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## Nature As Object Of Worship In The Brahmaputra Valley: A Historical Study.

Submitted by

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### Abstract:

The culture of the Brahmaputra Valley evolved as a result of the integration of Aryan and non-Aryan elements. Religious beliefs and practices shaped the cultural and religious landscape of the valley. The valley is a land of myriad tribes. Each one of them has their own traditional faiths and religious beliefs. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Christianity are prevalent in the region. They worship their deities as their belief system. Historically, the indigenous communities of the region including tribes like the Bodos, Mishings, and Karbis worshipped nature as their deity in various forms. This is known as animism, a religious system based on the notion that all natural elements, including rivers, mountains, trees, and animals, have spiritual value and are inhabited by supernatural powers. With the entrance of Hinduism, Buddhism, and later Islam and Christianity, the animistic practices in the Brahmaputra Valley underwent a transformation, leading to a syncretic religious culture. Understanding the role of nature in the traditional belief system of the Brahmaputra Valley provides valuable insights into the unique cultural character of the area.

Using a historical lens, the study will attempt to explore animistic beliefs in the Brahmaputra Valley.

**Keywords:** Animism, Brahmaputra Valley, Traditional, Indigenous Communities, Beliefs, Religious.

## 1.0 Introduction:

The Brahmaputra Valley, which stretches over Assam, Meghalaya, and Arunachal Pradesh, is a spectacular natural wonder. Indigenous groups have lived on this land for centuries, building a profound spiritual connection with nature. Among other notable religion in the Valley such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, a remarkable portion of the region believed on Animism. From time to time this belief system changed with various circumstances. And it shaped a different culture or different belief system in the North East India.

Nature worship in the Brahmaputra Valley is culturally, environmentally, socially, economically, spiritually, and ecologically significant. It preserves traditional knowledge and customs, promotes community cohesion and identity, and offers a spiritual link to the land. Nature worship protects biodiversity and ecosystems while encouraging eco-friendly practices. It strengthens indigenous communities, protects cultural heritage, and promotes natural resource-based livelihoods. Nature worship also promotes eco-tourism and sustainable livelihoods, stimulates ecologically responsible enterprises, and preserves natural resources for future generations. This spiritual connection also contributes to environmental balance, the protection of water sources and cycles, soil fertility, and agricultural productivity. All this process had a long history. It is developed by various stages with various reasons.

This paper entitled “Nature as Object of Worship in the Brahmaputra Valley: A Historical Study” examines the historical course of nature worship in the Brahmaputra Valley, focusing on its pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial manifestations.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem:

History of religion is an important part to understand the society. There are various works done on religion of Assam. Along with other religious beliefs, historically indigenous community of the region practiced animistic view. This point is discussed in less number. To fill this gap, this work is mainly about.

### 1.2 Importance of the Study:

Religion took an important part in day to day life of a society. Culture of North-East India, specially in Assam, is a blend of Aryan and non-Aryan elements. It made the culture unique and different from other's region. Among the non-Aryan elements, Animistic view and beliefs played an important role. To know the unique features of the culture and religion of the region one should also understand indigenous belief system of the region.

### 1.3 Area of The Study:

This paper entitled “Nature as Object of Worship in the Brahmaputra Valley: A Historical Study” tried to cover animistic view point of the indigenous communities and how it blends with other religion. In this paper, the Brahmaputra Valley spans in Assam only give importance on the account of post-colonial period.

## 1.4 Aims and Objective of the Study:

Main objectives of the study are as follows-

1. To examine the belief system of the Indigenous communities of the Brahmaputra Valley on historical context.
2. To know about nature as object of worship in the Brahmaputra Valley on historical context.
3. To understand how this belief system changed time to time and how it impacted by other religion of the Valley.

## 1.5 Methodology of the Study:

To study these three major objectives, an analytical method has been used. The data have been collected from both the secondary sources and primary sources. Primary sources like survey reports of colonial period and secondary sources like books and articles related with the topic etc.

## 2.0 Main Discussion:

Every known society has a religious belief system, although the nature and practice has differed from one society to another. Worshipping is a manifestation of human kind and it is a part of a religious belief system. Each and every society of the world worship someone they belief as God or greater than them in their own way as their own belief system. It is a fundamental core of the human society. At the very primitive age of humankind, they worship nature as they didn't understand the reason behind natural calamities. Over the time, it has changed. The perspective of worshipping nature also changed with time. Now a days, world has a large number of religious sects and belief system. But most of the indigenous community of the world worshipped nature as their deity in different forms such as place, river, tree, a hill etc. They have some deities which they relate with nature.

In India, there have every major religion of the world. A significant part of India that is lie in north-eastern part of Indian subcontinent known as North-East India. In this region, specifically the Brahmaputra Valley is a land of myriad lands. From very ancient period, the valley faced migrations. Different tribes and communities inhabited the region and altogether they created a unique culture and belief system in the valley. Most of the indigenous community practiced animistic beliefs as they were very close to the nature such as Karbi, Bodo, Rabha, Deori, Mishings etc.

## 2.1 Animism:

Animism is a religious system based on the notion that all natural elements, including rivers, mountains, trees, and animals, have spiritual value and are inhabited by supernatural powers. The word Animism originating from Latin "anima" means "breath or soul". Sir Edward Burnett Tylor coined the word in his work 'Primitive Culture' (1871) and this was the first to thoroughly survey animistic beliefs.

As mentioned in the Britannica Dictionary, “**animism**, belief in innumerable spiritual beings concerned with human affairs and capable of helping or harming human interests.”<sup>1</sup>

1. Britannica Dictionary, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/animism> accessed on 15.10.2024

According to Edward Tylor in his book ‘Primitive Culture’ (1871), “Animism is the belief in the existence of spiritual beings, and the attribution of life and consciousness to inanimate objects.”<sup>2</sup>

E.B. Tylor revised his definition regarding animism in his book “Primitive Culture” (1892). According to this revised definition, “Animism is the doctrine that all things, including animals, plants, and inanimate objects, possess a spiritual essence or soul.”<sup>3</sup>

In the Census Report of 1901, Animism of the hill tribes has been defined by Dr. Tiele in the following terms, “Animism is the belief in the existence of souls or spirits, of which only the powerful, those on which may feels himself dependent, and before which he stands in awe, acquire the rank of divine beings and become the objects of worship.”<sup>4</sup>

From above views, it is cleared that Animism is a religious philosophy that holds that all natural elements, including rivers, mountains, trees, and animals, have spiritual significance and are inhabited by supernatural beings.

## 2.2 Animism in Pre-colonial Assam:

The pre-colonial Brahmaputra Valley was home to a diverse population of indigenous tribes. Each one of them had their own set of nature-based beliefs and rituals. Animism and shamanism were practiced in the Valley in ancient period. They honouring nature spirits, ancestors, and sacred sites. Many tribes, like the Bodo, Karbi, and Garo, considered the Brahmaputra River sacred and undertook ceremonies and sacrifices to ensure fertility and wealth. Thus, Paromita Das in her paper ‘Ethnic Religious Beliefs in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam’ stated that, “The Brahmaputra Valley of Assam and the surrounding hills is the home of myriad ethnic groups who were originally animists, believing in the existence of spirits in all creation.”<sup>5</sup>

2. Britannica Dictionary, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/animism> accessed on 15.10.2024

3. Ibid

4. Census Report of India 1901, Page no 46.

5. Das, Paromita, *Ethnic Religious Beliefs in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam*, Serial Publications, retrived on 10.10.2024.

The Bodo-Kachari tribes are known as Mech, Sonowal, Thengal Kachari, Bodo and Dimasa in various parts of the region. They worshiped nature as their deity. The Mech and Bodo tribe worshiped Bathou and Bali Khungri. According to their belief, Bathou embodied the *panchabhuta* or five natural elements, which are the earth, water, fire, wind and the sky<sup>6</sup>. Bali Khungri represented as Siju tree (*Euphorbia Indica*) and they believed that every tree had a soul. The Dimasa tribes believed in the evil spirits who create disease, disasters, and misery. According to the Census Report of India (1911), the Rabhas were originally animists. Additionally, the Hajongs and Deori tribes of Assam were initially animists.<sup>7</sup>

The Mishing also practiced animism and believed in *Uie*, or spirits. They worship the spirits of their forefathers as well as natural phenomena such as thunder and lightning, storms, droughts, and so on in order to ensure peace, prosperity, and immunity from illness and natural disasters. Their officiating priest, known as the Mibu, is said to have magical powers.<sup>8</sup> The Mishing are descended from the Abors (Adi) of Arunachal Pradesh's hills and once practiced the Mirui cult, worshipping Donyi (Sun) and Polo (Moon).<sup>9</sup>

As Ahoms came to the Brahmaputra Valley in 13<sup>th</sup> century, with the beginning of the gradual political integration and socio-cultural amalgamation of many ethnic group, it transformed the history of Assam in the next six hundred years (1228-1826 CE). Along with the politics of the region, socio-religious side also got impacted by this. Traditional beliefs of the tribes started to assimilation with the new religious system.<sup>10</sup>(Rena Laisram)

The ethnic religious beliefs in the Brahmaputra valley changed gradually as Vedic civilization spread. However, this alteration affected only a small population in western and central Assam.

6. Paromita, Das, (1999), *The Worship of Siva among the Bodo-Kacharis of Assam*, in the Proceedings of the Indian Art History Congress, Volume VIII, 1999, Guwahati Page no 103-106.
7. Das, Paromita, *Ethnic Religious Beliefs in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam*, Serial Publications, retrived on 10.10.2024.
8. Saikia, et al.: 1987: 113-114) Saikia, M. C. et al. Tribes of Assam, Part I, (1987). Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and Scheduled Castes, Guwahati.
9. Ibid
10. Laisram, Rena, (2019), *Religion in Early Assam: An Archaeological History*, Cabridge Scholars Publishing, Page no X.

### 2.3 Animism in Colonial Period:

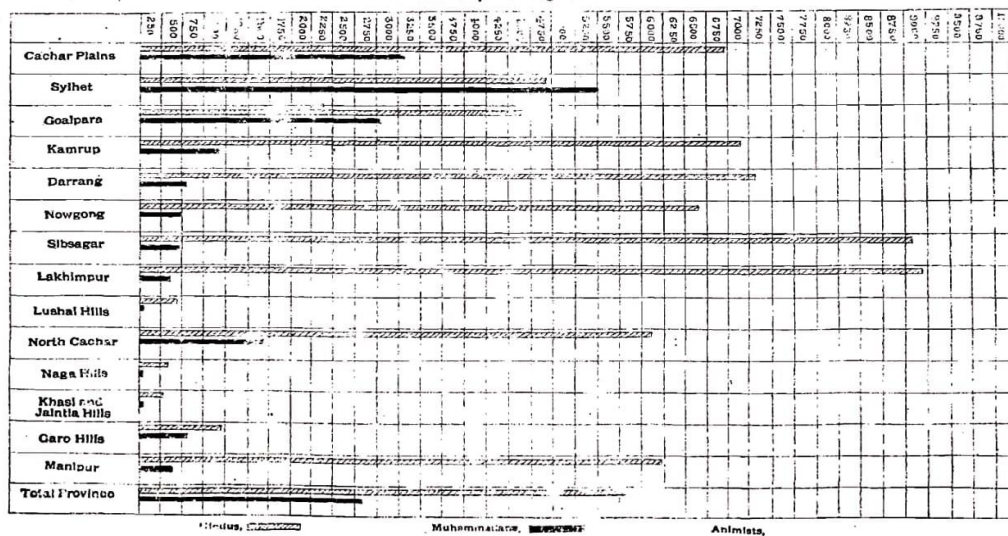
In the colonial period, traditional belief system of Indigenous communities of the Brahmaputra valley faced a transitional period. With the advent of Christianity, western education and other changes, many abandoned their earlier beliefs. In course of time many were greatly influenced by their Hindu neighbours while others embraced Christianity. In the year 1790 the Dimasa king Krishna Chandra and his brother Gobinda Chandra formally accepted Hinduism.



As the Census report of 1911, Animism was counted as one of the main religion of the Valley during colonial period.<sup>11</sup>

Diagram showing the proportionate distribution of ten thousand persons in each district under the three main religions, Hinduism, Muhammadanism and Animism.

Each division represents 650 units.



Along with the British East Indian Company, Baptist Missionaries came to Assam also. Their main purpose was spread Christianity. They targeted the hilly population of the region. As many of the tribes lived in the hilly region, they were attracted by the Christianity. A notable portion of the population started to adopt Christianity. As a result Animistic population was started to decrease. Census Report of 1911 showed it clearly.

11. Census Report of India, 1901, Page no 38

The report is given below-

Percentage of increase or decrease of Hindus, Muhammadans, and Animists by divisions and districts.

Natural divisions and districts.	HINDUS.		MUHAMMADANS.		ANIMISTIC.	
	Total.	Percentage of variation (+) or (-).	Total.	Percentage of variation (+) or (-).	Total.	Percentage of variation (+) or (-).
Cachar Plains ...	278,964	+ 16.2	126,698	+ 12.2	8,079	- 41.8
Sylhet ...	1,049,248	+ 3.2	1,180,324	+ 5.0	11,337	- 17.9
Total Surma Valley ...	1,328,212	+ 5.7	1,307,022	+ 5.6	19,416	- 29.9
Goalpara ...	203,696	- 2.7	128,388	+ 3.1	125,618	+ 8.1
Kamrup ...	407,363	- 8.4	53,701	- 2.9	125,599	- 4.6
Darrang ...	239,318	+ 22.1	17,372	- 5.8	78,458	- 14.5
Nowgong ...	167,709	- 21.7	12,578	- 11.0	79,767	- 30.6
Sibsagar ...	529,480	+ 26.4	24,878	+ 25.6	39,203	+ 141.3
Lakhimpur ...	333,484	+ 46.7	11,925	+ 47.4	17,973	+ 43.2
Total Brahmaputra Valley ...	1,881,050	+ 9.9	248,842	+ 3.5	166,618	- 3.3
Total Plains ...	3,209,262	+ 8.1	1,555,864	+ 5.3	486,034	- 4.9
Lushai Hills ...	3,373	...	202	...	78,657	...
North Cachar ...	23,908	+ 190.8	5,804	+ 38.593	10,839	+ 1.2
Naga Hills ...	3,351	- 24.4	142	- 32.0	97,948	- 16.7
Khasi and Jaintia Hills ...	5,354	+ 17.2	1,118	+ 36.3	178,275	- 3.8
Garo Hills ...	13,274	+ 16.5	7,804	+ 39.4	113,274	+ 9.9
Total Hill Districts ...	49,260	+ 62.9	15,070	+ 119.7	478,993	+ 4.4
Manipur ...	45,887	+ 60.3	14,868	+ 123.8	400,336	- 3.9
Total Province ...	170,577	...	10,383	...	103,307	...
Total Province ...	3,429,099	+ 14.4	1,581,317	+ 6.5	1,068,334	+ 10.1

Total Hill districts.—The lower set of figures indicates the totals and percentage of variation, excluding the Lushai Hills.

The report shows that, where Animistic religion of the other districts of the Brahmaputra Valley decreased by a number; Goalpara, Lakhimpur and Sivasagar District had increased its population respectively in 8.1%, 43.2%, 141.3%. However, total Animistic population of the Valley was decreased by 3.5%.<sup>12</sup>

Along with the spread of Christianity in the region, colonial Forest Policy affected animistic belief of the society as they were mainly dependent on nature and forest.

12. Census Report of India, 1901, Page no 51

## 2.4 Animism in Post-Colonial Period:

Animism resurfaced in the Brahmaputra Valley after colonization, as indigenous groups reclaimed their cultural legacy. Following India's independence in 1947, the region saw a revival of traditional rituals such as nature worship, totemism, and shamanism. The Ahom and Bodo people among others, reinforced their spiritual bonds with the land, rivers, and forests.

Verrier Elwin's influential essay, "The Religion of an Indian Tribe" (1955), contributed to the understanding of animism in tribal civilizations.<sup>13</sup> Indigenous rights to ancestral lands and resources were recognized by the government through efforts such as the Tribal Rights Act (2006). Ecotourism and conservation efforts have also highlighted the relevance of traditional ecological knowledge. Today, animism continues to influence the Brahmaputra Valley's cultural character, with festivals such as Bihu, Ali-Aye-Ligang, Bathou Puja, Chinthong Arnam of the Karbis commemorating the spiritual relationship between humans and environment. The attempts to preserve this rich cultural heritage will continue to be critical in the future.

## 3.0 Conclusion:

This historical study has examined the evolution of nature worship in the Brahmaputra Valley, highlighting the significance of animism in the region's cultural and religious landscape. From pre-colonial times to the post-colonial period, animistic beliefs have undergone transformations, influenced by external factors such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and colonial policies. Despite these changes, indigenous communities have consistently revered nature, acknowledging its spiritual and supernatural significance. Today the region presents the picture of the Indian ethos of a multicultural society where differences not only exist but are celebrated together with common rituals and festivities of an essentially agricultural society.

13. Elwin, Verrier, (2024), *The Religion of an Indian Tribe*, 1955, Canny Press.

The study reveals that animism has played a vital role in shaping the unique cultural character of the Brahmaputra Valley. The resilience of animistic practices, even in the face of colonialism and religious conversions, testifies to the deep connection between indigenous communities and their natural environment.

As the region continues to navigate modernization and environmental challenges, understanding and preserving animistic traditions become crucial. Recognizing the cultural significance of nature worship can inform sustainable development strategies, promote eco-friendly practices, and ensure the preservation of traditional ecological knowledge. Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of respecting and celebrating the rich cultural heritage of the Brahmaputra Valley, where nature remains an integral part of the region's spiritual identity.

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