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## Religious And Socio-Cultural Identity Of Assam: Society And Culture: A Relevant Discussion

(With special reference to Darrang district)

Dr. Manoranjan Baruah, Associate Professor

LOKD College, Dhekiajuli, Sonitpur (Assam)

### Abstract

Assam is a land of rich cultural heritage and diverse social traditions where different ethnic groups, religions, languages, and customs have developed a unique socio-cultural identity through centuries of interaction and coexistence. The socio-cultural structure of Assam reflects unity in diversity, and its society is deeply influenced by traditional beliefs, customs, rituals, festivals, and community practices. Among the districts of Assam, Darrang district occupies an important position for its historical background, cultural diversity, and traditional social institutions. The district represents a harmonious blend of different communities such as Assamese Hindus, Muslims, tribal groups, and other ethnic populations who have preserved their distinct cultural practices while maintaining social unity.

The present study attempts to examine the religious and socio-cultural identity of Assam with special reference to Darrang district. It focuses on the traditional customs and rituals, marriage systems, festivals, folk culture, religious practices, and funcrary rites and customs which continue to shape the social life of the people. The study also highlights the influence of modernization and social change on traditional cultural values and institutions. Both primary and secondary sources have been used for collecting information, including books, journals, census reports, and local observations.

The findings of the study reveal that the socio-cultural identity of Darrang district is deeply rooted in traditional values, religious tolerance, and community participation. Customs and rituals associated with birth, marriage, death ceremonies, and festivals play a significant role in preserving social solidarity and cultural continuity. Funcrary rites and customs reflect the religious beliefs and emotional attachment of the

people toward their traditional heritage. Despite the impact of globalization and modernization, the people of Darrang district still maintain their cultural identity through traditional social practices and community-based cultural activities. Therefore, the socio-cultural identity of Darrang district represents an important component of the wider cultural heritage of Assam.

**Key words:** *Darrang district, Customs and rituals, socio-cultural identity, Funerary rites and customs.*

### **Introduction:**

Society is the unit of some communities of people big and small. In the animal world man has been known as the supermen social being. Dependent on nature, human race, along with increasing the store-house of knowledge, has been rushing towards new experience and knowledge. With the evolution of civilization, the human race, with a view to living in comfort and happiness, felt the need of literature, art and culture along with food for physical sustenance. The strange human society is the outcome of such human endeavour. In the gradual increasing evolution, society is the group of individuals. By `society` is generally meant those people who live untidily, who have will knit organizations to lead themselves; who have power and capacity to remove own sorrows and miseries; whose behavior is benign to all and who have knowledge and power of thought for successive development. On the whole individuals help in all round development of society. While doing so, they act in cohesion observing some rules and regulations. It means that individual and society are complimentary to each other. Socio-cultural identity is a reflection of a community`s tradition, beliefs, practices, and social institutions. Darrang district located in central Assam, is historically significant and culturally vibrant. It was once part of the undivided Darrang region, which included present-day Udalguri.

The district is influenced by the river Brahmaputra River, which shapes its settlement patterns, economy, and cultural life. Over time, migration and interaction among different ethnic groups have contributed to a composite socio-cultural identity.

### **Objective of the study:**

1. To analyze the religious composition of Darrang district and its role in shaping social identity.
2. To study the ethnic and linguistic diversity and its influence on socio-cultural Life.
3. To examine the traditional cultural practices, including festivals, customs and folk traditions.
4. To understand the role of religion in everyday social interactions and Community life.
5. To explore the process of cultural coexistence and syncretism among Different communities.
6. To analyze the impact of socio-economic conditions on cultural identity And social structure.
7. To suggest measures for preserving cultural heritage and promoting Social integration.

**Methodology:**

1. **Research Design:** The study is descriptive and analytical in nature. It aims to describe the religious composition and socio-cultural practices of Darrang district and analyze their impact on identity formation and social relations.

2. **Nature of Data :**

The study is based on both:

**Primary Data:**

- . Field observations in selected villages of Darrang district.
- . Informal interviews with local residents, community leaders, and elders.
- . Personal interactions to understand cultural practices and religious life.

**Secondary Data:**

- Census of India reports (2011)
- Books, journals, and research articles
- Government reports and official records
- Relevant online academic sources

Religious and socio-cultural identity of Darrang District: society and culture: Society is the unit of some communities of people big and small. In the animal world man has been known as the supermen social being. Dependent on nature, human race, along with increasing the store-house of knowledge, has been rushing towards new experience and knowledge. With the evolution of civilization, the human race, with a view to living in comfort and happiness, felt the need of literature, art and culture along with food for physical sustenance. The strange human society is the outcome of such human endeavour. In the gradual increasing evolution, society is the group of individual. By `society` is generally meant those people who live untidily, who have will kint organizations to lead themselves; who have power and capacity to remove own sorrows and miseries; whose behavior is benign to all and who have knowledge and power of thought for successive development. On the whole individuals help in all round development of society. While doing so, they act in cohesion observing some rules and regulations. It means that individual and society are complimentary to each other.

Culture is like the basis of human society. Collective practice of manners and customs of society expresses the mode of culture. It means that in the various aspects of life such as residence, sleeping, eating, movement, birth, marriage, death, sources of livelihood, functions and ceremonies, rest, mental recreation a person has been observing traditional and yet reformative rules and customs. So, cultural man may be called the basis of traditional habits and experience of society. The habits observed by society on the basis of culture has been divided by the socialist thinkers in to some special heads.

They are:-

- a) Endeavour to adopt with the atmosphere.
- b) Economics habit

- c) Habit of social organization
- d) Habit of social control (Narzi 1976 : 164).
- e) Habit of movement

According to the social thinkers, to get the real identify of a society there must be, among its constituent people a kind of culture for maintaining their common habitat, specialty of religion, sources of livelihood and self-consciousness. But in modern civilization, not only on Assamese or Indian but also on the various civilization of the world, the influence of collective culture and civilization of the world is discernible.

In a society are prevalent some rules and regulations and habits and manners of a nationality, These rules and regulations, customs and habits and manners are the creations of the people belonging to that nationality. Therefore, these manners and behavior and rules and regulations are a specimen of culture of that society. Culture helps in making the course of life convenient and shaping life as well.

The society of Darrang district is a mixed one. This Darrangia society has emerged from mingling of various castes and sub castes. These include the Brahmins, kalitas, kayasthas, Ganaka (astrologer), Napits, kumars, kamars, Nath, Koch-Rajbongshis and the Muslims. Besides, the people belonging to schedule tribes and Schedule Castes such as the Bodo kacharis, Rabhas, karbis, Bengali, Nepali and Chaotalis also are constituent units of this society. The Darrangia social life has emerged as a result of the cooperation of the people belonging to these caste and tribes. It is seen that composition of the social life of darrang district has achieved wide and well- extended nourishment.

The tribals have a special role in the social set-up of Darrang. All the people belonging to various ethnic groups, castes and tribes have remained tied by a common bond. In spite of that, the system of livelihood, rites and behavior, and rules and customs of the various people could not but leave its impact on the total social gamut.

#### **Customs and rituals associates with child-birth:**

As in the other districts in the province, in Darrang too there has been some traditional customs and rituals associated with child-birth. In the fifth month of pregnancy after marriage the pregnant woman is fed panchamrit. This custom is not there among the tribals. Generally Panchamrit is fed on the fifth day of waxing moon of the fifth month since after pregnancy. Now a days people are also found celebrating this function according to their convenience. This function is celebrated in the pregnant woman's parents' house. On account of the function the parents, the pregnant woman and her husband are invited. On the appointed day, following the conventional rules, the mother of the pregnant woman prepare an emulsion mixing up curd, milk, ghee (classified butter), honey and sugar. At first the emulsion is offered to the house hold god as oblation. Custom entails that the pregnant woman is to be fed the Panchamrit after she is bathed and dressed in set of new clothes. After that the woman panamrit. In the same ways, the custom of feeding jeura in the seventh month of pregnancy is also prevalent in Darrang. This function is celebrated in the son-in-law's house with fish, milk, meat, curd, sweet-meats and cakes brought from the pregnant woman's parents' home. As in case of feeding panamrit, the function of Jeura too is celebrated observing the conventional rites rituals and after making the woman dressed in new clothes. The ceremonial rites are first observed and then the people belonging to the son-in-laws clan and the relatives are feasted.

Again the custom of celebrating Pungsavan or pohanbiah in the eight month of pregnancy is also prevalent in Darrang. Along with the Brahmins, the Ganaks, the Kayasthas and the people belonging to the Nath communities also celebrate this ritual. After this in the 9<sup>th</sup> month of pregnancy is celebrated the Bhat Khuwa function. This is a ceremony of fasting. The neighbours and the relatives and the friendly families invite the pregnant woman with a view to entertain her with a sumptuous meal. It is during this month that the mother feeds the pregnant daughter anything she desires to eat. As in the other places, in Darrang too musical instruments like bell and conch-shells are sounded to herald the birth of a child. In the rural areas delivery is done with the help of midwife and the root of the tubular organs at the naval of the infant is out with the help of a razor-sharp mbamboo chip to separate it from the mother. Now a day such hard and fast conventional custom have been relaxed to a great extent. Yet the practice has been there in some rural areas. The system of cutting the tubular organ at the naval of the infant is also there among the Bodos. There prevails a custom of putting a drop of honey in then month of the new-born. Tribal people like the Bodos and the Mundaris also put a drop of honey in the month of the infant. In addition to this, people out-side the house in whice the child is born give blows on the wall and make chuh-chuh sound. As soon as a child is born the mBodo cut a chicken and offer it to the gods as oblation . It is belived that such act brings good luck to the new-born. In the same manner, there has been prevailing among the living in Darrang a system of sacrificing an animal or a cock immediately after a child is born. Such sacrifice is done with the heip of a priest. The custom among the Rabhas is some-what different. When a child is born, the members of the family take bath enmass to sanctify themselves. Afire slumbering within paddy husk is kept always in the house in whice the infant and the convalescing mother slay. Pearls of garlic and mustard seeds are also strewn in that chamber. This fire is preserved for eleven days and in some certain areas continuity of the fire is maintained till the end of the month. This custom is prevalent among the tribals. A knife is kept under the bed of the woman who had delivered the infant. This is done in order that no evil sprit could prevail on or do harm to the mother and the infant. During one month after the child-birth the members of the family lead a kind of restrained life and do not enter into any temple or Namghar (Community prayer hall). Aashush or the sanctifying function is generally celebrate at the ciose of a month. Of course now a days this function is observed conveniently. Villagers and the other guests are entertained with feast on the occasion of celebrating this grand function. The Bodos also celebrate this sanctifying function. In this function they invite the villagers, collect arun plants (a local variety of wild plant used as vegetable), prepare a kind of pungent dish and entertain the guests with Laapani (home brewed wine) and that pungent dish. On the eleventh day of the child –birth, the Rabhas invite the priest of their clan, take cleansing both to sanctify themselves and arrange feas

### **Funerary rites and customs:**

The people of Darrang have been observing some traditional rituals relating the funerary sites of the dead relatives. There are difference amlong the various ethnic groups relating to such rites and rituals. As for the customs, the Hindus consign the dead body to flame and the Muslims and Christians bury them in graces. Incase of death of a child, be it male or female, the custom is to bury the corpse. In the same manner croses of a person dying unusual death is buried in grave either on a river bank or in a forest. It is seen that the Muslim and the Christian Communities have systematic burial grounds for performing the funerals rites of the dead. But the non tribals do not have any such burial grounds.

In the rural areas of Darrang, men from each household take a bamboo to the burial ground as soon as they get the information of a persons death. The people of the village collectively burn the dead body . People of the dead persons family and those belonging to his or her dynasty observe a period of impurity which in Darrangi language is called ahuj .On the tenth day after the death a ritual called daha is celebrated and shradha ceremonies are held on the eleventh and thirteenth days and on completion of a month. The people of the village help and co-operate in celebrating the shradha ceremonies and they are entertained with feast. Ritualistic rites of the dead are ended with Maschwani held on the day after the shradha ceremony. Mawsowani is a celebration in which the people belonging to the dead one,s family and dynasty, who had celebrated a period of impurity since after the day of death (ashous) are allowed to touch and eat fish, meat and other non-vegetarian food. On that day is offered a cooked meal to the dead one. The food stuff and dishes including fish and meat which were favourite of the dead person during his or her life time are cooked and prepared and served in deserted place near his or her home.

In ancient time the Bodos used to abandon the dead body leaving it lying in a field. But now a days they are seen burning the corpse. Some dead bodies were disposed according to the wishes and directions left by the persons while they were living. The Bodos make bier of bamboo to carry away the dead body to the burial ground. At the time of abandoning the corps in the field, a knife, a bowl –earthen or metal , a copper and a fire slumbering within a braided wisp of straw (jumuthi) are left in the name of the dead person. On the tenth day after death is celebrated Daha ritual , The Bodos called this Daha-gamai.

On the shradha day the Bodo offer puja to Bura Bathau Maharaja in the morning itself. After that wine and boiled rice are offered to the dead. There are offered in the courtyard itself. Then the public are entertained with feast. Generally the bodo living in other part of Assam are not found offering fish and meat in the shradha ceremony of a dead person. But in addition to those living in Darrang . Bodos of Kamrup and Nagaon are found offering fish and meat in this ceremony.

In case of death of a person belonging to Muslim community the custom is to keep the dead body lying on wooden bed stand with its head towards west and the body is keep shrouded with a white cloth. After that aju is done by the females. After that the dead body is dressed with clothes and perform is sprayed on it. At the end of these ritual the body is carried to the burial ground. A pit is dug and the corpse is put it and buried filling the grave with soil. The members of the dead person,s family do not lit fire for three days. After three days fire is lit according to direction given by a maulavi. The members of the dead person,s family become free from funeral obligation after forty days. A feast is held for the public on that day and this ritualistic act is known as chalis.

The custom of the Yogies (Nath) in Darrang was to bury the dead body . The Chaotalies and the Kolmundas (two tea tribes) used to abandon the dead body lying in a field. But , now they are found consigning the corpse to the flames. Among the Rabhas the traditional custom was to bury the corpse. But now a days they are found barring the corpse along with recital of relevant Vedic verses. There is no custom of engaging any priest for the performance of shradha rituals among the Rabhas. Normally the shradha ceremony is solemnized between eleven and twenty one days after the death. However, because of inconvenience, it is often seen solemnizing after a month.

The above functional social and religious customs have lent a colourful shape to the Darrang culture and to the historically famous Darrang district as a whole. In the cultural mosaic of Darrang , have been accommodated all the various cultures of the caste Hindus, Muslims, Bodos, Rabhas and others. As a result of mixing up of all

these cultures Darrangi culture has collectively emerged as a colourful collective culture. This mixed culture of Darrang is said to have contributed a lot to the rich and colourful culture of Assam. However it cannot but be said that various economic methods and the consequent problems created by them, lack of transport and communication illiteracy, population spurt and such other problems have collectively stood as well to hinder progress of Darrangi culture. Customs and manners of the Bodo, Rabhas, tea-tribes, Muslims and others living in Darrang have been influencing the culture of this region. People belonging to various religious sects and faiths like vaisnwas and shaktas have been living here. People belonging to various sects and castes worship gods of their choice according to their own customs and tradition. In the same manner all the sects and clans have respective places of worship of their own. They have been helping in building the bridge of understanding.

### **Different festivals and faires:**

Festivals and functions are indispensable parts of culture. Religious faith is integrally related to the root of almost all the traditional festivals and functions. It is seen that all the festivals and functions traditionally observed and celebrated are aimed at enhancing agricultural production by augmenting fertility of soil. In addition to these are celebrated traditionally wishing welfare of the people in general.

As in the other districts of the state, people in Darrang district also have been observing Narayana puja and such other religious functions and festivals either in individual places of worship or community places of worship. In addition to these religious functions like Deul, Pacheti, Matheni etc, have been able to occupy a place of importance.

People of all the communities living in Darrang have been observing festivals related to agriculture and associated with farm life. Such festivals are; aagdia, aagana, na-bhat Khbowa, domahi, ammeti and Bihu. In the same manner remarkable festivals celebrated by the tribal Bodos are; Kherai puja, Langaruara puja and Bathow puja. Remarkable religious functions observed by the Rabhas are Baikhu puja and Manasa or Maroi puja. Among the Muslims religious functions celebrated in different times of the year are: Idulfiter, Muharrum, Fateha-e-dohaj daham etc.

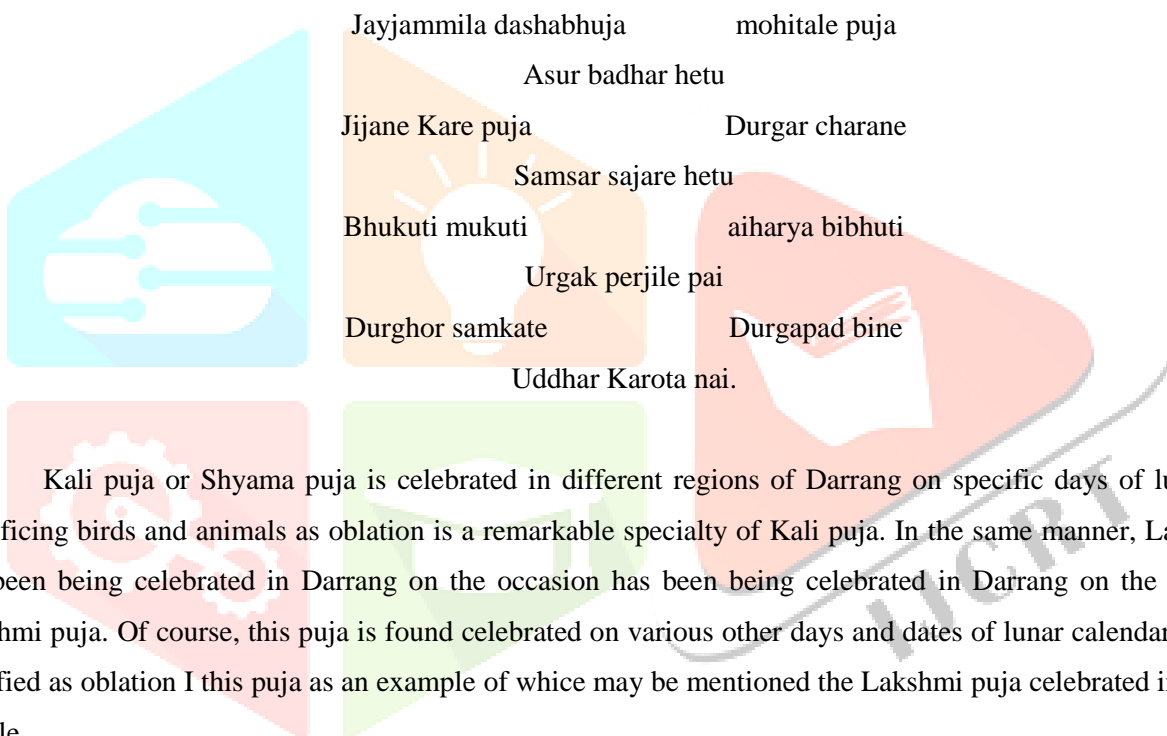
Maroi puja in Darrang districts is celebrated both by the tribals and non-tribals. Here this puja is also known as mare or maroi puja, gosomisewa, and padmapuja. The Bodos generally celebrated this puja on any day of waning moon fortnight (Krishna-paksha) between the month of Bohag (April-may) and shaon (June-july). It is customary to sacrifice a pair magoormach (a species of mud water fish); a pair or grasshopper and a pair of cooks in this puja. In addition to this buffalo is also sacrificed and its head and blood are offered to the goddess as oblation. As an example of Manasa puja celebrated by the Bodos mention may be made of the Manasa puja held in the temple of Muhadeo at Pakimuri, In celebration of puja in the temple cooks and pigeons are sacrificed to propitiate the goddess. It is said that in ancient time human sacrifice used to be done in this puja to propitiate goddess Manasa.

Like wise prevalence of Manasa puja is there among the Rabhas of Darrang districts of course they celebrate this puja individually at home. A pair of pigeons, a duck, a he-goat and a buffalo are sacrificed in the puja as oblation to the goddess. In addition, it is compulsory to release and set free a pair of white coloured pigeons. Regarded as presiding goddess of the serpentine world, the Rabhas engage in Manasa puja. Sukanani oja for recital of hymns and legends associated with Manasa cut. (Ojapali is a group of choral singers led by one oja and aided four to five palis who recite hymns and legends associated with gods and goddesses and it is a popular form of

performing art traditionally prevalent in Assam). One remarkable thing is that once upon a time, in Darrang, the Muslims also used to celebrate Manasa puja. Famous Muslim Suknanni oja of Maroi village in Sipajhar area, Parashu is a burning example of this fact. He also got recognition as oja of the royal house.

Another kind of puja that the people of Darrang have been celebrating is the Durga puja. This puja has been being celebrated traditionally in Howli at Mongoldoi, Mohanpur, Kalaigaon, Kharupetia and at Muhradeo temple. He goats and pigeons etc. are sacrificed at the Muhradeo shrine on the occasion of the puja.

Jagra puja is celebrated in the house of Byas Oja of Byaspara and in Rudreswar shrine at Maharipara in Pati Darrang areas of Darrang districts. In this puja Ardhanariswar shiv is worshipped both in scriptural and customary ways (Ardhanariswar is a peculiar figure of Lord shiv of which one half is masculine and the other half feminine). During celebration of this puja Bayasgoa Oja recite Jagargeet. As it is sung in a malast tune, it is called malasi. Below is given specimen a few lines of Malasigeet---



Kali puja or Shyama puja is celebrated in different regions of Darrang on specific days of lunar month. Sacrificing birds and animals as oblation is a remarkable specialty of Kali puja. In the same manner, Lakshmi puja has been being celebrated in Darrang on the occasion has been being celebrated in Darrang on the occasion of Lakshmi puja. Of course, this puja is found celebrated on various other days and dates of lunar calendar. He goat is sacrificed as oblation in this puja as an example of which may be mentioned the Lakshmi puja celebrated in Muhradeo temple.

One of the cheerful festivals of the people of Darrang is Deul utsav (the festival of colour). This festival is celebrated at various places in Darrang throughout the month of Bohag (April-May). At present Deul utsav is found celebrated even in the month of Zeth (May-June). Among the deul utsav celebrated in the district remarkable are the deul of Kalaigone and deul of Bihubhanga. Deul utsav is primarily a puja offered to Lord Vishnu. On the occasion of deul puja tender plantain trees are fixed at each of the four corners of the bedi (elevated earthen plain on which is offered the puja, and it is decorated with floral wreaths. The thapana (sanctum sanctorum) is fixed on the bedi. The bedi is decorated with magar and kundali slung around it. Ojapali, thiya-nam, nagara-nam are held in this festival.

**Conclusion:**

The religious and socio-cultural identity of Darrang district reflects a rich tradition of diversity, harmony, and cultural continuity. The district is home to various ethnic and religious communities, including Assamese Hindu, Muslims, Bodos, Koch-Rajbongshis, Rabhas, and other groups, who have contributed significantly to its unique social fabric. Despite differences in language, religion, and customs, these communities have maintained peaceful coexistence through mutual and cultural interaction.

Religious institutions such as temples, mosques, namghars, and satras play an important role in shaping the moral and social life of the people. Festivals like Bihu, Eid, Durga puja and other local celebrations strengthen social bonds and promote communal harmony. Traditional customs, folk culture, music, dance, and indigenous knowledge systems continue to preserve the cultural heritage of the district.

However, modernization, urbanization, migration, and globalization have brought significant changes to traditional lifestyles and cultural practices. While these changes have created opportunities for social and economic development, they also pose challenges to the preservation of indigenous cultural values and identities. Therefore, conscious efforts are needed from government agencies, educational institutions, cultural organizations, and local communities to document, preserve, and promote the rich religious and socio-cultural heritage of Darrang district.

In conclusion, the religious and socio-cultural identity of Darrang district remains a vital component of its social structure and historical legacy. The district stands as an example of cultural pluralism and communal coexistence, where diversity is celebrated as a source of strength not only enriches the district but also contributes to the broader cultural mosaic of Assam and India.

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