of local myths and legends with canonical storylines. This syncretic approach enables the community to reinterpret epic themes in ways that align with regional beliefs and practices.

Dramatic performances and ritual enactments based on epic narratives also contribute to the dissemination of cultural values. The staging of mythological episodes during festivals and community events serves both educational and entertainment purposes, reinforcing ethical ideals while fostering communal solidarity. Such performances often incorporate traditional music, dance and costume, reflecting the dynamic interplay between inherited traditions and local artistic forms.

Furthermore, oral traditions rooted in epic mythology function as repositories of collective memory that sustain cultural continuity within diasporic settings. By embedding moral lessons within narrative frameworks, these traditions facilitate the transmission of ethical principles across generations.

In this manner, the influence of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata on literature and oral traditions within the Gorkha community of North-East India underscores the adaptability of epic narratives in diverse socio-cultural environments. Their continued relevance attests to their role in shaping cultural identity and preserving communal heritage amidst changing social circumstances.

## **6. Cultural Assimilation and Hybrid Identity Formation**

The settlement of the Gorkha community in North-East India has resulted in a dynamic process of cultural assimilation that has significantly shaped their collective identity over time. Living within a region characterized by ethnic plurality and diverse indigenous traditions, the Gorkhas have engaged in sustained interaction with various local communities. This interaction has facilitated the exchange of cultural practices, belief systems and social norms, leading to the gradual emergence of a hybridized cultural identity that reflects

both ancestral heritage and regional influences.

A crucial factor in this process of identity formation has been the integration of ethical and philosophical ideals derived from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata into everyday social practices. These epics provide a shared moral vocabulary that transcends linguistic and ethnic differences, enabling the Gorkha community to establish common ground with neighbouring groups. The universal themes of duty, justice, sacrifice and righteousness articulated in these narratives resonate with indigenous value systems, thereby fostering intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding.

Participation in regional festivals and community events has further contributed to cultural assimilation. While preserving traditional religious observances inspired by epic mythology, the Gorkhas have also adopted certain local customs and practices that reflect the socio-cultural environment of North-East India. This reciprocal exchange has enriched both the Gorkha community and the indigenous populations with whom they interact, promoting social harmony and collective resilience.

The adaptation of epic narratives within local folklore represents another important dimension of hybrid identity formation. Storytelling traditions often incorporate elements of regional mythology alongside canonical epic themes, resulting in narrative forms that reflect the lived experiences of the community. Such adaptations illustrate the capacity of epic traditions to evolve in response to changing socio-cultural contexts while retaining their ethical core.

Language also plays a pivotal role in mediating cultural assimilation. While the Nepali language remains a primary marker of ethnic identity, bilingualism and multilingualism are common among Gorkhas residing in North-East India. This linguistic adaptability facilitates social integration and enhances participation in regional cultural life without undermining ancestral traditions.

Furthermore, educational institutions and cultural organizations within the community actively promote the preservation of traditional values while encouraging engagement with contemporary social realities. Through literary activities, religious discourses and cultural programmes, these institutions contribute to the formation of a balanced identity that harmonizes historical continuity with modern aspirations.

In this manner, the process of cultural assimilation among the Gorkha community in North-East India has given rise to a hybridized identity that integrates Himalayan cultural heritage with indigenous regional traditions. The continued relevance of epic-derived values in shaping this identity underscores the adaptability of classical narratives in diverse socio-cultural environments.

## **7. Socio-Political Relevance of Epic Ideals**

Beyond their religious and cultural significance, classical epic traditions exert a notable influence on the socio-political consciousness of the Gorkha

community in North-East India. The ethical and philosophical principles embedded in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata provide normative frameworks that inform attitudes toward governance, justice and civic responsibility within the community. These narratives articulate ideals of righteous leadership, social duty and collective welfare that continue to shape political engagement and community organization.

One of the most significant contributions of epic traditions to socio-political thought lies in their emphasis on moral accountability in leadership. The concept of dharma, frequently highlighted in epic discourse, underscores the obligation of leaders to uphold justice and act in the best interests of society. Within the Gorkha community, expectations regarding integrity, fairness and selflessness in leadership roles often reflect these epic-derived values. Community leaders and local representatives are frequently encouraged to demonstrate ethical conduct and commitment to communal welfare, mirroring the archetype of righteous governance portrayed in epic narratives.

The epics also provide philosophical insights into conflict resolution and social harmony. Principles of dialogue, negotiation and adherence to moral law are often invoked in addressing disputes within the community. Informal decision-making processes, including community councils and social organizations, frequently draw upon ethical teachings derived from epic traditions to ensure equitable outcomes and maintain social cohesion.

Furthermore, epic ideals contribute to the formation of collective identity and political awareness among the Gorkhas of North-East India. Narratives emphasizing duty, sacrifice and perseverance resonate with the community's historical experiences of migration and settlement. These themes have informed socio-political movements aimed at securing recognition, safeguarding cultural rights and promoting social justice.

Educational initiatives and cultural programmes organized by community institutions often incorporate epic narratives to foster civic responsibility and ethical citizenship. By emphasizing values such as honesty, discipline and service, these initiatives seek to cultivate a sense of responsibility toward both the community and the broader national framework.

In contemporary times, the relevance of epic-derived ideals is evident in discussions concerning social equity, governance and public welfare within the Gorkha community. The continued invocation of these principles underscores their adaptability to modern socio-political contexts while preserving traditional ethical foundations.

Thus, the socio-political relevance of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata extends beyond spiritual guidance to encompass community governance, conflict resolution and civic engagement among the Gorkhas of North-East India. Their enduring influence highlights the role of classical narratives in shaping political consciousness and promoting ethical leadership within diasporic communities.

## **8. Contemporary Relevance in a Globalized Context**

In the contemporary era characterized by rapid globalization, cultural homogenization and technological advancement, the preservation of traditional values has emerged as a critical concern for diasporic communities across the world. For the Gorkha community residing in North-East India, classical epic traditions continue to serve as enduring sources of moral guidance and cultural continuity. The ethical and philosophical teachings embedded in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata remain relevant in shaping social attitudes, personal conduct and communal identity amidst changing socio-economic conditions.

The processes of modernization and urbanization have introduced new challenges related to cultural preservation and identity formation. Increased mobility, exposure to global media and evolving occupational structures have influenced traditional modes of social organization within the Gorkha community. However, epic narratives continue to function as stable reference points that provide moral clarity in navigating contemporary dilemmas. Concepts such as duty, righteousness and collective responsibility derived from these texts are frequently invoked in discussions concerning education, professional ethics and social relationships.

Educational institutions and cultural organizations within the community play a vital role in promoting epic traditions among younger generations. Literary competitions, theatrical performances and religious discourses based on epic narratives are organized to foster awareness of cultural heritage. These initiatives facilitate intergenerational transmission of ethical values while encouraging engagement with modern societal realities.

Digital platforms and social media have further expanded the reach of epic traditions in recent years. Online forums, community websites and virtual cultural programmes provide new avenues for disseminating mythological narratives and philosophical teachings. Such platforms enable members of the Gorkha diaspora to maintain connections with their cultural roots despite geographical dispersion.

Participation in regional and national cultural events also reflects the continued relevance of epic-inspired practices. Festivals and public celebrations incorporating mythological themes serve as expressions of communal solidarity and cultural pride. These events reinforce shared values while promoting intercultural dialogue within the multicultural environment of North-East India.

Furthermore, epic-derived ideals contribute to ethical decision-making in contemporary social contexts. The emphasis on honesty, discipline and social responsibility informs attitudes toward public service, environmental stewardship and community development initiatives. In this sense, the epics function as living traditions that adapt to evolving socio-cultural landscapes while preserving foundational moral principles.

Thus, the enduring influence of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata in the lives of the Gorkha community in North-East India underscores their capacity

to address contemporary challenges without compromising cultural integrity. Their relevance in a globalized context highlights the role of classical narratives in sustaining identity, fostering resilience and guiding ethical conduct within diasporic communities.

## **9. Conclusion**

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that classical epic traditions have played a significant role in shaping the cultural, religious and socio-ethical life of the Gorkha community residing in North-East India. The influence of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata extends far beyond their literary or mythological dimensions, permeating various aspects of communal existence including religious observances, social organization, moral conduct and identity formation. These epics function as normative frameworks that guide individual behaviour and collective decision-making processes within the community.

The historical migration and settlement of the Gorkhas in North-East India created a socio-cultural environment in which the preservation of ancestral traditions became essential for maintaining communal cohesion. Epic narratives provided a shared moral vocabulary that enabled the community to negotiate identity amidst diverse indigenous cultures. Through ritual practices, oral storytelling and literary expressions, these narratives have facilitated the transmission of ethical values across generations.

Furthermore, the integration of epic-derived ideals into social institutions has contributed to the development of a cohesive moral framework that governs interpersonal relationships and community governance. Concepts such as duty, justice and collective responsibility continue to inform attitudes toward leadership, family obligations and civic engagement.

The processes of cultural assimilation and hybrid identity formation have also been influenced by epic traditions, which offer universal themes that resonate across ethnic and linguistic boundaries. By adapting these narratives to local contexts, the Gorkha community has successfully integrated elements of regional culture while preserving its Himalayan heritage.

In the contemporary globalized context, the continued relevance of epic traditions underscores their adaptability to evolving socio-cultural realities. Educational initiatives, cultural programmes and digital platforms have facilitated the dissemination of epic teachings, ensuring their accessibility to younger generations.

In conclusion, the enduring influence of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata highlights their role as instruments of cultural continuity and ethical guidance within diasporic communities. Their impact on the life of the Gorkha community in North-East India exemplifies the capacity of classical narratives to sustain identity, promote social cohesion and address contemporary challenges while preserving traditional values. Future interdisciplinary research may further

illuminate the transformative potential of epic traditions in diverse cultural settings.

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# Sacred Speech and Devotional Identity: Linguistic Practices in the *Satra* Tradition of Assam

Chayanika Dutta

## Abstract

The Satra institutions of Assam, founded through the Neo-Vaishnavite movement of Srimanta Sankardeva and later strengthened by Madhavdeva, have played a central role in shaping the religious and cultural life of the region. While scholars have widely discussed their contribution to music, dance, literature, and social reform, the unique language used within *Satras* has received less attention. This article focuses on the distinctive vocabulary and speech practices of the *Satra* tradition, with special reference to Bhogpur *Satra* in Majuli.

Based on fieldwork and observation, the paper explores how everyday speech, ritual terminology, forms of address, naming practices, and pronoun usage reflect humility, discipline, and spiritual identity. The study argues that *Satra* vocabulary is not just a variation of Assamese but a refined devotional register shaped by centuries of religious practice. In the *Satra*, language becomes more than communication; it becomes a way of living devotion and preserving the spiritual legacy of the Neo-Vaishnavite tradition.

**Keywords:** *Satra*, Sacred speech, Sankardeva, *Satra* Tradition, language

## Introduction

The Satra institutions of Assam, established through the Neo-Vaishnavite movement initiated by Srimanta Sankardev and his foremost disciple Madhavdev, have exerted a profound influence on the religious, literary, and cultural life of Assam. The word Satra is originally derived from a Sanskrit word. The term

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Satra is used in the Rigveda. It means a place where yajna (sacrificial rituals) are performed, and food is distributed (Goswami, 1984). In Hemkosh, the word Satra is used to refer to the residence of religious scholars or devotees. (Barua, 1900). Accordingly, a Satra is an important religious institution of Assam. Emerging as centres of spiritual practice, education, and artistic excellence, the *Satras* have significantly enriched Assamese literature and devotional traditions. Satra tradition is an important part of Assamese cultural and religious life. It began in the 15th–16th centuries with the Neo-Vaishnavite movement started by Srimanta Sankardeva. *Satras* are monastic institutions led by a *Satradhikar* and supported by resident devotees called *bhakats*. They help preserve *Ekasarana Nama Dharma* through daily prayer, devotional singing, and reading of sacred texts like the *Kirtan Ghoxa* and the *Bhagavata Purana*. *Satras* are also known for protecting and promoting important cultural forms such as *Sattriya*, *Borgeet*, *Ankiya Naat*, and *Bhaona*. In the past, *Satras* helped reduce caste differences, strengthened the Assamese language, and worked as centers of moral and social education. Even today, despite challenges like modernization and the migration of young people, *Satras* continue to play a vital role in preserving Assam’s Vaishnavite religious and cultural heritage (Kalita, 2023).

This tradition is clearly evident in the life of the Bhogpur *Satra* in Majuli. Bhogpur *Satra*, established by Srimanta Sankardev in 1528 CE in Majuli, Assam, is a prominent center of *Sankari* art, culture, and Vaishnavism. The earlier name of Bhogpur was Dinapur. When Srimanta Sankardev was travelling to Rangpur under the instruction of the Ahom king, he stopped at Dinapur, the residence of his disciple Dinanath Bharali, to take rest. Sankardev was deeply pleased with the devotion of the people and their abundant hospitality and offerings. As a result, he renamed the place “bhogpur” (Goswami, 2011). Over time, the *Satra* grew with a *kirtan ghar*, *manikut*, gardens, and sacred rituals, led today by Sri Sri Duttadev Goswami, the fourteenth *Satradhikar*. Here, the daily life of *bhakats* follows strict discipline. Most *Satras* function like small family units with three to six members. Boys are often admitted at a young age, around four to six years old, and trained in celibate monastic life. However, the system also allows flexibility through the *Udaseen* practice, which permits a person to leave monastic vows later if they choose. Before Sankardeva’s reform movement, Assam had many ethnic religious traditions such as those of the Chutia, Ahom, Kachari, Bhuyan, and Mishing communities (Saikia, 2018).

Beyond their religious and cultural roles, the *Satras* also have a distinctive language use that sets them apart from general Assamese society. Inside the *Satra*, words are not used casually; they reflect respect, humility, discipline, and spiritual values. The language spoken among *bhakats* shows a clear sense of hierarchy and devotion. For example, special terms are used to address the *Satradhikar*, senior *bhakat*, and fellow devotees. Everyday activities such as eating, sleeping, praying, or performing rituals are described with devotional

expressions rather than ordinary words. Even instructions and conversations carry a tone of politeness and self-control.

This unique vocabulary has developed over centuries within the Satra tradition and helps maintain its spiritual environment. It teaches values like obedience, simplicity, and surrender to God through language itself. In this way, speech becomes part of religious practice. By studying these special words and expressions, we can better understand how *Satras* shape identity, discipline, and community life not only through rituals and arts, but also through language.

Therefore, this article aims to explore these distinctive linguistic features of the Satra tradition. It seeks to examine how specific words, forms of address, and patterns of speech reflect the values, discipline, and devotional mindset of the *Satra* community. By analyzing this specialized vocabulary, the study attempts to show how language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a tool for shaping identity, hierarchy, and spiritual life within the *Satra* tradition.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative and ethnographic approach to examine the distinctive vocabulary and linguistic practices of the Satra tradition, with special reference to Bhogpur *Satra* in Majuli. Data were collected through fieldwork involving participant observation, informal interviews, and interactions with *bhakats*, *Aldharas*, Satra authorities, and local people. The research carefully documented everyday conversations, ritual speech during *naam-prasanga* and *Guru Kirtan*, forms of address, pronoun usage, architectural terminology, and occupational titles used within the *Satra*. Field notes were maintained to record speech contexts and social settings in which specific terms were used. Secondary scholarly works were also reviewed to provide historical and cultural context.

### **Linguistic Practices in the *Satra* Tradition**

Before analyzing the linguistic features in detail, it is important to outline the classification of *Satras* and the modes of life they sustain. The threefold categorization *Udaseen*, *Ardha Udaseen*, and *Grihasthi* reflects different degrees of renunciation and engagement with worldly life. Among these, the *Udaseen Satras*, characterized by devotion and strict discipline, provide the most concentrated environment for observing refined devotional speech. The institutional structure, educational training, ritual discipline, and hierarchical organization together shape a distinct communicative culture. Therefore, an examination of *Satra* classification and *Satriya* education becomes essential for understanding how specialized vocabulary emerges, is transmitted, and is maintained within the devotional community. In *satra* tradition, the sayings or proverbs of devotees (*Fokora*) also often carry hidden meanings and are not immediately easy to understand. Many of them convey spiritual or moral lessons

in a subtle way. Some examples of such Satriya devotional sayings include:

“*Raij bulile raja, bhakat bulile Chaitanya.*”

“*Baaynar ghoror kukure’o rag diye.*”

“*Hastiruo pichale pao, sajjanor’o bure nao.*”

“*Nokoi’o nuwaro phatamukh k’oleo lage bhaktar dox.*”

### **Satriya Education and Cultural Formation**

Children who are admitted into a *Satra* as Vaishnavas enter a structured and disciplined environment from a very young age. Their training is not limited to religious rituals alone; rather, it is a holistic process that shapes their body, mind, behavior, and speech. Along with basic general education, they receive systematic instruction in *Mati Akhara*, which builds physical strength, balance, coordination, and mental discipline. This training prepares them not only for performance traditions like *Satriya* dance but also for cultivating self-control and devotional focus in daily life.

Music and performance are central to their education. They learn devotional songs such as Borgeet, Bhatima, and *Ghosha path*, instrumental practices such as playing the *khol* and *taal*, scriptural recitation, and participation in *naam-prasanga*. Through constant repetition and participation in collective rituals, they internalize spiritual concentration. *Satriya* dance is taught not merely as an art form but as an offering to the divine. From an early age, children are trained to use respectful forms of address, refined vocabulary, and devotional expressions in everyday conversation. They learn to avoid harsh, casual, or ego-centred language. Instead, humility, collective identity, and reverence become central to their mode of communication. This linguistic discipline is reinforced through daily interaction with senior *bhakats* and the *Satradhikar*, where hierarchy and spiritual etiquette are carefully maintained. This discipline is also maintained outside the *Satra* space.

Thus, education within the *Satra* is not simply instructional but formative. It creates a distinct *Satriya* identity through ritual practice, artistic training, and disciplined speech. Language, in this process, becomes a powerful cultural marker shaping how devotees see themselves, relate to others, and understand their spiritual responsibilities in the *satra* tradition.

### **Linguistic Characteristics of the *Satra* Tradition**

The language used inside *Satras* is slightly different from everyday colloquial Assamese. Although it is based on Assamese, its tone and style are more refined, devotional, and disciplined. The speech of *bhakats* conveys humility, respect, and spiritual awareness. It avoids casual or harsh expressions and instead reflects calmness and reverence.

This devotional style of language is closely connected to the prose found in the *Charit Puthis*, the biographical texts of Srimanta Sankardeva, Madhavdeva,

and later *santamahantas* or the next generation of devotees. These texts were written in simple Assamese but carried a deeply devotional tone. They often included elements of *Brajavali*, a literary dialect developed by Sankardeva to give sacred dignity to religious literature. *Brajavali* blended Assamese, Maithili, and Sanskrit influences, creating a language that sounded elevated yet accessible.

The spoken language within *Satras* reflects this devotional literary tradition. While it remains understandable and rooted in Assamese, its expressions are shaped by spiritual discipline. In this way, speech mirrors the devotional atmosphere of the *Satra* itself. Language becomes not just a tool for communication but a continuation of the sacred literary and spiritual heritage of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement.

### **Devotional Address and Theological Vocabulary**

In the *Satra* tradition, humility and respectful address are very important. Devotees believe in complete surrender to Lord Krishna, and this surrender is reflected in the way they speak. God is never addressed casually; instead, His name is spoken with deep reverence and devotion. The language used for the divine expresses love, respect, and spiritual submission.

Interestingly, different *Satras* may use different names for Lord Krishna, showing slight variations in devotional emphasis. For example, Dakshinpat *Satra* refers to Krishna as Yadavrai, Auniati *Satra* uses the name Govinda, Garhmur *Satra* addresses Him as Gopal, and Bengenati *Satra* worships Him as Basudev. Although the deity remains the same, these different names reflect local traditions, historical influences, and particular devotional preferences within each *Satra*.

These variations do not create division but instead show the richness of the Vaishnavite tradition in Assam. They highlight how theological understanding and devotional expression can take slightly different forms while remaining united under the broader framework of *Ekasarana Nama Dharma*. Through such forms of address, language becomes an expression of faith, identity, and localized spiritual heritage.

### **Structural Vocabulary of the *Satra***

The physical layout of a *Satra* is closely connected to its spiritual and communal life, as reflected in its specialized terminology. Each part of the *Satra* has a specific name that carries both practical and symbolic meaning. *Karapat* is the gateway located at the front of the *satra*. It marks the entrance to the *satra* and symbolizes the beginning of the spiritual environment. According to custom, visitors remove their shoes or footwear at the *Karapat* before entering the *satra* premises. Another important feature of a *satra* is the *Chari Hati*. The houses where the Vaishnava devotees live are arranged around the *Namghar* or *Kirtanghar*, and these residential groups are called *Hati*. Since they are located

in four directions, they are named East *Hati*, West *Hati*, North *Hati*, and South *Hati*. Within each *Hati*, there are individual houses called *Boha* that serve as living spaces for devotees.

At the center of the *Satra* stands the *Kirtan Ghar* or *Namghar*, the main prayer hall where collective worship, *naam-prasanga*, and major rituals take place. This space represents the spiritual heart of the institution. Attached to it is the *Manikut*, the inner sanctum located on the eastern side, where sacred objects and scriptures are kept. Inside the *Manikut* is the *Guru Asana*, the sacred seat symbolizing the spiritual authority of the Guru and the presence of divine teachings. Above this seat hangs the *Chandratap*, a cloth canopy that adds both dignity and sacredness to the space. The *Laikhuta*, the first pillar of the *Kirtan Ghar*, also holds ritual importance and marks the structural and symbolic foundation of the prayer hall.

In addition, the *Satra* includes a *Bhoral*, a storehouse where manuscripts, scriptures, and sacred items are carefully preserved. These architectural terms are not merely functional labels; they reflect the organized communal life and spiritual hierarchy of the *Satra*. Through this structural vocabulary, space itself becomes sacred, and the physical environment supports the community's devotional discipline.

### Ritual And Festival Vocabulary

In the Satriya tradition, the *Tithis* (death anniversaries) of Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhavdeva are observed with great devotion under the name *Guru Kirtan*. This annual observance is not a single-day event but a carefully structured four-day ritual, and each stage has its own specific terminology. The *Guru Kirtan* at Bhogpur *Satra* is a four-day festival honoring Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardev and Madhavdev. The first day, *Chaul Bhojoni*, includes distributing rice, offerings, morning prayers, scripture readings, and cultural performances. On the second day, called *thaponi*, the rituals and devotional songs continue, accompanied by traditional music and dance. The third day, *Main kirtan*, is the principal day with scripture recitations, *prasada* distribution, and major cultural programs. On the fourth day, *Bhangoni*, the festival concludes with final rituals, *kirtans*, and the ceremonial return of sacred items. Moreover, the *Tithis* (death anniversaries) of former *satradhikars* and senior *bhakats* of the *satra* are observed with prayers, scripture recitation, and *naam kirtan* in their remembrance. Besides these, the *satra* observes *Raas Mahotsav*, Sri Krishna's birth anniversary is celebrated as *Janmastami*, Holi as *doul-Utsav*, and annual *naam kirtan* called as *Bor Xobah* for the well-being of the *satra*. During *Bor Xobah*, devotees perform *Naam Kirtan* (devotional singing) throughout the day. In the evening and at night, they present religious dramas, such as *Ankiya Bhaona*, depicting stories from scriptures and the life of Lord Krishna.

### Social Address and Terminology

The language within the *satra* clearly reflects its internal hierarchy and spiritual values. Special terms are used to identify positions, ages, and responsibilities within the institution. For the smooth management of various religious ceremonies in a *satra*, a chief person, *Satradhikar* (Authority), is selected who oversees the administration. People who personally assist the *Satradhikar* in his tasks are called *Aldhara*. The *Panchani* serves as the messenger of the *Satra* and sometimes assists, as an *Aldhara* does. *Burabhakat* refers to the head or chief devotee of the *satra* or *Boha*, while *Budhabhakat* is used for an elderly and respected devotee. A *Namghoriya* is appointed to maintain the Kirtan house properly. In villages, similar officials maintain the Kirtan or Namghar, and each household contributes donations for its upkeep. A *Paldhoriya* is appointed to periodically supervise the *Kirtanghar*, *Hat*, and *Chouhad* of the *Satra*. In a *satra*, the *Deuri* assists in performing religious rituals and maintaining discipline during prayers and ceremonies. The *Biloniya* helps prepare and distribute food or *prasada* for the devotees in the *satra*. The term *Atai* is one of the most important forms of address in *satra* life. It is a respectful term used regardless of age and expresses spiritual equality and humility. In the *Boha*, senior devotees who are older than the young devotees but younger than the *Burhabhakat* are respectfully addressed as *Dekajon* or *Xoru Dekajon*. *Atairam* or *Haribhaktis* a respectful address used to refer to companions in *xaran-Bhajan* practice. *Xaran* and *Bhajan* are important spiritual practices in the *satra*. *Xaran* is given by the *Satradhikar* and helps purify the body, mind, and speech while teaching moral and spiritual values. *Bhajan* is given by the elder devotees or *Burhabhokot*. These practices guide devotees to live a moral, disciplined, and spiritual life.

Interestingly, common Assamese kinship terms such as *khura* or *bardeuta* are generally avoided within the *satra*. Instead of family-based identity, spiritual fraternity becomes more important. Even in simple interactions, devotion is reflected in speech. When someone calls another person, the reply often begins with “Ram,” showing constant remembrance of the divine name in everyday communication. For example: Ram! *Ki koi?* (What are you saying?). The *Satradhikar*, who is the spiritual head of the *satra*, is sometimes addressed respectfully as “*Prabhu*” or “*Lord*,” recognizing his role as a guide. However, he addresses the devotees as “*Atai*,” creating a sense of spiritual brotherhood rather than strict worldly authority. Thus, *satra* forms of address balance hierarchy with humility, reinforcing discipline while maintaining devotional equality.

Within the *satra*, different responsibilities and artistic roles are marked by specific titles. These titles do not simply describe work; they reflect devotion, skill, and service to the religious community. For example, *Bayon* refers to a drum player who performs with the *khol* during *naam-prasanga* and other rituals. A senior or highly skilled drummer may be called *Bor Bayon*. The *Gayan* is the lead singer who guides devotional songs and maintains the rhythm of collective

worship. The *Pathak* is responsible for reciting sacred scriptures such as the Bhagavata or Kirtan, ensuring correct pronunciation and devotional expression. The term *Oja* refers to a teacher or expert performer, especially in dance, music, or dramatic traditions. Another important role is *Nam Lagowa*, the person who begins or leads the chanting of the divine name during prayer sessions. Each of these roles is essential to maintaining the *satra's* spiritual and cultural life.

Importantly, these titles are usually followed by the respectful term “Atai,” showing that even while recognizing specific duties, humility and equality remain central values. Thus, these titles within the Satra combine skill, service, and spiritual dignity, reinforcing the idea that every role, whether musical, ritual, or educational, is an offering to the divine.

### **Naming Practices and Pronoun Usage**

In the Satra tradition, naming carries deep spiritual meaning. When children are admitted into the Satra, they are often given new names connected with the divine, such as Krishna, *Hari*, or *Narayan*, *Jadav*, *Jadu* etc. This naming symbolizes a form of spiritual rebirth. It marks the child's entry into a devotional life and shows that their identity is now linked to the service of God rather than ordinary worldly ties. Through such names, devotion becomes part of everyday identity, constantly reminding the individual of their spiritual commitment.

Pronoun usage in *satra* tradition also reflects humility and discipline. Speech avoids direct, commanding, or self-centered expressions. Instead of using ordinary second-person forms, more respectful alternatives are chosen. In the devotional speech style (Bhakatiya kathanshaili), the use of pronouns, case markers, and masculine forms of words makes the style of expression pleasant and graceful. For example, *amat*, *aponasob*, *ami xobe*, etc.” These collective expressions, such as “our”, are often preferred over “my,” reducing individual ego and emphasizing community belonging. This careful use of pronouns reinforces the values of modesty, equality, and surrender to the divine. In this way, even small elements of language, such as names and pronouns, help shape a devotional mindset and maintain the spiritual culture of the Satra.

### **Conclusion**

The vocabulary of the *satra* tradition is not simply a different way of speaking Assamese; it reflects a deeply rooted devotional culture. Every term, whether related to ritual, hierarchy, architecture, naming, or daily interaction, carries spiritual meaning. Through language, values such as humility, discipline, respect, and communal harmony are constantly reinforced. Speech inside the Satra is shaped by devotional practice and institutional structure, making it an essential part of religious life rather than a separate element.

Influenced by the elements of *Brajavali* introduced by Srimanta Sankardeva, the speech of *satra* represents a refined devotional register within the broader

Assamese language. It preserves continuity with the teachings of Madhavdeva and the Sankardeva.

Therefore, to understand the spiritual and cultural identity of the Satra institutions, one must also understand their language. Satra institution's vocabulary functions not only as a means of communication but as a living expression of faith. It sustains memory, discipline, and collective identity, helping to preserve the spiritual legacy of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement across generations.

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1. Duttadev Goswami (Satradhikar, Bhogpur Satra)
2. Krishna Atoi
3. Anil Dutta
4. Utpal Mahanta

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# **Print Nationalism and Civic Activism in Colonial Tezpur Town of Assam in the Early Twentieth Century**

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**Abstract:** The growth of nationalism in India is associated with the anti-colonial movement. Under the imperial government of British colonialism, different groups of people in India shared a sense of bond among themselves due to the subjugation of the administration. The local histories of nationalist activities in different places in India during colonial times include various local negotiations between local specific aspirations and the larger nationalist goal of independence and sovereignty. Nationalism, while rightly understood as an ideology, was enacted and implemented by the Indian nationalists through their concrete activism of writing, printing, publishing and also a set of locally defined civic engagements. This article briefly dwells on such nationalist activities carried out by educated individuals in Tezpur town through their print, literary and civic engagements during 1900 to 1947.

**Keywords:** Nationalism; Assamese; Print, Identity, Language.

## **Introduction**

Nationalism, in addition to being a political ideology, also includes a set of cultural beliefs and practices. It is seen as a cultural system that brings people together, rather than simply a political ideology. Benedict Anderson famously outlined in his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* that nationalism is a modern creation, not a pre-existing, natural force. He argues that nations are “imagined communities” – a sense of belonging and shared identity among people who may never meet yet feel part of a larger whole. This “imagined” aspect is crucial, as it highlights

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the cultural and social construction of national identities rather than a fixed, inherent reality (Nguyen, 2016). The development of nationalism, Anderson further argued, was caused by the convergence of capitalism and print media (Anderson, 2006). Referring to the advent of the nation as a product of print capitalism, Anderson saw the development of vernacular publishing, replacing the pan-cultural sacred scripts, as a crucial element in the development of nationalist sentiments. The inevitable consequence of vernacular publishing led to the formation of new vernacular reading public that facilitated the modern imagination of, and a sense of belonging to, a shared human collective demarcated through the vernacular linguistic lines. This new identity consciousness and sense of belonging were pivotal in the imagination of the nation and formation of nation-states.

The rise of nationalism in India can be seen as an outcome of its anti-colonial movement against the British imperial rule. The different groups of people in India shared a sense of bond with each other due to the oppression faced by all of them under colonialism. In a recent essay "*Nationalism and the City in Colonial India: Bombay Bombay, c. 1890-1940*" Colonial urban historian Prashant Kidambi highlights that's the studies of Indian nationalism have frequently acknowledged its "urban roots" but not often considered in a systematic and sustained method the ways in which nationalism shaped the city (Kidambi, 2012). In colonial Bombay, nationalism manifested through middle-class mobilization, civic activism, and the emergence of a nationalist press, challenging colonial urban policies and governance. The city became a space where Indians, including an elite representing the masses, engaged in self-reform initiatives and questioned the shortcomings of the colonial state. This involved utilizing newspapers, civil and political associations, and municipal politics to exert influence and challenge colonial power.

According to Chatterjee, even though colonial modernity and the anticolonial struggle first emerged in the urban context, Indian nationalists "devoted most of their imaginative energies to the task of producing an idea not of the future Indian city but of a rural India fit for the modern age" (Chatterjee, 2004, p. 140). To validate this contradiction, he further argues that the perceived lack of agency by the Indian elite in thinking about the city shaped the modern urban lifeworld. For him, "the colonial cities of British India were largely creations of British colonial rulers to which Indians had adapted" (Chatterjee, 2004, p. 140).

The root of Assamese nationalism is embedded in linguistic nationalism of late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Bengali was the official language in the courts and schools in Assam during this period following the directive of the British government (Dutta, 2010). The language rivalry between the Assamese and the Bengali mounted a significant anxiety towards the Assamese identity and culture. At the same time, European literature was a major influence on educated readers in Assam. Before that, the socio-political life of the people of Assam

had come under stress in the mid-nineteenth century. The repeated Burmese invasions, which had virtually reduced Assam to a wasteland, was a major factor for a literary and intellectual vacuum. This gloomy situation was gradually changed by the coming of the British Rule with their modern institutionalized education system and western thoughts, which had an impact on almost every aspect of life and society. With the spread of western education and ideas, the form and content of Assamese literature underwent radical changes. To elucidate the rise of Assamese nationalism, Uddipan Dutta discussed, how “The Assamese students studying in Calcutta, who designed Assamese nationality in the late nineteenth century, took the language as the most important unifying factor for the formation of an Assamese nationality. ‘Bhāxār bikāx holehe jātir bikāx hobo’ (The nation develops only when the language develops) was the slogan of the early Assamese intelligentsia and they began the process of standardization of the language by standardizing orthography, writing grammars and dictionary, and most importantly by using the standardized version in the print. By the end of the nineteenth century the language spoken in Upper and Middle Assam became the accepted standard language of Assam as a direct intervention of this group of young men” (Dutta, 2010, p. 6). Contact with the British and liberal education through the medium of the English language led to a remarkable social and intellectual awakening that resulted in the birth of a new literary era. “The *Orunodoi* (1846), the first printed vernacular periodical in Assamese language under the auspices of the Christian missionaries, was a breath of fresh air that revitalized the Assamese language, which was on the verge of extinction due to colonial policy of replacing Assamese with Bengali as a medium of instruction as well as the court’s language” (Dutta, 2010, p. 3).

Calcutta (Kolkata) was the only centre for higher education for the Assamese students till Cotton College was established in the year 1901 in Guwahati. Assamese students created their space in that port city among the *bhadroloks* (gentlemen) by taking their houses on rents and forming messes. There were a substantial number of students in Calcutta in the eighth decade of the nineteenth century. The Assamese mess in Calcutta had a very important role in the narratives of Assamese nationalism. Instead of the colonial economic exploitation, the Bengali linguistic hegemony was perceived as the real threat to the increasing Assamese nationality. These young, enthusiastic and western educated nationalists initiated a wave of Assamese nationalist activities through their literary and cultural activities in Assam. A great deal of their such activities was pivoted by the printing and publishing of Assamese letters. One of the urban townships that emerged as the hub of such literary and cultural nationalist activities was the Tezpur town of central Assam. The subject of this article is about those print nationalist activities in Tezpur during first half of the twentieth century.

## Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative historical approach to examine how print culture in colonial Tezpur contributed to the development of Assamese identity and nationalist consciousness between 1900 and 1947. The research is based on both primary and secondary sources, including vernacular newspapers and magazines such as *Orunodoi* (1846), *Asam Bilasini* (1871), *Assam Darpana* (1874–75), *Assam News* (1882), *Assam Bandhu* (1885), *Assam Bonti* (1900), and *Usha* (1906–1912), as well as municipal records of Tezpur and writings of Assamese intellectuals like Padmanath Gohainborooah and Hemchandra Baruah. These materials were examined to trace the emergence of civic awareness and local identity among the Assamese middle class, and to understand how print media became a vehicle for social and political mobilization in colonial Assam.

The analysis draws upon Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities and insights from historians such as Prashant Kidambi, Sanjay Joshi, and Ashish Bose to contextualize Assamese nationalism within broader colonial urban processes, including print activism. A historical-analytical and interpretive framework was applied, combining textual and contextual analysis to study editorials, essays, and civic reports from Assamese periodicals and municipal records. Comparative perspectives from other colonial cities like Bombay were also incorporated to situate Tezpur within the wider discourse of Indian urban nationalism. As the study relies exclusively on archival and published materials, no human subjects were involved, and all sources have been cited following academic conventions.

## Brief Background of the Printing Press in Colonial Assam

Like elsewhere, the vernacular presses played a critical role in the promotion of political awakening among the masses in Assam. The history of printing press dated back to January 1846 when the monthly magazine *Orunodoi* was first published by the American Baptist Missionary Nathan Brown from Sivasagar. It was written in a very popular style, and was devoted to religion, science, and general intelligence. Its pages are illustrated with woodcuts copied from the engravings of the *Illustrated London News*, and among other interesting items, it published an Assamese translation of an Ahom *buranji* and a *buranji* of Chutiyas.

After *Orunodoi*, Sri Dattadeb Goswami, the Satradhikar of Auniati Satra of Majuli had set up a printing press at Majuli and started publishing *Asam Bilasini* in 1871. The press was named as '*Dharma Prakash Yantra*'. He was inspired by the missionaries who established a printing press to propagate Christianity. The paper ran successfully for 12 years and ceased to exist in 1883, which can be claimed to be the first Assamese daily established by an Assamese. But it was mainly a religious paper and contained a few items of general information.

The *Assam Darpana* was a monthly journal in Assamese, started during

the year 1874-75 by a resident of the Darang District. The paper was printed in Calcutta and published in Darrang. It existed only for a short time.

In 1882, eminent litterateur Hemchandra Baruah published a weekly tabloid *Assam News* which was a bilingual weekly paper started in Guwahati and contained articles in Assamese and English language. At one time it had as many as 900 subscribers, and its articles were often well written. But, owing to difficulties in the matter of editors and other problems, it gradually fell off and was discontinued in July 1885

*Assam Bandhu*, a monthly vernacular magazine started in 1885 by Rai Bahadur Gunabhiram Barua. It contained articles relating to science, arts and literature and was printed in Calcutta. Only 16 numbers appeared, and the journal was then discontinued for want of support. The editor had commenced a valuable series of article entitled “Assam: past and present”, but this series remained incomplete due to the discontinuation of the periodical.

Around the end of the 19th century, a number of presses being established in Dibrugarh and other places of Upper Assam. The first press in Dibrugarh was established by Radhanath Changkakoti on 9 May 1881, called the “Radhanath Press”. Shivanath Bhattacharya established the “Bhattacharya Press”, around the same time, printing mostly school textbooks and religious books.

### **Print Nationalism and Civic Activism in Tezpur**

The Tezpur had witnessed the rise of nationalism through print in the very beginning of twentieth century as a few enlightened middle class Assamese people from Tezpur led by Padmanath Gohainborooah, the first President of the Assam Sahitya Sabha, established the “Assam Central Press” through collecting public fund which had aimed at scrutinizing the public affairs and ran successfully for 44 years.

The local context of nationalist activities in a small and apparently peripheral town like Tezpur requires to be understood in terms of the dynamic relationship between the pan Indian Nationalist consciousness and the local historical contexts. In the context of Tezpur, the emergent middle-class political activity in the urban public sphere expressed a distinctive civic patriotism, and local identity requires special attention. What is apparent here is the fact that the emergent self-imagination of the urban nationalist activists of Tezpur during that time was the result of a mixture of general anti-colonial goals of freedom as well as the aspiration to preserve the local distinctions. It was like a process of local customization of the global templates of sovereign democratic institutions. As Sanjay Joshi has argued, even though the emergence of this public sphere was “facilitated” by British rule, it was “ultimately created by the efforts of educated Indians ... who invested in presses, worked as journalists, created civic and political associations, and published and debated their ideas either in the press or in the forums of their associations.” It was “through these activities as well

as control of the public sphere, that educated, respectable, but hardly the richest, most powerful or influential of men in colonial India, were able to successfully represent themselves as the middle class” (Joshi, 2010). Major colonial cities of India demonstrated a common print and civic activism by the educated natives, carried out through newspapers and other local publishing, on diverge aspects of the emergent local realities.

In Tezpur, the Asom Central Press accorded a prominent place to the proceedings of the city’s Municipal Corporation, whose deliberations were subjected to intense and sustained scrutiny. It was especially quick to seize upon, and criticize, the privileges claimed by members of the British ruling elite which includes the Bengalis hired by British to run the administration with regard to the distribution of resources within the town. In a joint venture by prominent English educated Assamese elite like Kamalakanta Bhattacharya, Joydev Sarma, Bhabanicharan Bhattacharya and Mathura Mohan Bhattacharya, Padmanath Gohainbarua published started publishing the bi-lingual weekly *Assam Bonti* newspaper from Asom Central Press on 14<sup>th</sup> January 1900 which continued till 1944. As Munin Borkotoki describes “A pioneer English Journalist of Assam, Mathura Mohan Baruah, who was also a patriot to his fingertips for whom no cause was dearer than that of spiritual and material upliftment of Assam and Assamese” (Borkataki, 1972). At initial stage in a general meeting of the press, “few members of the board suggested the name of the paper as “Praja Bondhu”, “Priodicals of Rayats” “Assam Flag” etc.” (Gohainborooah, 2017, p. 125). which directly indicates the patriotic ethos of the urban middle class who also fashioned their *urban* identities through their activities in the public arena.

In the early twentieth century, this Assamese paper that was most prominent in debates over the urban question was the *Asom Bonti*. The *Asom Bonti* had a national perspective, it was nonetheless a “Tezpur paper” that reflected the cosmopolitan ethos of the town from which it was published. The *Asom Bonti* attributed the town’s growing problems to the “unrepresentative” character of urban governance and became a vocal champion of democratic rights in the civic arena. In his autobiography Padmanath Gohainborooah described that the idea of setting up of an independent press and publishing a local newspaper originated from the public-interest forum call *Chatubarga* led by four public intellectual of that times namely late Manuram Borthakur, Kinaram Gaonburha, Pandit Ganganath Goswami and Gohainborooah himself who were inspired by the fearless, simple and non-violent democratic intellectual tradition established by the late Kamalakanta Bhattacharya which had greatly enriched their literary discourse as well as their social and political discussions and movements. The forum’s role was to counter the any kind of oppression, injustice, and any kind of cruelty that was done by the British ruler to the indigenous people, particularly government servant belongs to Assamese; by generating public opinion and sending complain and memorandum signed by collective of civil society to the

government. Later on, Kamalakanta Bhattacharya himself gave the proposal to Gohainborooah to publish a local newspaper (Gohainbaruah, 2017, p. 122). In that way, after lots of effort from conscious local publics (particularly Assamese middle class and Marwari community) the Assam Central Press got established in the year 1900 with a capital amount of rupees 3000 gathered from the public (Gohainborooah, 2017, p. 123).

In the autobiography of Gohainborooah, records of numbers of such incidents of public oppression and counter actions are mentioned. One such incident describes that once in a public meeting, some representative of Tezpur, Chariduar, Na-duar and Choy-duar Rayotcircles made an appeal to the then Chief Commissioner of Darrang district Mr. Phular to waive off the tax from cutting cane, bamboo, timber etc. from jungle, where Mr. Gohainborooah were also present. Mr. Phular personally requested the representatives present there that if the problems of the representatives were not resolved, then the meeting itself should be made public and that this issue should be raised more strongly; and instructed Mr. Gohainborooah by saying that “Padmanath should deal this subject in *Bonti* in an early issue” (Gohainborooah, 2017). Another such instance of such a bold action of *Asom Bonti* was writing of an article against corruption of a Bengali revenue official and his selfishness and partiality with common people based on class and community (Gohainborooah, 2017). Later on, the same issue raised in then circulated English newspaper *Times of Assam* and the British government had compelled to address the issue because of huge public pressure.

In particular, the *Asom Bonti* campaigned vigorously for a reform of the Municipal Corporation, which would transform it into a genuinely democratic body that represented the “public interest. Soon after, Padmanath Gohainborooah became the Ahom Community representative in Assam Council of British Government in the year 1916. As British government decided to give autonomous administrative body to the Indian, in February 1921 Padmanath Gohainborooah again elected as a member of Reform Assam Council of Assam province (Gohainbaruah, 2017). In the year 1922 Padmanath Gohainborooah became the first elected Civil Chairman of Tezpur Municipal Board. It was not known to anyone when exactly the Chawk bazaar was established but it was set up and run under the governance of Tezpur Municipal Board. From beginning of its establishment Chawk Bazaar was the only permanent marketplace in public control where Assamese traders could establish their shops and other trade and commerce. Pioneer book publisher B R Kalita & Co also got space in Chowk Bazaar under the Tezpur Municipal Corporation in the year 1922 in Padmanath Gohainborooah’s regime.

Padmanath Gohainborooah started publishing another magazine – *Usha* in 1906, which continued till 1912. *Usha* had played the role of early harbinger to Assamese nationalism. Many stalwarts like Hemchandra Goswami, Satyanath

Bora, Sarat Chandra Goswami etc. regularly wrote in the magazine that heralded a new year in Assamese literature.

“Civic patriotism”, as elucidated by Laborde, “emphasizes the motivational prerequisites of democratic governance, stresses the need to preserve existing ‘co-operative ventures’ such as nation-states, and demands that existing political cultures be democratically scrutinized and re-shaped in an inclusive direction” (Cécile, 2002, p. 591). The development of the printing press and the standardization of national and language in print allowed scattered individuals to feel a sense of shared experience and simultaneous awareness of events, fostering a national conscious. As Ashish Bose describe in his article in *Municipal Socialism*, published in *Economic and Political Weekly* (1971) the Indian nationalists also took an active part in municipal affairs” (Bose, 1971). Urban historian Prashant Kidambi also made similar statement in the introductory essay of his book “Bombay before Mumbai” that “in the late nineteenth century, English-educated Indians in colonial Bombay became increasingly prominent within the city’s Municipal Corporation, challenging the dominance of the city’s colonial and Indian moneyed elites within that institution” (Kidambi, Introduction, 2019). After the Autonomous Council reform by British in India, the member of the local representative like Layers, Doctors, community representative the member of the Reformed Assam Council increased up-to 53 from 25. The hold of the nationalist elite Indian became powerful. Soon after becoming chairman of Municipal Board, Gohainborooah undertook many development activities within the township of Tezpur. Within his regime he undertook numbers of tasks for Urban landscape development and public amenity enhancement. He had initiated the process of naming street under the Tezpur municipal areas by adopting the model of colonial city of Kolkata for ease of annual tax collection. Development of flower gardens in tri-junction roads areas by removing garbage cleaning and renovation of Tezpur Water Pump, Polton Pukhuri & Dhubi Pukhuri for drinking water. Development of walking zone and Litchi & Orange orchard the bank of those ponds, development of the Padma park, i.e. old Observatory Hill, and at present known as Agnigarh, extension of roads to shipyard of Tezpur, Railway Station etc. and many more (Gohainbaruah, 2017).

These print and civic activities under the leadership of local urban nationalist individuals of that time were instrumental in giving a distinct identity of the emergent urban space in Tezpur.

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# টোকাৰী গীত আৰু উমাকান্ত বৈৰাগী

হীৰকজ্যোতি শৰ্মা

## সাৰকথা

টোকাৰী গীত প্ৰাকশংকৰী যুগৰ সৃষ্টি হোৱা আধ্যাত্মিক লোক সংগীত। টোকাৰী গীতৰ জন্ম উজনি অসমত। টোকাৰী গীতসমূহৰ মূল লক্ষ্য ভগৱত ভক্তিৰ উৎকৰ্ষ সাধন। এই গীতসমূহৰ জৰিয়তে ভক্তসকলে কৃষ্ণ ভক্তিত আকুল হৈ নাম লোৱাৰ সময়ত সকলো বিষয়বাসনাৰ চিন্তা মনৰ পৰা দূৰ কৰি বৈৰাগ্য অৱস্থা প্ৰাপ্ত হয়। সামাজিক, ধৰ্মমূলক ইত্যাদি অনুষ্ঠানত এই ধৰণৰ অনুষ্ঠানসমূহক নিমন্ত্ৰণ জনোৱা হয়। টোকাৰী গীতক অধিক জনপ্ৰিয় কৰি তোলা শিল্পীগৰাকী আছিল উমাকান্ত বৈৰাগী। ডিব্ৰুগড় জিলাৰ খোৱাঙত জন্মগ্ৰহণ কৰা শিল্পীগৰাকীয়ে বিগত অৰ্ধ শতিকাৰো অধিক কালজুৰি অপূৰ্ব শিল্প-সৌকৰ্যৰে টোকাৰী গীতক এক অনন্য মাত্ৰা প্ৰদান কৰিছিল। সাম্প্ৰতিক গৱেষণা-পত্ৰত টোকাৰী গীতলৈ উমাকান্ত বৈৰাগীৰ অৱদান, তেওঁৰ পৰিৱেশন শৈলী ইত্যাদিৰ বিষয়ে আলোচনা কৰা হ'ব।

সূচক অভিধা : টোকাৰী গীত, পৰিৱেশন, কলা-সংস্কৃতি, পৰিবেশ্য কলা, বাদ্য।

## অৱতৰণিকা

লোকসাহিত্য মানৱ ইতিহাসৰ দলিল স্বৰূপ। এই শ্ৰেণীৰ সাহিত্য সমাজৰ অশিক্ষিত (আনুষ্ঠানিক শিক্ষা) মানুহৰ সৃষ্টি যদিও ইয়াৰ মাজত লোকমনৰ মৌলিক ভাবানুভূতিৰ প্ৰকাশ ঘটে আৰু লোকসমাজৰ চিন্তা-চৰ্চা, সামাজিক ধ্যান-ধাৰণা আদিৰ প্ৰতিফলন ঘটে। লোকসাহিত্য যিদৰে বিশ্বজনীন তথা সাৰ্বজনীন সেইদৰে যুগ নিৰপেক্ষ। ইতিহাসে ঢুকি নোপোৱা কালৰে পৰা মুখ বাগৰি চলি অহা নানা তৰহৰ গীত, তন্ত্ৰ-মন্ত্ৰ মালিতা, সাঁথৰ, ফকৰা-যোজনা, কাহিনী গীত আদি লোকসাহিত্যৰ ঘাই সমল। অসমীয়া গীতি সাহিত্যৰ অন্তৰ্গত দেহবিচাৰ গীত আৰু টোকাৰী

হীৰকজ্যোতি শৰ্মা, গৱেষক, পৰিবেশ্য কলা বিভাগ, মহাপুৰুষ শ্ৰীমন্ত শংকৰদেৱ বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়, নগাঁও

গীতবোৰ অসমীয়া লোকজীৱনৰ গীতিময় অভিব্যক্তি। ভক্তিমূলক ভাবধাৰাত এইবোৰে বিশিষ্ট স্থান অধিকাৰ কৰি আহিছে। এইবোৰ আধ্যাত্মিক ভাবাপন্ন হোৱাৰ লগতে এইবোৰৰ কোনো কোনোটোত দেহৰ অনিত্যতা, আত্মাৰ-অবিনশ্বৰতা, কোনো কোনোটোত দেহাটোতেই সমস্ত বিশ্বব্ৰহ্মাণ্ড থকা বুলি কৰা ধাৰণা, সংসাৰখনক মায়াময় বুলি কৰা অনুভৱ, দেহাটোক কচুপাতৰ পানীৰ লগত তুলনা কৰি জীৱন অনিত্যতাৰ কথা সোঁৱৰাই দিয়া, কোনোটোহঁতৰ গুৰুক আশ্ৰয় কৰি ভৱসাগৰ পাৰ হ'বলৈ উপদেশ আদিৰে পৰিপূৰ্ণ কৰা দেখা যায়। দেহবিচাৰ গীত আৰু টোকাৰী গীতৰ বহুত মিল আছে যদিও গীতৰ বিষয়বস্তু একে নহয়। দেহবিচাৰ গীতত দেহ স্বভাৱ ভংগিমাৰ কথা উল্লেখ থাকে আৰু টোকাৰী গীতত আধ্যাত্মিক ভাব, ঈশ্বৰৰ গুণ-গৰিমা, সময়ৰ পৰিৱেশ পৰিস্থিতি ইত্যাদিৰ কথা উল্লেখ কৰা হয়।

সংস্কৃত শব্দ 'টংকৰ' শব্দৰ পৰা টোকাৰী উদ্ভৱ হোৱা বুলি কোৱা হয়। আভিধানিক অৰ্থত টংকৰ অৰ্থাৎ ৰচী বা গুণাত টোকৰ যি বাদ্যত সুৰ সৃষ্টি কৰা হয় তাকেই টোকাৰী বাদ্য বুলি কোৱা হয়। ভৰতমুনিৰ নাট্যশাস্ত্ৰত বাদ্যক প্ৰধানত চাৰিটা ভাগত ভাগ কৰা হয়। তত্বাদ্য, সুশীৰ বাদ্য, ঘন বাদ্য আৰু অবনদ্ধ বাদ্য। যি বাদ্য তাঁৰেৰে সংযুক্ত হৈ থাকে সেই বাদ্য তত্বাদ্য বুলি কোৱা হয়। যেনে— দোতাঁৰা, টোকাৰী, বেহেলা ইত্যাদি। যি বাদ্য বায়ুৰ জৰিয়তে বজোৱা হয় সেই বাদ্য সুশীৰ বাদ্য বুলি কোৱা হয়। যেনে— পেঁপা, বাঁহী ইত্যাদি। যি বাদ্য ধাতুৰে নিৰ্মিত, সেই বাদ্য হ'ল ঘন বাদ্য। যেনে— তাল, বৰকাঁহ ইত্যাদি। যি বাদ্য চামৰাৰে আবদ্ধ সেই বাদ্য অবনদ্ধ বা আনদ্ধ বাদ্য। যেনে— ঢোল, তবলা, ডবা ইত্যাদি।

টোকাৰী হ'ল তত্বাদ্য। টোকাৰী সাধাৰণতে কেইবাবিধো আছে। ইয়াৰে লাউ টোকোৰা এটা বাঁহৰ ভাঁজ দিয়া চেপেনা এডালৰ মাজেৰে গাঠিটোত সংযোগ কৰি যি বাদ্য আঙুলিৰ টোকৰ দি দি বজোৱা হয় সিয়েই এক প্ৰকাৰৰ টোকাৰী। ইয়াক একতাৰা বুলিও কোৱা হয়। আনহাতে বংগদেশ আৰু অসমৰ নামনি অঞ্চলত দুডাল বা তিনিডাল বা চাৰিডাল গুণাজৰীযুক্ত কাঠেৰে সজা মজলীয়া ধৰণৰ এবিধ টোকাৰী সদৃশ তত্বাদ্য আছে, যাক দোতাঁৰা বুলি কোৱা হয়। অসমত প্ৰচলিত টোকাৰী বিধ হ'ল এটুকুৰা কাঠৰ এটা মূৰ কিছু পেটুৱা আকৃতিৰ কৰি লাউ এটাৰ এফালৰ দৰে মাজটো খুলি লোৱা। এই খোলনি কৰা অংশৰ পৰা কাঠডোখৰ ক্ৰমে সৰু কৰি নি হাতেৰে খামুচি ধৰিব পৰা জোখৰ ৰাখি একেবাৰে মূৰৰ অংশ পুনৰ অলপ শকত কৰি ৰাখি তাত সাপৰ ফণা, ময়ূৰ চৰাই আকৃতিত সজোৱা হয়। সেই অংশতে শালকেইটাত টোকাৰীৰ গুণা বা ৰছীসমূহ মেৰিয়াই গুণাকেইডালৰ সুৰ বন্ধা হয়। পেটুৱা খোলনি কৰা অংশৰ ওপৰত গুঁইছাল বা ছাগলীৰ ছাল আদিৰে ছাউনি কৰি লোৱা হয়। মূৰৰ শাল চাৰিটাৰ পৰা ছাউনি কৰা অংশৰ ওপৰেদি চাৰিডাল গুণাজৰী জোৰ দিয়া হয়।

টোকাৰী গীত আৰু উমাকান্ত বৈৰাগী এটা মুদ্ৰাৰ ইপিঠি-সিপিঠি। মহাপুৰুষীয়া ধৰ্ম-সংস্কৃতিৰ অন্তৰ্গত ভাওনাৰ বায়ন, দিহানাম, তথা নাম-প্ৰসংগৰ আধ্যাত্মিক চৰ্চা আৰু পৰিৱেশনৰ লগত জড়িত আছিল বৈৰাগী। ১৯৬৯ চনত ডিব্ৰুগড় অনাতাঁৰ কেন্দ্ৰৰ পৰা কণ্ঠ পৰীক্ষাত উত্তীৰ্ণ হৈ ১৯৬৯ চনৰ পৰা কেন্দ্ৰৰ নিয়মীয়া শিল্পী ৰূপে স্বীকৃত আছিল বৈৰাগী। ১৯৮০ চনত সুৰেন ফুকনৰ

প্ৰযোজনাত গুৱাহাটী জ্যোতি চিত্ৰবন ষ্টুডিঅ'ত বৃন্দাবন নামেৰে অসমৰ প্ৰথমটো টোকাৰী গীতৰ কেছেট পৰিচালনা আৰু কণ্ঠদান কৰে উমাকান্ত বৈৰাগীয়ে। ১৯৮৮ চনৰ কলিকতাৰ ভাইব্ৰেচন ষ্টুডিঅ'ত মথুৰা নামৰ টোকাৰী গীতৰ কেছেটত কণ্ঠদান আৰু পৰিচালনা কৰি লোকসংগীতৰ বৰঙণি আগবঢ়াই বৈৰাগীয়ে। ইয়াৰোপৰি ১৯৮৯ চনত অমিয়া মাধুৰী, ২০১১ চনত ড° যাদৱ বৈশ্যৰ প্ৰযোজনাত ধৰ্ম শিৰোমণি নামৰ কেছেটেৰে অসমীয়া লোকসংগীতৰ বৰপথাৰখনিত বৰঙণি আগবঢ়াই বৈৰাগীয়ে। ২০১১ চনত ভাৰত চৰকাৰৰ সাংস্কৃতিক মন্ত্ৰনালয়ৰ পৰা 'গুৰু শিষ্য পৰম্পৰা' আঁচনি লাভ কৰে তেখেতে। ১৯৭১ চনত ডিব্ৰুগড় অনাতাঁৰ কেন্দ্ৰই তেখেতলৈ প্ৰদান কৰে 'বৈৰাগী' সন্মান। বেচৰকাৰী বিভিন্ন অনুষ্ঠানে বঁটা প্ৰদান কৰাৰ উপৰিও ২০০৭ চনত অসম চৰকাৰৰ পৰা এককালীন সাহায্য লাভ কৰা উমাকান্ত বৈৰাগীক ২০২২ চনত শিল্পী পেঙ্গন, ভাৰত চৰকাৰৰ পৰা 'গুৰু' উপাধি আৰু টোকাৰী গীত আৰু দেহবিচাৰ গীতক নতুন গতি প্ৰদান কৰাৰ বাবে সংগীত নাটক অকাডেমীয়ে 'সংগীত নাটক অকাডেমী' বঁটাৰে বিভূষিত কৰে। এইগৰাকী প্ৰাতিস্মৰণীয় ব্যক্তিৰ ২০২৩ চনৰ ২৬ জুলাই তাৰিখে দেহাৱসান ঘটে।

**অধ্যয়নৰ গুৰুত্ব :** টোকাৰী গীত আধ্যাত্মিক পৰিবেশ্য কলা। শিল্পী উমাকান্ত বৈৰাগীয়ে এই কলাৰ জৰিয়তে সমাজলৈ কেতবোৰ গুৰুত্বপূৰ্ণ বাণী জ্ঞাপন কৰিছিল। টোকাৰী গীতত অনন্য শৈল্পিক মাত্ৰাৰ সংযোগো বৈৰাগীৰ অনবদ্য অৱদান। এইবিধ কলা পেচাগতভাৱে গ্ৰহণ কৰাৰ বাট মোকলাওতা হিচাপেও তেওঁৰ অৱদান লেখত ল'বলগীয়া। এইসমূহ কাৰণতেই বৈৰাগীৰ কৃতিৰ এটা প্ৰণালীবদ্ধ আলোচনা অতি জৰুৰী।

**অধ্যয়নৰ উদ্দেশ্য :** সাম্প্ৰতিক সময়ত টোকাৰী গীতলৈ উমাকান্ত বৈৰাগীৰ অৱদান, তেওঁৰ পৰিৱেশন শৈলী আৰু সাংগীতিক দিশ ইত্যাদি সম্পৰ্কে আলোচনা কৰা হ'ব।

**অধ্যয়নৰ পদ্ধতি :** এই গৱেষণা পত্ৰত বৰ্ণনামূলক আৰু বিশেষণাত্মক পদ্ধতি ব্যৱহাৰ কৰা হৈছে।

**আলোচনা :** বাল্যকালৰ পৰা অসমীয়া লোকসংগীতৰ প্ৰতি আকৰ্ষিত আছিল উমাকান্ত বৈৰাগী। উমাকান্ত গগৈ পৰৱৰ্তী সময়ত ডিব্ৰুগড় অনাতাঁৰ কেন্দ্ৰৰ পৰা বৈৰাগী উপাধিৰে বিভূষিত হৈ উমাকান্ত বৈৰাগী হৈ পৰে। মিলিটাৰী চাকৰিত কাৰ্যনিৰ্বাহ কৰি পৰৱৰ্তী সময়ত নিজ গাঁওলৈ উভতি আহি একাগ্ৰপতীয়াভাৱে নিজৰ কৰ্মত মনোনিৱেশ কৰে বৈৰাগীয়ে। বৈৰাগীৰ পৰিৱেশন শৈলী আছিল শ্ৰুতিমধুৰ। মুখৰ এফালে তামোলখন চোবাই হাঁহি হাঁহি টোকাৰীখন বজাই লয় আৰু ভংগীত দৰ্শক আপোনা পাহৰা হৈ পৰে। অপূৰ্ব কণ্ঠৰ অধিকাৰী আছিল উমাকান্ত বৈৰাগী। পেচাগতভাৱে টোকাৰী গীত পৰিৱেশনেৰে পৰৱৰ্তী সময়ত গুৱাহাটী মহানগৰৰ বাসিন্দা হৈ পৰিছিল বৈৰাগী। সংগ্ৰহ কৰা গীতসমূহ পৰম্পৰাগত সুৰত সজাই নিজৰ মৌলিকতা অক্ষুণ্ণ ৰাখি সম্পূৰ্ণ নিজস্ব পৰিকল্পনাৰে পৰিৱেশন কৰিছিল বৈৰাগীয়ে। টোকাৰীখন বজাই বজাই তেওঁ গাইছিল—

দিহা—

শুনা কৈলাসত গুণ গুণ টোকাৰী বাজে

কৈলাসত গুণ গুণ টোকাৰী বাজে

আই পাৰেবতী কাৰ্তিক গণপতী  
 লগত নন্দী ভৃঙ্গী নাচে  
 কৈলাসত গুণ গুণ টোকাৰী বাজে

পদ—

ৰেবাবে চেবাবে দুখনি টোকাৰী  
 আহিল ভাৰস্তুলৈ নামি।  
 এখনি গ'লগৈ কৈলাসৰ ধামলৈ  
 এখনি ভাৰস্তুত থাকি।

পদ—

চাঙৰ ভাঙে মুঠি নমাই আন পাৰ্বতী  
 আঠিয়া কলেৰে খাও  
 জুলি জোলোঙা আনি দে পাৰ্বতী  
 ভিক্ষা মাগিবলৈ যাও।

তাত্ত্বিক কথা টোকাৰী গীতত বিদ্যমান। জীৱনৰ লগত টোকাৰীখনৰ সম্পৰ্ক অৰ্থাৎ দেহাটো যে ক্ষন্তেকীয়া তাৰো উদাহৰণ দিছে টোকাৰী গীতত। এইখৰণৰ গীতসমূহ— বৈৰাগীৰ কণ্ঠত নতুন মাত্ৰা পাইছিল—

দিহা—

কৈলাসৰ টোকাৰী বজালে বাজিব  
 মিলালে মিলিব সুৰ  
 সেই টোকাৰীৰ গুণা যিদিনা ছিগিব,  
 এই দেহাৰ পৰিব ওৰ।।

টোকাৰীৰ জন্ম প্ৰসংগত গাইছে—

দিহা—

এজুপি বিৰিখে দুইপাত মেলিলে  
 তললৈ মেলিলে শিপা  
 সেই গছজুপি খোজে মহাদেৱে  
 টোকাৰী সাজোঁগৈ দিয়া  
 মহাদেৱ গোসাঁয়ে টোকাৰী কাটিলে

বাটে পাৰেবতী গুণা  
সেই গুণাৰ সুৰত হৰিনামৰ ধ্বনি  
ভকত সকলে শুনা।

ঈঙ্গলা পিঙ্গলা চিত্ৰা সুযুম্মা  
এইনো চাৰি গছি গুণা  
চাৰি পাৰিষদে চাৰিটি মছৰা  
বহি টানি আছে গুণা।

লোকসংগীতত সাধাৰণতে জীৱন বিচাৰি পোৱা যায়। জীৱনৰ প্ৰতিটো ক্ষণ, প্ৰতিটো মুহূৰ্তৰ  
তাত্ত্বিক দৃষ্টি-ভংগী বিচাৰি পোৱা যায় লোকসংগীতত। শিশুকাল, কৈশোৰ কাল, যৌৱন কাল আৰু  
বৃদ্ধ কালৰ কথাও টোকাৰী গীতত নিয়োজিত হৈ আছে। যেনে—

শিশুকাল সাৰথি প্ৰভু ভগৱন্ত  
যৌৱন কাল সাৰথি ভাৰ্য্যা  
বৃদ্ধ কাল সাৰথি লাখুটি বিচনা  
মৰণ কাল সাৰথি চিতা।

অসমীয়া সমাজ ব্যৱস্থাত ভকতৰ স্থান শীৰ্ষ পৰ্যায়ত। গতিকে ভকত সম্বন্ধে টোকাৰী গীতত  
গাইছে—

ভকত আহিলে আদৰি আনিবা  
সাদৰেৰে পাৰিবা ঢৰা  
পদূলিত মূৰতে চৰণ ধুৱাই দিবা  
সেয়ে হ'ব ভকতৰ সেৱা।

মোকে কিনো দিয়া অবোধ গোৱালী  
অতিথিয়ে মাগিছে ঠাই  
গধূলি বেলিকা অতিথি আহিছে  
আহিছে গোৱালী গাই।

মহাপুৰুষ শ্ৰীমন্ত শংকৰদেৱ আৰু শ্ৰীশ্ৰী মাধৱদেৱ গুৰুজনাক বাদ দি অসমীয়া যুগ সংস্কৃতিৰ  
ভঁৰাল কেতিয়াও চহকী নহয়। যদিও টোকাৰী গীতৰ সৃষ্টি প্ৰাকশংকৰী যুগত কিন্তু বৈষ্ণৱ ধৰ্মৰ  
প্ৰভাৱত টোকাৰী গীতত শংকৰদেৱ আৰু মাধৱদেৱ নাম-গুণ গৰিমা তথা তাত ব্যৱহাৰ হোৱা



গুৱাহাটী।

- ৮) বৰদলৈ, নিৰ্মলপ্ৰভা, “অসমৰ লোকসংস্কৃতি, ২০১৮, বিনা লাইব্ৰেৰী, পাণবজাৰ।
- ৯) বৰুৱা দাস, দীপামণি- ‘অসমৰ লোক পৰিৱেশ্য কলা (দ্বিতীয় খণ্ড) ২০১৯, পূৰ্বায়ন প্ৰকাশ, পাণবজাৰ।
- ১০) ভকত, দ্বিজেন্দ্ৰ নাথ- “কীৰ্ত্তন এক সামীক্ষাত্মক আলোচনা, ১৯৯৮”, চন্দ্ৰ প্ৰকাশ, পাণবজাৰ।
- ১১) ভড়ালী, সংগীতা- “অসমীয়া লোকগীত সংগ্ৰহ, ২০১৩, আসাম বুক ট্ৰাষ্ট, পাণবজাৰ।
- ১২) শৰ্মা, নবীনচন্দ্ৰ- “ভাৰতৰ উত্তৰ পূৰ্বাঞ্চলৰ পৰিৱেশ্য কলা, লোকসংস্কৃতি, ২০১২, বাণী প্ৰকাশ মন্দিৰ, গুৱাহাটী।

তথ্য দাতাৰ নাম :

- ১) উমাকান্ত বৈৰাগী (৮২ বছৰ)
- ২) ড° যাদৱ বৈশ্য (৭৮ বছৰ)
- ৩) খগেন গগৈ (৬৬ বছৰ)

ঠিকনা :

- হেঙেৰাবাৰী, গুৱাহাটী
- কাহিলীপাৰা, গুৱাহাটী
- কাহিলীপাৰা, গুৱাহাটী

# বংবং তেৰাঙৰ 'জাক হেৰোৱা পক্ষী'ত প্ৰতিফলিত গোষ্ঠী সংঘৰ্ষ

বৰষা ডেকা

## সংক্ষিপ্তসাৰ

অসমীয়া সাহিত্য জগতৰ এজন অন্যতম ঔপন্যাসিক হ'ল বংবং তেৰাং। 'বংমিলিৰ হাঁহি', 'জাক হেৰোৱা পক্ষী', 'মিৰবিন', 'ক্ৰান্তিকালৰ অশ্ৰু' আদি উপন্যাস ৰচনাৰ জৰিয়তে অসমীয়া উপন্যাস সাহিত্যক সমৃদ্ধ কৰা বহুমুখী প্ৰতিভাৰ অধিকাৰী বংবং তেৰাং একেধাৰে গল্পকাৰ, ঔপন্যাসিক, শিক্ষাবিদ। এইজনা সাহিত্যিকৰ উপন্যাসৰ কাহিনীত কাৰবি সমাজ, উৎসৱ-পাৰ্বন, ৰীতি-নীতি, ডেকা-গাভৰুৰ প্ৰেম, গোষ্ঠী সংঘৰ্ষ, মানৱীয় প্ৰমূল্যৰ অৱক্ষয় আদি দিশ প্ৰতিফলিত হৈছে।

'জাক হেৰোৱা পক্ষী' বংবং তেৰাঙৰ এখন উল্লেখযোগ্য উপন্যাস। কাৰ্বি সমাজক পটভূমি হিচাপে লৈ ৰচিত উপন্যাসখনৰ কাহিনীত কাৰ্বি-কুকিৰ গোষ্ঠী সংঘৰ্ষৰ বিষয়ে বৰ্ণনা পোৱা যায়। শাস্তি আৰু সম্প্ৰীতিৰে বসবাস কৰা কাৰ্বি আৰু কুকি জনগোষ্ঠীৰ নিৰীহ জনতাৰ মাজত গোষ্ঠী সংঘৰ্ষই কঢ়িয়াই অনা ভয়াৱহতা, অস্তিত্বৰ সংকট, দুয়োটা গোষ্ঠীৰ বিদ্ৰোহী সংগঠনৰ সন্ধানৰ কাৰ্য-কলাপে সাধাৰণ মানুহৰ মনতো পৰস্পৰৰ প্ৰতি উদ্ৰেগ হোৱা ঘৃণা আদি উপন্যাসখনত প্ৰতিফলিত হৈছে। গোষ্ঠীগত সংঘৰ্ষৰ ফলত সমাজত মানৱীয় প্ৰমূল্যবোধৰ অৱক্ষয় ঘটিছে। এই পত্ৰখনত বংবং তেৰাঙৰ 'জাক হেৰোৱা পক্ষী' উপন্যাসত গোষ্ঠীগত সংঘৰ্ষই কেনেদৰে কাৰ্বি আংলাঙৰ জনজীৱন বিধ্বস্ত কৰিছিল, অস্তিত্বৰ সংকটত ভুগিছিল সেই বিষয়ে আলোচনা কৰিবলৈ প্ৰয়াস কৰা হ'ব।

বীজ শব্দ : বংবং তেৰাং, গোষ্ঠী সংঘৰ্ষ, জাক হেৰোৱা পক্ষী, কাৰবি সমাজ।

## অৱতৰণিকা

অসমীয়া সাহিত্য জগতৰ এজন অন্যতম ঔপন্যাসিক হ'ল ৰংবং তেৰাং। 'ৰংমিলিৰ হাঁহি', 'জাক হেৰোৱা পক্ষী', 'মিৰবিন', 'ত্ৰাণ্তিকালৰ অশ্ৰু' আদি উপন্যাস ৰচনাৰ জৰিয়তে অসমীয়া উপন্যাস সাহিত্যক সমৃদ্ধ কৰা বহুমুখী প্ৰতিভাৰ অধিকাৰী ৰংবং তেৰাং একেধাৰে গল্পকাৰ, ঔপন্যাসিক, শিক্ষাবিদ। এইজনা সাহিত্যিক উপন্যাসৰ কাহিনীত কাৰ্বি সমাজ, উৎসৱ-পাৰ্বন, ৰীতি-নীতি, ডেকা-গাভৰুৰ প্ৰেম, গোষ্ঠী সংঘৰ্ষ, মানৱীয় প্ৰমূল্যৰ অৱক্ষয় আদি দিশ প্ৰতিফলিত হৈছে।

ৰংবং তেৰাঙৰ উপন্যাসৰ কাহিনী উপস্থাপন সহজ সৰল। কাৰ্বি সমাজখনক পটভূমি হিচাপে লৈ উপন্যাসসমূহ ৰচনা কৰিলেও 'ত্ৰাণ্তিকালৰ অশ্ৰু' উপন্যাসখন অসম আন্দোলনৰ পটভূমিত ৰচিত। উপন্যাসসমূহৰ মাজেৰে ঔপন্যাসিকৰ সূক্ষ্ম দৃষ্টিভংগী আৰু মানৱদৰদী সংবেদনশীল মনটোৰ প্ৰতিফলন ঘটিছে। ঔপন্যাসিক গৰাকীৰ আন এখন উপন্যাস 'জাক হেৰোৱা পক্ষী'ত কাৰ্বি আৰু কুকিসকলৰ গোষ্ঠী সংঘৰ্ষৰ ছবি অংকিত হৈছে। আলোচনা পত্ৰৰ কম পৰিসৰৰ বাবে 'জাক হেৰোৱা পক্ষী' উপন্যাসখন নিৰ্বাচন কৰি লোৱা হৈছে।

## বিষয়ৰ পৰিসৰ

বিষয়ৰ আলোচনাৰ সুবিধাৰ বাবে ৰংবং তেৰাঙৰ 'জাক হেৰোৱা পক্ষী' উপন্যাসখন নিৰ্বাচন কৰি লোৱা হৈছে।

## অধ্যয়নৰ উদ্দেশ্য আৰু গুৰুত্ব

সমাজ এখনৰ সুস্থ বিকাশৰ বাবে শান্তিপূৰ্ণ বাতাবৰণৰ প্ৰয়োজন। অশান্ত, সংঘৰ্ষপূৰ্ণ পৰিৱেশে সমাজৰ সুস্থ অগ্ৰগতিৰ পথত বাধাৰ সৃষ্টি কৰে। গোষ্ঠী সংঘৰ্ষই কিমান ভয়াবহ ৰূপ ল'ব পাৰে সেই বিষয়ে আমি প্ৰত্যেকজন ব্যক্তি সচেতন হোৱাৰ দৰকাৰ আছে। গোষ্ঠী সংঘৰ্ষই এটা পৰিয়াল, এখন সমাজ খানবান কৰিব পাৰে। এই পত্ৰখনত গোষ্ঠী সংঘৰ্ষৰ ভয়াৱহতা, অস্তিত্বৰ সংকট, মানুহৰ মাজত মানৱতাৰ স্বলন আদি দিশসমূহৰ অধ্যয়ন কৰাই প্ৰধান উদ্দেশ্য।

## অধ্যয়নৰ পদ্ধতি

বিষয়ৰ অধ্যয়নৰ বাবে বৰ্ণনাত্মক আৰু বিশেষণাত্মক উভয় পদ্ধতিৰে সহায় লোৱা হৈছে।

## বিষয়বস্তু

'জাক হেৰোৱা পক্ষী' ৰংবং তেৰাঙৰ এখন উল্লেখযোগ্য উপন্যাস। উপন্যাসখন কাৰ্বি-কুকিৰ গোষ্ঠী সংঘৰ্ষক পটভূমি হিচাপে লৈ ৰচিত। শান্তি আৰু সম্প্ৰীতিৰে বসবাস কৰা কাৰ্বি আৰু কুকি জনগোষ্ঠীৰ নিৰীহ জনতাৰ মাজত গোষ্ঠী সংঘৰ্ষই মাতি অনা ভয়াৱহতা, অস্তিত্বৰ সংকট, দুয়োটা গোষ্ঠীৰ বিদ্ৰোহী সংগঠনৰ কাৰ্য-কলাপৰ ফলত দুয়োটা গোষ্ঠীৰ সাধাৰণ মানুহৰ মনতো পৰস্পৰৰ প্ৰতি উদ্ৰেগ হোৱা ঘৃণা আদি উপন্যাসখনৰ কাহিনীৰ মাজেৰে প্ৰতিফলিত হৈছে।

‘জাক হেৰোৱা পক্ষী’ উপন্যাসখনৰ প্ৰধান চৰিত্ৰ হৈছে বংজাংফং গাঁওৰ গাওঁবুঢ়া ৰাইছং তেৰাং। ৰাইছঙৰ ডাঙৰ পুত্ৰ জিৰছঙে কুকি ছোৱালী জুলীক বিয়া পতা কথাটো ৰাইছঙৰ পত্নী কাজিৰে সহজভাৱে ল’ব পৰা নাই। তেওঁলোকৰ একমাত্ৰ নাতি ৰূপলীনে কুকি আদৰ কায়দা শিকিব বুলি কাজিৰ চিন্তিত। পোন্ধৰটা অধ্যায়ত বিভক্ত উপন্যাসখনৰ প্ৰথম অধ্যায়তে কুকি মিতিৰৰ ঘৰৰ পৰা অনা কুকুৰা, আদা, জিৰলাং আৰু পছৰ শুকান মঙহৰ টোপোলাই ৰাইছঙৰ ঘৰলৈ সম্প্ৰীতিৰ ভাৱ কঢ়িয়াই আনিলেও কাজিৰৰ মনৰ পৰা কুকি মানুহৰ প্ৰতি থকা মনোভাৱ একেবাৰে আঁতৰ কৰিব পৰা নাই। সমাজত চলি থকা জাত-পাতৰ বিচাৰৰ বিষয়ে ঔপন্যাসিকে ৰাইছং চৰিত্ৰটোৰ মনত চলি থকা প্ৰতিক্ৰিয়াৰ মাজেৰে প্ৰকাশ কৰিছে —

“ফটিকা এচোক খাই, ৰাইছঙে ভাবিব ধৰিলে তাৰ সৰু ঘৰখনৰ কথা। কুকি ছোৱালী ঘৰ সোমোৱাত পৰিয়ালৰ মানুহখিনিয়ে ছিঃ-ছিঃ, ছাঃ-ছাঃ কৰাৰ পৰাই কিমান যে সমস্যাত সি ভুগিবলগীয়াত পৰিছে, সেয়া তাৰ বাহিৰে আনে বুজিব কেনেকৈ? অজাতিৰ ছোৱালীক সি ঘৰত সোমোৱাই সি হেনো সাত পুৰুষৰ বাবে বসাতললৈ গ’ল। কুকি ঘৰৰ ছোৱালীয়ে জানো কাৰবি ঘৰৰ নীতি-নিয়ম ধৰিব পাৰিব? সি হেনো তেৰাং বংশত কলংক সানিলে।” (তেৰাং, ৰংবং, পৃ. ৯)’

উপন্যাসখনৰ চৰিত্ৰ, কাহিনী, গাঁওখন সম্পূৰ্ণ কাল্পনিক যদিও ঔপন্যাসিকে প্ৰতিটো চৰিত্ৰক জীৱন্ত ৰূপত প্ৰকাশ কৰিছে। কাহিনী কাল্পনিক যদিও কাৰ্বি-কুকি সংঘৰ্ষৰ বাস্তৱ ছবি এখন উপন্যাসখনৰ মাজেৰে প্ৰতিফলন ঘটিছে। ‘জাক হেৰোৱা পক্ষী’ উপন্যাসখনৰ এঘাৰ নং অধ্যায়ত ৰাইছঙৰ ঘৰত অনুষ্ঠিত হেম্ফু পূজা আৰু ন-ভাত খোৱা উৎসৱত ৰাইছঙৰ সৰু পুত্ৰ লংকিৰি উপস্থিত নথকাৰ বাবে গাঁওৰ ৰিচ’বাছাই কৰা প্ৰশ্নৰ উত্তৰত হোৱা কথোপকথনত কাৰ্বি আংলঙত চলি থকা ভয়াৱহ পৰিস্থিতিৰ বিষয়ে বুজিব পাৰি —

“আহিব কেনেকৈ? কাৰবি আংলং বন্ধ নহয় জানো?”

“কোনে দিলে? আমি গ’ম নাপাওঁৱেই দেখোন।”

“হাতত বন্দুক ধৰা ল’ৰাহঁতে। কাৰবি আংলং জানো ছেমছাছিং ইংতি, খৰছিং তেৰাঙৰ দিনৰ কাৰবি আংলং? কেৱল কটা-কটি, মৰা-মৰিৰ কথাহে শুনিবি এতিয়া।”

“এতিয়াও কিবা ঘটিছে নেকি?” — ভাত মুঠি মুখত দি ৰিচ’বাছাই সুধিলে।

“ছিংহাছ্ পাহাৰত হোনো কাৰবি আৰু কুকিৰ মাজত গুলীয়াগুলি হৈছে।” (তেৰাং, ৰংবং, পৃ. ৭৫)৯

অসম চৰকাৰে ৩০ ৰ দশকত কাৰ্বি আংলঙৰ হাবি জংঘল কাটি সৰু সৰু টিলাবোৰ কাটি সমান কৰা আঁচনি গ্ৰহণ কৰিছিল। সেয়েহে এনে আঁচনি কাৰ্যকৰী হোৱাৰ পিছত সমতল ভূমিত স্থায়ীভাৱে বসাবস কৰিবলৈ একাংশ কাৰ্বি লোক সিংহাসন পাহাৰ এৰি নামি আহে। সিংহাসন পাহাৰৰ মাটি আদা খেতিৰ বাবে উপযোগী। সেয়েহে ৮০ৰ দশকত আদাৰ চাহিদা বৃদ্ধি পোৱাৰ বাবে মণিপুৰৰ কুকি সকলে সিংহাসন পাহাৰলৈ অনুপ্ৰবেশ কৰিবলৈ লয়। নতুনকৈ প্ৰব্ৰজিত কুকি সকলে স্থানীয় লোকৰ ভূমি দখল কৰিবলৈ আৰম্ভ কৰাৰ ফলস্বৰূপে স্থানীয় কাৰ্বিসকল অসন্তুষ্ট হৈ পৰিছিল। ইয়াৰ পৰিণতিত কাৰ্বি আৰু কুকিৰ মাজত সংঘাত আৰম্ভ হয়। কুকি জনগোষ্ঠীৰ

বিদ্রোহী গোটে সিংহাসন-খনবামন এলেকাত কাৰবি বা আন সম্প্ৰদায়ে প্ৰৱেশ কৰিলে ভয়াৱহ পৰিণতি হোৱাৰ ভাবুকি প্ৰদান কৰে। সিংহাসন-খনবামন এলেকাত যুগ যুগ ধৰি কাৰ্বিসকলে বসবাস কৰি আহিছে। ‘জাক হেৰোৱা পক্ষী’ উপন্যাসখনত কাৰ্বি-কুকিৰ এনেবোৰ বিবাদৰ বিষয়ে উল্লেখ আছে। উপন্যাসখনৰ তৃতীয় অধ্যায়ত কাৰ্বি আৰু কুকিৰ গোষ্ঠী সংঘৰ্ষৰ বিষয়ে মাইছ’ কিলিং গাঁওৰ গাওঁবুঢ়া ছাইজঙে ৰাইছঙক অৱগত কৰাইছে। মণিপুৰ পৰা নতুন বাসস্থানৰ সন্ধানত দলঙাঙি অহা কুকিসকলৰ চাল-চলন স্থানীয় কুকিসকলৰ দৰে নহয়। সিংহাসন-খনবামন অঞ্চল দখল কৰিব বিচৰাৰ বাবে কাৰ্বি আংলঙৰ কাৰ্বি লোকসকল জাঙুৰ খাই উঠাটো স্বাভাৱিক কথা।

“আমাৰ পৰ্বত-খনবামন অঞ্চল হেনো দখল কৰাৰ মতলব।”

“কেনেকৈ দখল কৰিব পাৰিব? সেয়া জানো কাৰবি আংলঙৰ মাটি নহয়?”

“কিয় নহ’ব? আমিবোৰচোন পৰ্বত-খনবামনৰ পৰা নামি অহা নাছিলো? স্বয়ং খৰছিং মেম্বৰচোন খেদংপি গাঁৱত ডাঙৰ-দীঘল হৈছিল। এতিয়া কুকিহঁতে এইখন কুকি পাহাৰ বুলি ক’লে জানো আমি মানিম? এই কথাবোৰে জানো আমাৰ মাজত কাজিয়া এখন নলগাবনে? আপুনিয়োই কওঁকচোন, ফু কাংবুৰা।” (তেৰাং, ৰংবং, পৃ. ৩০)°

গোষ্ঠী সংঘৰ্ষই ২০০৩ চনৰ কাৰ্বি আংলঙৰ বাতাবৰণ সলনি কৰিছিল। কাৰ্বি আৰু কুকি দুয়োটা গোষ্ঠীৰ নিৰীহ জনতা হিংসা-প্ৰতিহিংসাৰ বলি হ’বলগীয়া হৈছিল। নিৰাপত্তাহীনতাত ভুগি বহু পৰিয়াল কাৰ্বি আংলঙৰ পৰা অজ্ঞাত স্থানলৈ গুচি যোৱা পৰিলক্ষিত হৈছিল। ‘জাক হেৰোৱা পক্ষী’ উপন্যাসখনৰ ছে’ লাংঠুৰ গাওঁবুঢ়া ছাৰ্মেনো গোষ্ঠী সংঘৰ্ষৰ বলি হয়। ৰেংমা নগা, কুকি মানুহবোৰৰ লগত ভাল সম্পৰ্ক ৰখা ছাৰ্মেনক গুলীয়াই হত্যা কৰা ঘটনাৰ বাবে ৰাইছঙৰ লগতে গাঁওৰ আন লোক সকলো নিৰাপত্তাহীনতাত ভুগিছিল। গোষ্ঠী সংঘৰ্ষই এনে ৰূপ ল’লে যে মানুহে মানুহক গুলীয়াই মাৰিবলৈও কুৰ্ণাবোধ নকৰা হ’ল। মানজাৰ স্কুলত পঢ়ি থকা কুকি ল’ৰা দুটাৰ হত্যাকাণ্ড গোষ্ঠী সংঘৰ্ষৰ আসুৰিক ৰূপৰ প্ৰতিফলন। হিংসা-প্ৰতিহিংসাই বিবেকহীন কৰি তোলা মানুহৰ বৰ্বৰতাই দুয়োটা গোষ্ঠীৰ মানুহকে অস্তিত্বৰ সংকট, নিৰাপত্তাহীনতাত ভুগিবলৈ বাধ্য কৰাইছিল। পৱিত্ৰ মনেৰে গীৰ্জা ঘৰলৈ ঈশ্বৰৰ প্ৰাৰ্থনাৰ বাবে যোৱা কাৰ্বিসকলৰ ওপৰত কুকি বিদ্রোহীৰ আক্ৰমণেও গোষ্ঠী সংঘৰ্ষৰ ভয়াৱহতাৰ ছবি দাঙি ধৰিছে।

হাবিতলীয়া ৰংজাংফং গাওঁখন নিৰাপদ নহয়। পুৰতি নিশা গাঁও আক্ৰমণ কৰা, জ্বলাই দিয়া ঘটনাই ৰাইছঙ আৰু গাঁওৰ লোকসকলক চিন্তিত কৰি তুলিছিল। মণিপুৰৰ পৰা অহা দল হেৰোৱা কুকি সন্ত্ৰাসবাদীৰ হাতত ৰাইফল, পিষ্টল আছে। তাৰ বিপৰীতে ৰংজাংফং গাঁওবাসীৰ হাতত অস্ত্ৰ-শস্ত্ৰ নাই। নিজৰ জীৱন বচাবৰ বাবে নিৰাপদ স্থানত আশ্ৰয় লোৱাৰ চিন্তা-চৰ্চা কৰাৰ বাহিৰে তেওঁলোকৰ হাতত আন উপায় নাই। সেয়েহে সিদ্ধান্ত নোলোৱালৈকে নিশা ডেকা সকলক গাঁও পহৰাৰ দায়িত্ব দিয়ে।

গোষ্ঠী সংঘৰ্ষত ৰংজাংফং গাঁওখনো জুইত জাহ গৈছে। কুকি সন্ত্ৰাসবাদীয়ে পুৰতি নিশা গাঁৱত জুই জ্বলায় আঁতৰি গৈছিল। চাৰিওফালে আতংকময়ী পৰিৱেশ। জুই আৰু বন্দুকৰ শব্দ শুনি মানুহবোৰে যেনিয়ে-তেনিয়ে পলাই নিজৰ প্ৰাণ ৰক্ষা কৰিবলৈ চেষ্টা কৰিছিল। জাক হেৰোৱা

পক্ষীৰ দৰে মানুহবোৰে আশ্ৰয় বিচাৰি, নিৰাপত্তা বিচাৰি হাহাকাৰ কৰিছে।

‘জাক হেৰোৱা পক্ষী’ উপন্যাসখনত প্ৰকাশ পোৱা গোষ্ঠী সংঘৰ্ষ আৰু বিপদাপন্ন মানুহৰ জীৱনৰ বিপৰীতে ৱাইছ্‌ৰ ঘৰলৈ কুকি ছোৱালী জুলী বোৱাৰী হৈ অহা ঘটনাই ঐক্য-সম্প্ৰীতিৰ বাৰ্তা বহন কৰিছে। কুকি সম্ভ্ৰাসবাদীৰ আক্ৰমণত জুইত জাহ যোৱা ঘৰখন দেখি এফালে জুলী জাংচন সংতাপত দন্ধ। আনফালে শাহুৱেক কাজী ৰংহাপীৰ মনত জ্বলিছে অবিশ্বাসৰ জুই। এনে এক সংকটপূৰ্ণ পৰিস্থিতিত দুখ আৰু ভয়ত ঘৰলৈ উভতি যাব খোৱা জুলীৰ প্ৰতি ৱাইছ্‌ৰ প্ৰতিক্ৰিয়াই ঔপন্যাসিকৰ ঐক্য-সংহতিৰ আদৰ্শত বিশ্বাসী সংবেদনশীল মানৱ দৰদী মনটোৰ প্ৰতিফলন ঘটাইছে — “বোৱাৰী কৰি তোমাক আনিলো। এতিয়া মই উভতি যাবলৈ নকওঁ। তোমাৰ জাতিৰ সম্ভ্ৰাসবাদীহঁতে আহি ঘৰ জ্বলালে বাবেই তুমি নিজকে কিয় দোষী কৰিবা? তুমিতো আমাৰ ঘৰ জ্বলাবলৈ অহা নাই, ঘৰখন বান্ধিবলৈহে আহিছা। আই, মই কি সতেনো তোমাক উভতি যাবলৈ কওঁ। এয়া হ’ব নোৱাৰে। ঘৰ জ্বলিল। অকল আমাৰ ঘৰেইতো জ্বলা নাই। তোমালোকৰ বংশ-পৰিয়ালৰ ঘৰবোৰকো জ্বলাইছে আমাৰ কাৰবি সম্ভ্ৰাসবাদীহঁতে। সম্ভ্ৰাসক ভাল পোৱা মানুহবোৰৰ কোনো জাত নাই, ধৰ্ম নাই, আই। এই ঘটনাবোৰ দেশৰ বাবে, জাতিৰ বাবে একো-একোটা দুৰ্যোগ।” (তেৰাং, ৰংবং, পৃ. ৮৯)<sup>৪</sup>

### সিদ্ধান্তসমূহ :

ওপৰৰ আলোচনাত কেতবোৰ সত্য উদ্ভাসিত হৈছে —

- ১) ৰংবং তেৰাঙৰ ‘জাক হেৰুৱা পক্ষী’ উপন্যাসখন কাৰ্বি-কুকিৰ গোষ্ঠী সংঘৰ্ষৰ পটভূমিত ৰচিত।
- ২) ‘জাক হেৰুৱা পক্ষী’ উপন্যাসখন কাৰ্বি-কুকিৰ গোষ্ঠী সংঘৰ্ষৰ পটভূমিত ৰচিত যদিও ঔপন্যাসিকে কাৰ্বি সমাজখন পাহৰা নাই।
- ৩) ৰংবং তেৰাঙৰ ৰচনামূল্যে সহজ সৰল।
- ৪) ঔপন্যাসিকে মানুহৰ মনোজগতত চলি থকা ক্ৰিয়া-প্ৰতিক্ৰিয়াসমূহ অতি সূক্ষ্মভাৱে পৰ্যবেক্ষণ কৰিছে।
- ৫) ৰংবং তেৰাং হিংসা-প্ৰতিহিংসাৰ বিপৰীতে ঐক্য-সংহতিৰ আদৰ্শত বিশ্বাসী সংবেদনশীল মনৰ অধিকাৰী।

### উপসংহাৰ :

ৰংবং তেৰাঙৰ ‘জাক হেৰোৱা পক্ষী’ উপন্যাসখনত কাৰ্বি-কুকিৰ গোষ্ঠী সংঘৰ্ষৰ জীয়া ছবি এখনৰ প্ৰতিফলন ঘটিছে। কাৰ্বি আংলঙত সংঘটিত কাৰ্বি-কুকিৰ গোষ্ঠী সংঘৰ্ষই কাৰ্বি আৰু কুকি জনগোষ্ঠীৰ লোকসকলে নিৰাপত্তাহীনতা, অস্তিত্বৰ সংকটত ভুগিবলগীয়া হৈছিল। ‘ৰংবং তেৰাঙৰ জাক হেৰোৱা পক্ষী’ত প্ৰতিফলিত গোষ্ঠী সংঘৰ্ষ শীৰ্ষক আমাৰ এই আলোচনা পত্ৰই গোষ্ঠী সংঘৰ্ষৰ ভয়াৱহতা, মানৱতাৰ অৱক্ষয় সম্পৰ্কে জনাত সহায় কৰিব। উপন্যাসখনত প্ৰতিফলিত কাৰ্বি

সমাজ, ৰীতি-নীতি, গদ্যৰীতি আদি বিভিন্ন দিশৰ গৱেষণামূলক বিচাৰ-বিশ্লেষণ হ'লে বিদ্যায়তনিক দিশত নতুন দিশৰ উন্মোচন হ'ব বুলি আশা কৰিব পাৰি।

### প্ৰসংগসূত্ৰ

- ১) তেৰাং, ৰংবং, *জাক হেৰোৱা পক্ষী*, পৃ. ১।
- ২) প্ৰাগুক্ত গ্ৰন্থ, পৃ. ৭৫।
- ৩) প্ৰাগুক্ত গ্ৰন্থ, পৃ. ৩০।
- ৪) প্ৰাগুক্ত গ্ৰন্থ, পৃ. ৮৯।

### গ্ৰন্থপঞ্জী

#### মুখ্য উৎস :

- ১) তেৰাং, ৰংবং। *জাক হেৰোৱা পক্ষী*। বনলতা, গুৱাহাটী, দ্বিতীয় প্ৰকাশ, অক্টোবৰ, ২০১৮।

#### গৌণ উৎস :

- ১) দাস, শৈলেন। *কাৰবি সংস্কৃতিৰ প্ৰবাহ*। জনজাতি গৱেষণা কেন্দ্ৰ আৰু অনুসূচিত জাতি, গুৱাহাটী, প্ৰথম প্ৰকাশ, ২০০৩।
- ২) ৰংফাৰ, বৰছিং। *গোষ্ঠী সংঘাত আৰু কাৰবি আংলং*। ছ'লাংদ' পাব্লিকেশ্বন, প্ৰথম প্ৰকাশ, ডিচেম্বৰ, ২০১৫।
- ৩) শইকীয়া, গীতাত্ৰী, জয়ন্ত দত্ত (সম্পা.)। *একবিংশ শতিকাৰ অসমীয়া উপন্যাস*। অসম বুক ট্ৰাষ্ট, গুৱাহাটী, পৰিৱৰ্তিত আৰু সংশোধিত সংকৰণ, আগষ্ট, ২০২৪।

