Vernacular Religion, Beliefs and Customs in Assam, India

Kailash Dutta, Senior Research Fellow
Dept. of Folklore Research,
Gauhati University, Assam, India
Visiting PhD student, Dept. of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, Tartu University
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Introduction

- Geographical location of Assam: It is located in the north-eastern part of India, Surrounded by states like Arunachal Pradesh in the North, Nagaland in the east, Mizoram and Tripura in the South and the West Bengal in the west. It shares international boundaries with China and Bangladesh. The region is an amalgamation of plains and river valleys and is surrounded by a ring of blue hills. Geographical area-78,438 sq kilometers.
- It is divided into two valleys namely the Brahmaputra and the Barak Valley. The Mikir and Cachar hills divides them.
- Climate: Tropical monsoon, temperate region. Humid in rainy season. Winter 6-8 degree Celsius and summer 35-38 degree Celsius.
- Famous: Tea, oil, one horned rhinoceros, other flora and fauna.
- Other facts: First mechanically drilled oil well in Asia. First refinery of Asia.
Some other facts

- People: Assam is a land of Aryan and non Aryan, numerous tribes and sub tribes and Mongoloids and Australoids.
- History: Mongoloids or Kiratas became the early inhabitants of the land. Earlier, the land was known as pragjyotishpura, as mentioned in Vedas. Then kamrupa. The Ahoms from Burma established rule in 1228 A.D. Then in the 15th century, Koch rules were also established. Finally, the Burmese invaded the land and handed over to the British.
- Culture: Assam has a rich culture of fairs and festivals, dances and music, languages, arts and crafts. Also the land is known for its delicious cuisines. The land is regarded as the anthropological and folklore paradise due to its various people, who are maintaining its unique culture and tradition. Bihu is the greatest festival of Assam.
Vernacular religion of Assam

• Almost all the major religions of the world are practiced in Assam. Thus, it is indeed a difficult topic to discuss all of them together.
• Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Jainism, Sikhism are the major religions of Assam. Among them, the number of Hindus is maximum followed by Muslims.
• Generally, there are large number of religious practices associated with Hinduism which appears in many vernacular forms in Assam.
• Neo-Vaishnavism religion preached by Shankardeva is one of the most popular religious traditions of Assam.
• The tribal groups of Assam have their own traditional religion and practices. But some of them have left its traditional religion and became the follower of neo-Vaishnavism.
• Some Muslims of Assam have their own customs and traditions.
Nature of Assamese Hindus

• The following point is very important to understand the Hindu population, “The Assamese Hindu society is one which has assimilated into itself various erstwhile tribal groups. Again many tribal groups have moved towards the Assamese Hindu fold through integration accepting the customs and traditions of non tribals. As a result, tribal features have made inroads into the Broader Assamese Hindu Society (Datta 1994:116).

• Most section of the Hindus also came under influence of the Neo-Vaishnavism religion preached by Sankardeva, a great saint scholar of Assam from 15th century. Also, many tribal people came under its influence.

• Also, the sanskritisation and the Hinduisation of the tribal people started from early date here.
Religious Beliefs

• The Assamese people follows many religious beliefs in their day to day social life.

• All sections of people believe in different gods and goddesses, spirits, ghosts, natural phenomena, magics etc. All these factors contribute to different forms of religious practices.

• Every activity of their life are determined by some kind of religious practices.

• When something wrong happens in their home, they immediately make up their mind to offer something to the God.
• Agriculture is the main occupation of the people. So, many practices are associated with agriculture and seasons.

• Modernisation, education etc have played a minor role in this vernacular religious practices of the Assamese people.

• Major section of the Assamese Hindus observe and worship all the pan Indian Gods and Goddesses. Thus, those religions also have great impact in their faiths.

• People also believe in magic and spells
Religious Practices of Everyday life

• In Assam, beliefs in local deities or celestial beings, spirits and ghosts etc existed with distinct characteristics. For example: Sat or sath, aii sabah, apeshari sabah, kanipan diya, barkhelia, subhachani puja, barsabah, frog marriage etc.

• The Vrata type rites and ceremonies of the Assamese Hindus.

• Neo vaishnavism practices.

• Brahmanical religion of the Brahmin Castes.

• Saktism: Worshipping of the goddesses or supreme female deity like Kamakhya, etc.

• Saivism: Belief in and praying to Shiva is very common in Assam.
Other religious practices

- All the tribal groups and the other ethnic groups of Assam have distinct religious traditions and customs. For example, the Bodo community believes in a spirit called modai.
- The Mishings, Karbis, Tiwas, Deoris, Rabhas, etc., have their own religions.
- Some tribal groups became followers of Neo-Vaishnavism but still follow some of its old religions. For example, Thengal kacharis and Sonowal Kacharis.
- Some primitive religions also existed with distinct characteristics as ancestor and fertility worship.
Names of some spirits of Assam.

- Benudhar Rajkhuwa has classified the spirits of Assam into four categories - subterranean, terrestrial, aerial, celestial. (Rajkhowa 1973: 125)
- The terrestrial has maximum number of spirits. Bak, Dot, Jakh, Chamon, Burha dangoria, pret etc.
- Siva, Durga, Lakhimi etc are celestials spirits.
- Bordoichila is an aerial and dhangleoi is a subterrenean spirits.
- All these spirits are very much in the mind of the people of Assam and many ceremonies are connected with satisfying such spirits.
Kamakhya Temple, Guwahati, Assam, India

Ambubachi Mela (May, 2009)
Kamakhya temple, Guwahati, Assam, India

The main door of the temple is closed and the devotees during the Ambubachi Mela (May, 2009)
Kamakhya temple, Guwahati, Assam, India

Devotees waiting for the final day of the Ambubachi Mela
N. Lakhimpur, Assam, India

Neo Vaishnavite devotees in the Namghar (religious prayer hall) performing gayan - Bayan (2009)
N.Lakhimpur, Assam, India

Vaishnavite devotees playing the cymbals in the religious hall premises.
N.Lakhimpur, Assam, India

- Traditional Religious drama performance (Bhoana)
Nalbari, Assam, India

Traditional devotional singing performance
Nalbari, Assam, India

Rati bansa naam. (2008)
Titabor, Jorhat, Assam, India

Entrance of the religious prayer hall (naam ghar)
Kachamari, Golaghat, Assam, India

Some idols of stone goddess worship in a home
N. Lakhimpur, Assam, India

A religious temple of the mother goddess Durga.

Photo by Ulo Valk
Gogamukh, Assam, India

Traditional custom of serving food in a tribal village of Assam (Mishing Village)
Letekupukhuri, N. Lakhimpur, Assam, India

The worship place of neo. Vaishnavite. They do not worship any idol.

Photo by ulo Valk
Udalguri, Assam, India

Traditional dances by the Bodo women during a traditional ceremony.
Silghat, Assam, India

Idol of Silghat Kamakhya temple
Rangia, Assam, India

Madan Kamdev Temple.
Dhekiajuli, Assam, India

Traditional way of praying to tree in front of the house by the Bodo people.
Dhekiajuli, Assam, India

A kherai dance performer.

Photo by Ulo Valk
N. Lakhimpur, Assam, India

Traditional way of welcome to the groom party in a marriage in Assam.
N. Lakhimpur, Assam, India

Traditional marriage ceremony of Assam.
Kamakhya temple, Assam, India

Sua-Karan Ceremony.
Mayong, Assam, India

The place of Human Sacrifice in old days in a Kesaikhati Temple.

Photo by Ulo Valk
Mayong, Assam, India
Small Shiva Temple.
Photo by Ulo Valk
Spirits of Assam

- লেন্দন কক্ষাবী জনবিশ্বাসত অপ দেবতা

- ৪- হেমেন্দ্র ঠেঙ্গাল

বুদা ডাঙ্গীয়া

অপেচবী

কদ্বা ভুত

দত্ত কলো

Spirits of Assam
Conclusion

- There are many indigenous religious practices of all the people living in Assam. Besides, the simple folk also worship the majestic images of the Hindu Pantheon. They are conscious follower of their mythological progenitors.
- The simple folk of Assam believes in spirits, celestial bodies, local deities etc. All these also play a great role in their religious life.
- The neo-vaishnavism has played a great role in the religious life, beliefs and customs of the Assamese people.
- The tribal groups of the region has its own religion, customs and traditions.
- Social life of the Assamese people is generally dominated by religion.