



Baithow Puja As A Folk Tradition Of Sonowal Kacharis Of Assam

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Abstract: North-East is a land of colourful tribe and their culture. The culture of north-eastern states is characterized by the diverse ethnic groups settled in the region. Each tribe has its own distinct custom, cuisine, attire and dialect. One of these tribes is the 'Sonowal Kacharies'. The Sonowal Kachari is indigenous and major Indo-Mongloid tribes of Assam. Therefore they are differentiated from others with their multicoloured traditions, social system, ritual, habits, economic and political life. The Sonowal Kacharis are resourceful in their Folklore and Folk life. With the tribal behaviour and immense love for their land, water, sky and above all the universe they deliver some performances during their working or in the leisure which are related to their life, activities and the universe. Hope, desire, happiness, sorrow, terror, adoration, social system, struggle, pleasure, tiredness, hunger of their life is reflected in these performances. Among the variety of Folk performances Bihuwa Nach, Baithow Puja, HaidangGeet, Huchari Geet, Gojai Sabah, Sarag dew Puja, Hogra Nach, Leseri, log Bihu, kulaburi nach etc. are unique habits to this tribe. The main aim of this research paper is to discuss Baithow Puja as a folk tradition of Sonowal Kachari Community and also to analyse the importance of Baithow on their tribal life. This paper is basically descriptive in nature. To prepare this research paper the investigator used both primary and secondary sources of data.

Keywords: Sonowal Kacharies, Baithow Puja and Culture.

Introduction:

Expression, Communication and sharing are impulsive behaviour of every individual. The inner urge of human being develops various oral narratives, craft, art, custom, belief, performing arts and other practices. In this way all communities create and practise their own traditions, relevant music, dance or theatre. These cultures have its own traditions, which are inherited from generation to generation. They have an effect on the thinking and living patterns of each individual of the particular community. The notion of tribe is, in all aspects, a colonial construct. The term tribe is used in a different context in Europe. According to historian Nihar Ranjan Ray, the so called tribals of India, are the indigenous, autonomous people who had settled in

India before the Aryan speaking people. In Assam the term tribes also signify those aboriginal people, who have settled in this region prior to the arrival of the Aryans. In other words; the entire North-East is a land of colourful tribe and their culture. In the narratives of ancient Indian history, mention is made about the aboriginal people of India and Assam particularly. The available accounts and literature about the origin of the Sonowal Kacharies don't mention that the Sonowal Kacharies since early times have maintained a distinct and separate tribe as 'Sonowal Kacharies'. Sources indeed are varying in nature. A common opinion however, is that the Kacharies are one ancient community in the North and North Eastern part of India. Scholars believe that the history of the Kacharies is nothing but the history of the Dimasa Kacharies whose important sites of megalithic culture left in Dimapur of present Nagaland. Infact, the Kacharies being the indigenous tribes of Indias North and Northeast, their history is also quite old. The ancient religious scriptures like the Kalika Puranas(10 th Century) and Yogini Tantras (16 th Century) made mention of the Kirata people of Kamrup. Edward Gait described about the origin of the term "Kachari" in a general manner, not specifically mentioning the term "Sonowal Kachari". In his description, the Kacharis are the aboriginal or earliest inhabitants of the Brahmaputra Valley, the Kacharies call themselves Dimasha, a corrupted version of Dima Fisa or "sons of the great river" (Gait 1933:299) According to Sir Herbert Risley in ancient time the tract between the river Brahmaputra and the river Kasi was known as Kachar. The people who lived in this tract were known as Kachari or Kasari. J.D. Anderson also says the term in nothing but the corruption of Kossari, i.e. those who have relation with Kochas (Sarma, Dr., N.C. 2006, P-14-15) According to Hiteswar Barbarua. "A clan of people was engaged for refining gold was known as Sonowal. (Borbarua, H.2013,P.573) S.L. Barua also mention that "In the prime of Ahom power in the middle of 19 th century, about sixteen thousand Sonowals or Gold washers were engaged by the Ahom government in washing for ten tolas of Gold annually. (Barua, S.L., 1997) Among the states of India, Assam is the home of several ethnic groups. After the partition of India, Assam was left with 23 tribes, comprising of 14 Hill tribes of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar hills and 9 (Nine) plan tribes inhabiting the plains of Brahmaputra valley. Among the various tribal groups of Assam, the Sonowal Kachari is the fifth largest plains tribal group of people. They are scattered in seven districts of upper Assam, viz Tinisukia, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Dhemaji and Lakhimpur. According to the census report of 1971, the Sonowal Kachari constitute the third largest plains tribal group of Assam with a total population of 1, 98,619. According to the census report of 2001 the total population of the sonowal Kachari is estimated 2, 35,881. The Sonowal Kachari is an indigenous and major Indo-Mongloid tribes of Assam. Therefore they are differentiated from others with their multicoloured traditions, social system, ritual, habits, economic and political life. The Sonowal Kacharis are resourceful in their Folklore and Folklife. With the tribal behaviour and immense love for their land, water, sky and above all the universe they deliver some performances during their working or in the leisure which are related to their life, activities and the universe. Hope, desire, happiness, sorrow, terror, adoration, social system, struggle, pleasure, tiredness, hunger of their life is reflected in these performances. Among the variety of Folk performances Bihuwa Nach, Baithow Puja, HaidangGeet, Huchari Geet, Gojai Sabah, Sarag dew Puja, Hogra Nach, Leseri, log Bihu, kulaburi nach etc. are unique habits to this tribe. Moreover the common traditional practices of the different tribes of Assam like the Bihu, Nowai Tulani Biya, Bhekuli Biya, Lakhimi Sabah, Ai Nam, Biya Nam, Gayan

Bayan etc. are also seen to perform by the Sonowals. These rituals and folk cultural performances, traditions of this caste carry some unique characteristics and all these depict their social, anthropological and ritual life. Amongst the most popular and common tradition of Sonowal Kacharis is “Khring Khring Baithow Puja.”

Objectives:

The main objectives of the study are as follows –

- (i) To discuss Baithow Puja as a folk tradition of Sonowal Kachari Community.
- (ii) To analyse the importance of Baithow Puja on their tribal life.

Methodology:

In this research, both primary and secondary data are used to collect information Sources for the data are as follows –Primary sources: Observation and interview and the Secondary sources: Books, Journals, e-resources etc.

Discussion:

Baithow Puja as a Folk Tradition: The religious beliefs and practices of the tribal of northeast India is a subject of much interest among the scholars mostly the social scientists. Like other tribal groups of northeast India, the Sonowal Kacharis also celebrate a number of festivals and perform rites and ceremonies in their life cycle. The festivals are celebrated at different levels – at individual family, village level at namghar (Assamese religious congregational Hall) and at wider community level. Some of such community festivals are – Baghdew Puja, Gatigori Puja, Gajai Puja, Sargadew Puja, Jalkhai Puja, Kulasaman Puja, Rangesaman Puja, Barsaman Puja, Bura Buri Puja, Balia baba puja, Kesaikhate puja, Kali Aai puja etc. At the household level, they worship and observed some routined rituals such as – Lakhimi Sabah, Bhur utua Sabha, Bali Sabha, Changali Masor Sabha, Narasiga Sabha, Garakhia Sabha, Falmular (fruits) sabha, Methoi Bota Sabha, Apeswari Sabha, Bor Sabha etc. In addition to the above the Sonowal Kachari tribe also performed lots of local socio-religious ceremonies and festivals for the moral and spiritual satisfaction and with the hope of family welfare. Some of such ceremonies are -Bura Puha, Chowt Kherua, Marak Diya, Na-purukia Hakan, Aai Hakam, Lakhimi Hokam, Barir Sukar Hakam etc. The traditional Sonowal Kachari worships various Gods and Goddesses at community level at different places and times cum seasons in Assam and abroad. There are various kinds of sacrifices and offering for different Gods and Goddesses. But one thing is very important that only especially designated person or persons from a particular clan of Sonowal Kachari community are only authorised to perform this religious activities on behalf of the community. Amongst, such a great puja of Sonowal Kachari is Khring Khring Baithow Puja. Lord Shiva has been regarded at the prime God of worship. In fact, the celebration of ‘Baithow Puja’ (or gajai puja) is deeply involved with the religious tradition of the Sonowal Kacharis. Baithow puja is celebrated for three continuous days in the Assamese month of “Phalguna”(March/April). The celebration starts on the first Sunday of the Lunar fortnight (Suklapaksha) in the month of “Phalguna” and finished on the third day. The main baithow puja spans a period of three days at

the central Mandir, Borpathar (Dangari) in Tinisukia District. Khring means four nos. living things (i.e. Bhraman, Gajan, Uran, Buran) and Baithow means composed of five elements (i.e. – sky, Fire, water, Air and Earth). On the otherhand ‘Ba’ means ‘Five’ and ‘Thow’ means idea or theory or philosophy. Thus Baithow means philosophy of five. First day, On Sunday evening the Pujari chants a mantra for appeal being Gods and Goddesses and lighting nine nos. of Chaki in the name of Na-vani Lakhimi. (i.e. Sengdoi, bengdoi, Hakladoi, Phakladoi, Dondoi, Kuladoi, Deobahi, Hombahi and Budhbohi). Then make nine nos. Pan Tamul Tupula for (1) Khring Raja (2) Gojai (3) Monai (4) Phulkonwar (5) Bhuruli Habuki (6) Saribura (7) Sarihal Gokhani (8) Sarasati and (9) Takabahi). It is performed in oneday long Puja only, not main Mandir. The community worships in a post of dead Jamu Plant as Khring Raja deota and called, “Waitha Himaleleng thai, hakalu dai dukh eke Mai iamuh – Khutate disang Moi” etc. Next day on Monday, the Pujari enlights the Na-Vani chaki and prepares Bura-hagar jal from Rohi vodka by chanting a mantra. The Devotees used this as ‘Santijal’ for puja. Then the pujari enlights 2 Nos. chaki each of four (4) lights in the dead Jamu plant and offered pan-tamul, pasad (rice & salt) etc. for the Khring. In the after one red Aluwa Pakai is consecrated to the Khri Khiri baithow Deota by the Pujari and chants a mantra. The devotees prepare a ‘Khaji’ from the aluwa Pakhi and enjoyed as pasad. The devotees perform worshipping to the Baithow Deota. The community used or play Bihu Dhol, Takamari, pepa, Gagana etc. instruments after Baithow puja. On Tuesday morning, from the Borsung of Rajaguri Borghor the Bihu getting down to the baithow Mandir by devotees performing their ancient religious dances. Haidang geet, Log bihu, Leseri, Huchari are well associated with the fervor, fun and the ban homie in the advent. The devotees perform huchari at the courtyard of the Pujaris home by beating the Dhole, playing pepa, Gagana, takamari etc. Singing songs, unitedly in orchestral order, the sound reverberating in the air to awaken nature. This is done in order to make earth fertile and their lands suitable for growing crops. As this the people are mainly agrarian. They believe this too.

Findings of the Study:

The major findings of the study are as follows –

- In the contemporary period, this festival has gained mass-based popularity among the Sonowals and celebrated at various places in Assam and the people of the community take part in it with great enthusiasm and grandeur.
- They worshiped Baithow Deota for all around development of the community.
- The community believes that worshipping the Baithow Deota puja adopted the Spring worship of Shakti and made it their main festival, which may also be called the spring festival. Here the ‘purusha’ and the ‘prakriti’ are worshiped as the Kiro and the Kirati (i.e. Shiva – Pravati) and Bordoichila is urged upon to make the earth fertile.
- Like other ethnic groups of North-East India, the Sonowal Kacharis of Assam have some ethnic or community associations of their own. In the contemporary period, such organizations have gained mass-based

popularity among the community people. The ‘Baithow’ celebration committee” is one such example where majority of the respondents are involved.

□ Many scholars and literary persons from among the community believe that Baithow Puja celebration in the recent decades has got its prominence as a result of ethnic revivalism and change of political environment at both local and regional levels. Its importance rests on restoring the socio-cultural and ethnic identity of the community.

□ On the otherhand, at present, most of the Sonowal Kacharis are the devout followers of Mahapurusia vaisnav Darma propounded by Srimanta Sankardeva in the 15 th Century. They are the disciples of the Auniata Satra. Though they have accepted vaisnavism, all of them could not give up some of their traditional socio-religious practices and beliefs.

Conclusion:

After discussion, it is observed that Baithow Puja of Sonowal Kacharis has been an integral part of their folk life. It preserves some folk knowledge and information of the tribe keeping attachments with the roots. It also carries the indigenous identity and ethnic beauty of Sonowal Kacharis from generation to generation. Through the study, it has been found that many social changes have taken place among the Sonowal Kachari with the changes of time and due to the advancement of science & technology, but still they practice their own traditions and cultures with great respect. Therefore we can conclude that the community, Sonowal Kachari is complete identification with nature, one of the most aboriginal tribes of the N.E. Region, worships Baithow God, Lord Shiva by following certain rituals handed down by their ancestors. So, it may be the philosophy of the Baithow is a primitive and age-old tradition.

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