



TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF THE SONOWAL
KACHARIS OF TINSUKIA DISTRICT OF ASSAM: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

Purpose of the study: The main purpose of this paper is to study the traditional religious beliefs and practices of the Sonowal Kacharies of Tinsukia District Assam. It also focus on various changes and continuity of certain beliefs and practices in their religious life and to find out the relevance of religion in the contemporary world.

Methodology: This paper is the outcome of the empirical field study of the Sonowal Kachari village “Dangori” of Tinsukia District, Assam. Various standard Anthropological methods like observation, interview, key informant etc., was employed to collect the relevant data. All the data were also cross variefied.

Main findings: Religion is a universal phenomenon. There is no society in the world without any religion. It is considered as one of the earliest institutions of humankind and is found in all the societies of the past and present. In the contemporary period also religion plays a very important role particularly in the simple societies. It has been found that religion influence biology, culture and society. The study reveals that the elderly population is more attached to various religious beliefs and practices as compared to the younger generation.

Implications/ Applications of this study: The present study can be utilized to understand Man- Nature relationship and its influence on each other. How religion plays an important role in the various aspects of the life of the people and its relevance in the contemporary period. It is also useful to know how various religious activities helps in the smooth functioning of a society.

Key Words: Religion, belifs, rituals, Sonowal Kacharis, Tinsukia, Assam.

Introduction: Religion can be defined as the belief in the supernatural beings. It is as old as human civilization. The most important element of religion is beliefs. The religious performances are depicted through rituals. All the people of the world have their own religious beliefs and practices. The diversity of religion is the centre of attraction of many scholars from different disciplines like Anthropology, Sociology, Philosophy etc. Religion influences the way of life of the people due to this it becomes important from scientific point of view to understand how it has influenced the people throughout the ages. Religion is one of the strongest cords which bind the human relationship thereby maintaining the social structure of every society. It is one of the mechanisms which maintains orderliness among the human society. The anthropological study of religion is an important aspect and it aims to understand how different religious domains operate the minds of the people and their activities. Anthropologists study the diversity of religious systems, present and past, in order to understand, what is common to humanity?

Belief in the existence of supernatural powers is almost universal. Day-to-day unexplainable experiences have led the villagers into believing in other than the material visible world i.e. in the invisible spiritual world or supernatural power. Generally the people are found to establish a close relationship with the spiritual world either by controlling or overpowering the spirit by enchanting or practicing some techniques and canalising the power, for good or bad or by offering ritual or worship to propitiate the supernatural power for acquisition of the thing or object desired.

The Land: North East India provides shelter to various population groups having divergent socio cultural tradition, different languages and exhibiting different physical features and biological makeup, therefore, the region had been attracting attention of social scientists since long past. A large number of social scientists have carried out a number of researches on physical, biological, cultural and social aspects of the life of different people living in different parts of North East India. There are researches on various aspects of both the tribal and non tribal people of North East India along with the rest of the country.

Social sciences that largely deals with the science of man, endeavours to study man in his totality. These subjects for example anthropology, sociology etc., has helped to understand people and their society as well as their various socio-cultural relationships. With the pace of time, research and studies in social sciences has started to change the human situation rapidly. Thereby, 'science of man' became the 'service of man' (Behera, 2014). Progressively welfare

and development activities were initiated by many anthropologists in different times. The social scientists' forte is that they understand the totality of the interactions and interplay of biology, society and culture in the spatio-temporal context that has placed them in an advantageous position in encountering and solving the problems.

North East India has always provided opportunities for socio-cultural and folklore research, since the early period due to pressure of diverse ethnic groups with their colorful traditions. No doubt, the folklore studies in Assam began at the end of the 19th century. The status of folklore in Assam is acknowledged at national level. There are contributions of many scholars at various levels. In Assam, though, folklore is an emerging discipline, it is still in infancy at the population level. North East India comprises of states harbor more than 180 major tribal communities of the total 457 tribal communities found in India. The entire region provides shelter to a large number of populations who speak different languages, have diverged socio-cultural traditions, values and beliefs and are of different ethnic origins. The people of this region are mostly tribals belonging to Mongoloid ethnic stock. Due to their gradual adaptation to their respective environment, each population had developed their own beliefs and customs regarding the way of their life like religious beliefs and practices, food habits, house types, fairs and festivals, crises rites and the like.

The People: Sonowal Kacharis is one of the indigeneous tribe of Assam. They are predominantly found in Dhemaji, Dibrugarh, Golaghat, Jorhat, Lakhimpur, Majuli, Sivasagar, Tinsukia districts and some parts of Assam. They show mongoloid racial traits and belong to Tibeto-Burman linguistic group. There are not any definite written records of the origin of these people. There are various sources which throw some light about their origin particularly the oral tradition among the people is more prevalent among them which is passed down from generation to generation. Those legends and myths also did not show any similarities. The elderly people took under consideration those stories and trace their origin. They relate themselves with *Hiranyakashapu*, *Prahalad* and *Bali*. They regarded *Bhim* and *Hidimba* as their ancestors.

The Sonowal Kacharis are mainly cultivators. They cultivate paddy and various types of vegetables. Rice is their staple food. The inheritance pattern of these people is patriarchal. They follow monogamy as their marriage system. Among them four types of marriage is prevalent, viz., *Nowai Dhowa (Bor bia)*, *Hom diya* (traditional Hindu marriage by employing Priest and by performing Hom), *Gandharba Vivah* (Marriage by Elopement) and *Sursuria or Rabha Surokia* (Marriage by running away in unceremonious feast is given to some elders for

legislation of the Marriage). They perform the crises rites, during the time of birth, onset of puberty (in case of females) and at the time of death. Notion of purity and pollution is also seen among them.

Literature Review: Various scholars have worked among different religions considering the different aspects of religion. Ramya, (2012) studied the traditional religious beliefs and practices and impact of Christianity among the Nyshis. Religious practices was also studied by Rooij (2016), Oxhandler et al., (2017) studied the religious and spiritual beliefs and practices among practitioners across five helping professions. In this present paper an attempt has been made to portray the traditional religious beliefs and practices of the Sonowal Kacharis of Rangagarah Village, Dangori of Tinsukia District, Assam. For the collection of data standard anthropological methods like observation, interview methods were employed. The secondary sources were also employed. The information collected was also cross checked.

Religious beliefs and practices of the Sonowal Kacharies: Among the Sonowal Kacharis one can find the mixture of religious beliefs that is their traditional tribal religion (*Shakti Cult*) and *Vaishnavism*. It has been found that in the traditional religious beliefs and practices of these people they do animal sacrifices, bloodshed is there, they also offer the *Madhopurukh* (local liquor) to their Gods. It was during 1903 when *Auniati Shatra's* head priest Shri Keshabdev Mahanta spread Vaishnavism among them. Since then many people became devotees of *Vaishnavism*. Due to these two major factors one can see both the traditional as well as Hindu religious beliefs and practices among them.

Some important traditional religious rituals are *Baithow puja*, *Baghdeo puja*, *Gatigiri puja*, *Gojai puja*, *Xhorogdeo puja*, *Jolkhai puja*, *Kula Samon puja*, *Ronga Samon puja*, *Bor Samon puja*, *Khatriya puja*, *Khin Vonga Puja*, *Tapsiling puja*, *Gukalika puja*, *Burha bhuri*, *Kesaikhati*, *Koli Aai Than* etc. They also celebrate *Krishna Jhanmashtami*, *Shivratri*, *Lakshmi Puja* etc. These religious festivals are done at individual level and at community level.

Some of the important traditional religious festivals are -

Baithow Puja: This is one of the main puja of the Sonowal Kacharis. It is celebrated in the month of *Phagun* (March/April) of the Lunar fortnight. Earlier this puja was done in the forest. In this puja a small bird is sacrificed and it is cooked which is then shared among them.

Baghdeo Puja: Next day after the *Baithow Puja*, *Baghdeo Puja* is performed in the jungle near the village. There the *Gatigiri* and *Baghdeo Puja* is performed by facing towards north

and south directions respectively. In this puja birds are also sacrificed. Divination is also done to foretell their future.

Gatigiri Puja: They believe that certain invisible power is controlling their society which they called them *Gatigiri*. In order to seek blessings for their village so that nothing harm can happen they do this puja.

Gajai Puja: Among the Sonowal Kacharis *Gajai Puja* is the other important puja next to *Baithow Puja*. It is believed that *Gajai Deo* was their Dharma Guru (Religious Head) and the ideal person of their society.

Xhorogdeo Puja: This puja is also known as *Indra puja*. In this puja a pair of Cock is sacrificed. Then 120 Gods are also offered puja. After this puja they believe that Goddess *Lakshmi* will enter their granary.

Conclusion: Many religious beliefs and practices are prevalent among the Sonowal Kacharis of Assam. Through such beliefs and practices we come to know about the customs, traditions as well as socio-cultural scenario of the Sonowal Kacharis of Assam. Now a days the Sonowal Kacharis are gradually becoming Hinduised, especially the *Vaishnavism* and *Tantricism*. Besides their traditional religious rites and duties most of the Sonowal Kacharis arrange the recitation of *Kirtana* and *Bhagawata* in the *Namghar* (Prayer Hall) in the name of Lord Krishna. Moreover, individual families also arrange such *Nam Kirtan* casually for remedies for the ailing persons. It is seen that the Sonowal Kacharis are able to preserve their traditional religious beliefs and practices in the contemporary period also. One cannot ignore the impact of *Vaishnavism* on them. Moreover due to conversion of religion their traditional practices are becoming less prevalent. In the contemporary world also the way of life of human beings is influenced by their religious beliefs and practices.

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