

Culture and Heritage of Assam

Ayushi Boruah¹, Dr. Aparna Srivastava²

¹Student, Amity Institute of Social Sciences Department, Amity University, Noida, UttarPradesh-201304

²Professor, Amity Institute of Social Sciences Department, Amity University, Noida, UttarPradesh-201304

Abstract

This paper explores the rich cultural tapestry and heritage of Assam, a state located in northeastern India, known for its diverse ethnic groups, languages, traditions, and art forms. Through a comprehensive review of historical and contemporary literature, the study delves into the multi-dimensional aspects of Assamese culture, tracing its evolution from ancient times to the present day. It examines the influences of various ethnic migrations, historical events, and socio-cultural practices on the formation of Assamese identity and cultural expressions. Key highlights include discussions on traditional festivals like Bihu, classical dance forms such as Satriya Nritya, architectural marvels like the Sibsagar monuments, and culinary delights that characterize Assamese cuisine. Additionally, the paper explores the challenges and opportunities in preserving and promoting Assam's cultural heritage in the face of modernization and globalization, emphasizing the importance of community engagement and sustainable development strategies. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of Assam's cultural richness and the significance of heritage preservation in fostering regional pride and identity.

Keyword: culture, heritage, traditions, ethnicity, identity, festivals, Bihu, Satriya Nritya, cuisine, community engagement, preservation, cultural diversity, cultural evolution, socio-cultural practices, traditional art forms

Introduction

Nestled in the northeastern region of India, Assam is a land of vibrant culture and rich heritage, shaped by its unique geographical diversity, historical influences, and the amalgamation of various ethnic groups. Situated on the banks of the mighty Brahmaputra River, Assam boasts a tapestry of traditions, languages, arts, and festivals that reflect its multifaceted identity.

The indigenous communities of North-East India continue to uphold subaltern customs that often remain obscure and overlooked by mainstream cultures. Their historical narratives are often denied recognition, residing within contested spaces in postmodern geographies. This raises the question: "Can the subaltern speak?" It appears that their voices struggle to be heard, as their oral socio-cultural traditions are systematically marginalized. In contrast to the dominant "Great Traditions," subalterns possess a rich tapestry of storytelling customs, encompassing diverse landscapes, folklore, and traditional knowledge systems.

The division between "Great Traditions" and subaltern customs is marked by the introduction of writing, a relatively recent and foreign concept to many indigenous communities. Despite this, efforts have been made to incorporate writing into the cultures of various subaltern tribes in the North-East region, which comprises eight states. Assam, for instance, boasts a multitude of ethnic groups, each with its own

distinct traditions, attire, cuisine, and belief systems. Food practices, in particular, serve as markers of social and cultural identity, influenced by geographical factors and resource availability. Similarly, clothing patterns and weaving traditions hold significant cultural value within these communities (F. Boro, S. Bhattacharjee, 2020)(F. Boro,S.Bhattacharjee,2020).

Geographical Diversity:

Assam's geographical landscape is as diverse as its cultural tapestry. From the lush plains of the Brahmaputra Valley to the verdant hills of the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar Hills, and the dense forests of Kaziranga and Manas, Assam is endowed with breathtaking natural beauty. The fertile plains of the Brahmaputra Valley support thriving agricultural practices, while the hills are home to indigenous communities with unique cultural practices and traditions.

Historical Influences:

Throughout history, Assam has been a melting pot of various cultures and civilizations. It has witnessed the rise and fall of powerful dynasties such as the Ahoms, who ruled the region for over six centuries, leaving behind a legacy of impressive architectural marvels like the Kamakhya Temple and the Rang Ghar. The region has also been influenced by the Indo- Aryan, Tibeto-Burman, and Austroasiatic cultures, resulting in a rich tapestry of languages, customs, and rituals.

Ethnic Diversity:

Assam is home to a diverse array of ethnic groups, each with its own distinct language, dress, cuisine, and customs. The Assamese people, with their unique blend of Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman heritage, form the majority population. However, the state is also inhabited by numerous indigenous communities such as the Bodos, Karbis, Mishings, and Dimasas,each contributing to the cultural mosaic of Assam.

Arts and Crafts:

The artistic heritage of Assam is evident in its vibrant traditional crafts, including intricate handloom textiles like the famous Assam silk and cotton fabrics adorned with exquisite motifs and designs. The state is also known for its craftsmanship in pottery, bamboo and cane work, wood carving, and traditional Assamese jewelry, all of which showcase the creativity and skill of the artisans.

Festivals and Celebrations:

Festivals form an integral part of Assamese culture, celebrated with great enthusiasm and fervor throughout the year. Bihu, the most famous festival of Assam, marks the agricultural cycle and is celebrated with vibrant dances, melodious songs, and traditional feasts. Other festivals like Durga Puja, Magh Bihu, and Ali-Ai-Ligang are also celebrated with equal zeal, highlighting the cultural diversity and communal harmony of the state.

In essence, Assam's culture and heritage are a reflection of its rich history, diverse communities, and deep-rooted traditions. As the land of the red river and blue hills, Assam continues to captivate the imagination with its timeless charm and unparalleled beauty, inviting visitors to explore its cultural treasures and unravel the mysteries of its past.

Assam serves as a junction where diverse cultures converge. Its populace, hailing from the captivating state, is a blend of various ethnic backgrounds including Mongoloid, Indo- Burmese, Indo-Iranian, and

Aryan descent. The Assamese culture, an intricate mosaic of these racial influences, has evolved over time through a process of assimilation. The indigenous people of Assam, referred to as "Asomiya" (Assamese), also the state's language, epitomize this rich cultural amalgamation. Assam boasts a plethora of tribes, each characterized by unique traditions, cultures, attire, and lifestyles.

Various tribes such as Bodo, Kachari, Karbi, Miri, Mishimi, Rabha, among others, coexist harmoniously in Assam, with most preserving their distinct languages alongside Assamese, the predominant language of the state. The majority of Assamese identify as Vaishnavas, followers of a Hindu sect that eschews idol worship in favor of "Naamkirtana," the recitation of Lord Vishnu's glory. Two significant cultural and religious institutions, the "Satras" and the "Naamghar," profoundly influence Assam's cultural fabric. The former, serving as centers for religious and cultural activities for over four centuries, and the latter, as places of prayer.

In Assam, although the caste system is present, it is less conspicuous compared to other regions of India. Moreover, Assam embraces a variety of religions including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and others. The central festival of the state, Bihu, observed with great enthusiasm in three parts throughout the year, serves as a unifying force among all Assamese regardless of their background in terms of caste, religion, or creed. Key symbols of Assamese culture such as the "Gamucha," "Jaapi," "TamulPaan," and "Xorai" hold deep significance in reflecting beliefs, heritage, and identity. Women adorn themselves in the traditional attire known as the "Mekhela Chador" along with Assamese jewelry, enriching the vibrant cultural tapestry of Assam.

Culture encompasses the essence of human existence, reflecting a group's history, inclinations, traits, accumulated knowledge, social organization, language, cuisine, music, and beliefs. The evolution of a society's culture is a gradual process that spans centuries, making it challenging to determine its precise origins. The term "culture" finds its roots in the Latin word "cultura." Understanding culture is akin to understanding the diverse perspectives and ways of life embraced by people. When exploring the historical development of Assamese culture, it becomes evident that the cultural tapestry of Assam is woven with various elements and shaped by centuries of migration and settlement. To comprehend Assamese culture fully, it is imperative to delve into its history—examining how Assam became a melting pot for diverse ethnic groups originating from South and Southeast Asia.

This article elucidates the historical backdrop of the ethnic communities residing in Assam, one of India's northeastern states, and the resulting multicultural landscape they have cultivated. (B Vijayakumar, 2023) Bihu, the most renowned folk dance of Assam, is celebrated during the Bihu festival by young boys and girls, symbolizing youthful vigor, fertility, and jubilation. The dance is characterized by lively steps and quick hand movements, accompanied by traditional colorful Assamese attire. Musical instruments such as "Dhol" (Dholak), pepa, gogana, and banhi (flute) are used during the performances. Although the exact origins of Bihu dance are unclear, historical records suggest its official recognition during the reign of Ahom king Rudra Singha, who invited Bihu dancers to perform at the Ranghar fields around 1694 during the Rongali Bihu festivities.

Satriya Nritya, the classical dance indigenous to Assam, encapsulates the essence of Satriya culture, which serves as the cornerstone of the region's religious and cultural ethos. Among the pantheon of classical Indian dance forms, it holds a significant position as one of the eight principal traditions. Unlike certain counterparts that have undergone revival efforts in recent years, Satriya Nritya has maintained its vitality since its inception in 15th-century Assam, credited to the esteemed saint Srimanta Sankardeva. Its thematic content often revolves around mythological narratives, serving as a conduit for imparting

mythological wisdom to the populace in an accessible and engaging manner.

Barpeta's Bhortal Nritya, stemming from the Sankari culture of Barpeta, has its roots entrenched in the classical dance heritage of this specific district in Assam. It was further refined and expanded upon by Narahari Burha Bhakat, a distinguished figure in the Satriya tradition. Typically executed by a group of six to ten performers, Bhortal Nritya showcases intricate formations synchronized with the rhythmic resonance of cymbals. This dynamic dance form, characterized by its lively tempo and accompanied by the distinct rhythm known as "7hiya Nom," is commonly observed during festive gatherings in and around Barpeta and Guwahati.

Research objectives:

1. To find the historical migration patterns and settlement processes that led to the diverse ethnic composition of Assam, with a focus on understanding the origins and cultural contributions of different ethnic groups to the region.
2. To find the socio-cultural dynamics and interactions among various ethnic communities in Assam throughout history, aiming to identify key factors and events that have shaped the composite culture of the region.
3. To find the cultural elements and traditions of Assam, including language, food, music, rituals, and beliefs, to elucidate the unique characteristics and nuances of Assamese culture resulting from the amalgamation of diverse ethnic traditions over centuries.

Literature of review

The evolution of culture within a society is a gradual process that spans centuries, much like the proverbial construction of Rome. Pinpointing the exact emergence of a culture is challenging, as it involves a complex interplay of various elements over time. The term "culture" itself, derived from the Latin word "Cultura," encompasses all aspects of human life—mental, social, and physical. To understand Assamese culture, one must delve into the historical context of how Assam became a melting pot of diverse ethnic groups.

Assam's composite culture has emerged through the assimilation and amalgamation of various ethnic groups inhabiting the region. During prehistoric times, the hills of Assam were occupied by Negritos, followed by Australoids. Historical records suggest that different racial groups began migrating to Assam as early as 3000 BC. In the era of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, Assam, then known as Kamrupa with its capital at Pragjyotispur, played a significant role, as evidenced by King Bhagadatt's participation in the battle of Kurushetra.

Local traditions trace the lineage of Assam's rulers back to the Danava Dynasty, with King Mihiranga Danava being one of the earliest rulers. Trade and commerce likely drove the migration of diverse racial groups to Assam, facilitated by its strategic location along international trade routes. Assam's abundant natural resources, including fertile plains, rich flora and fauna, hills, and evergreen forests, contributed to its reputation as a land of prosperity. The region's wealth in gold and lac further fueled commercial activities, making Assam a thriving center of trade. Assam's cultural evolution is a tapestry woven from the threads of its diverse ethnic groups, historical events, and geographical features.

Understanding the roots of Assamese culture requires an exploration of its rich history and the interactions between its inhabitants and their environment. (Abul Hussain, 2019)

Cultural tourism involves exploring the arts, traditions, and social practices of a country or region, with a

focus on communities known for their unique customs and art forms. This type of tourism encompasses visits to urban areas with cultural attractions like museums, as well as rural areas where indigenous traditions and lifestyles are showcased through festivals and rituals. The current research aims to evaluate the cultural tourism resources of Assam, located in North East India, to understand how culture contributes to tourism development and to identify the challenges and opportunities in this sector. (Das Beejata, Acharjee Shukla, 2013)

The conservation journey of Kaziranga National Park has undergone various phases since its inception as a 'game sanctuary' in 1916. Its remarkable beauty and diverse biodiversity, often impacted by both natural occurrences and human activities, have warranted the need for conservation efforts in this wildlife reserve. However, these conservation initiatives have resulted in disruptions to the livelihoods of local communities who have historically depended on the park's resources, thus becoming integral to its ecosystem. Consequently, numerous individuals have lost their means of livelihood, leading to frequent violent conflicts as these communities feel excluded from the conservation dialogue. This essay aims to explore the essential role of community involvement in the conservation of Kaziranga National Park, particularly in aligning conservation efforts with the livelihood aspirations of local residents. (Hazarika, A. K., & Kalita, U. (2019))

The monuments of Sibsagar in Assam, a northeastern state of India, are extensive structures constructed using materials such as sandstone, terracotta bricks, lime surkhi mortar/plaster, mud, and tiles. Over the centuries, and sometimes millennia, these monuments have been subjected to decay. Environmental changes and prolonged exposure have led to continuous deterioration of the monuments. This article explores the significant weathering and deteriorating factors affecting these monuments, including temperature fluctuations, relative humidity, atmospheric conditions, rainfall, surface water, groundwater, biological growth, and human vandalism. Additionally, it discusses a scientific approach to monument preservation, emphasizing efforts to enhance weather resistance and ensure the long-term health of these historical structures. (Kumar, D., Prasad, J., Pandey, A. K., & Upadhyay, M. K. (2018))

Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449-1568) founded the eka sarana nama dharma movement in 16th-century Assam, which is a religion centered around a single God (Vishnu or Krishna). The movement's main goal was to spread a new branch of Vaishnava ideology that was committed to social change and the outlawing of customs like animal sacrifice, goddess worship, and caste- or religion-based prejudice. At that time, Sankaradeva envisioned a new institutional system for the advancement of human welfare, which his principal pupil Madhavadeva gave shape to. This became known as Sattras, a religious and socio-cultural establishment resembling a monastery. After Sankaradeva's death, his disciples created several Sattras. (B.Saikia, 2018).

Research methodology:

Research design: Qualitative Research Component: Qualitative research involves exploring and understanding social phenomena in depth, focusing on the meanings, experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of individuals or groups. This approach is particularly useful for investigating complex topics, such as the historical evolution and cultural diversity of Assam, which require a deep understanding of people's perspectives, behaviors, and interactions within their socio-cultural contexts.

Participants: In the selection the priorities is on diversity, including representation from various ethnic groups, cultural practitioners, scholars, age groups, genders, and geographical regions to capture a comprehensive range of perspectives. This entails engaging with individuals possessing expertise in

Assamese culture, such as artists, musicians, historians, and anthropologists, while also ensuring generational and gender diversity to explore intergenerational and gender-specific viewpoints. Geographical representation from rural villages, urban areas, and indigenous communities is essential to examine variations in cultural practices across different contexts. Additionally, an inclusive approach should involve marginalized or underrepresented groups, like indigenous communities and socio-economically disadvantaged populations, ensuring their voices are heard. Obtaining informed consent from all participants is crucial, ensuring they comprehend the purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits of their involvement in the research.

Measures: Purposive sampling: Purposive sampling entails the deliberate selection of participants based on predetermined criteria that align with the research objectives. These criteria typically encompass factors such as ethnicity, age, gender, geographical location, cultural knowledge, and socio-economic standing. Through the intentional selection of participants possessing diverse backgrounds and perspectives, the research aims to capture a comprehensive understanding of Assamese culture, reflecting its multifaceted and diverse nature.

Analytical dimension:

Analyzing Assamese culture and heritage involves exploring various dimensions to gain a comprehensive understanding of its richness and complexity. This entails delving into the historical evolution of Assamese culture, tracing its development from ancient times to the present, and examining key socio-cultural practices, linguistic diversity, and artistic expressions prevalent in the region. Additionally, studying the role of cultural institutions, interethnic relations, and cultural policy and development initiatives provides insight into the dynamics shaping Assamese identity and community cohesion. By investigating these analytical dimensions, researchers can elucidate the significance of Assamese culture in contemporary society, its contribution to cultural diversity, and its implications for heritage preservation and socio-cultural development.

Case study:

This case study explores the transformative impact of handloom weaving on women artisans in Assam, India. With a rich tradition of handloom craftsmanship deeply ingrained in its cultural heritage, Assam presents a unique opportunity to examine how traditional textile practices empower women economically and socially.

Assam's handloom industry has been a cornerstone of the state's economy for centuries, with intricate weaving techniques passed down through generations. Historically, women have played a central role in the handloom sector, contributing to household income while preserving traditional craftsmanship. However, the industry has faced challenges in recent years due to competition from mechanized textiles and changing consumer preferences.

Case Study Analysis:

Economic Empowerment: Through interviews and field observations, this case study investigates how handloom weaving provides women artisans with a source of income and economic independence. It explores the role of women-led cooperatives and self-help groups in facilitating access to markets, financial resources, and training opportunities.

Social Impact: The case study examines the social benefits of handloom weaving, including increased

self-esteem, community cohesion, and cultural preservation. It highlights the role of weaving clusters in fostering solidarity among women artisans and promoting gender equality within households and communities.

Skill Development: By analyzing the training programs and skill enhancement initiatives implemented by government agencies and non-profit organizations, this case study assesses the effectiveness of capacity-building efforts in enhancing the technical proficiency and market competitiveness of women weavers.

Market Access: Through market surveys and stakeholder interviews, the case study evaluates the challenges faced by women artisans in accessing domestic and international markets. It explores strategies for overcoming barriers such as lack of infrastructure, limited market linkages, and competition from mass-produced textiles.

Conclusion:

This case study underscores the preservation of Assam's cultural heritage requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses the complex challenges posed by modernization, globalization, and socio-economic disparities. The culture and heritage of Assam stand as a testament to the region's enduring legacy of diversity, resilience, and vibrant traditions. From the majestic Brahmaputra River to the verdant hills and dense forests, Assam's geographical landscape mirrors the richness of its cultural tapestry. Throughout history, the land has been shaped by the influences of mighty dynasties, indigenous communities, and a myriad of ethnic groups, each contributing to the unique identity of the region.

The artistic heritage of Assam is showcased through its exquisite handloom textiles, intricate crafts, and timeless architectural marvels, reflecting the creativity and craftsmanship of its people. Festivals like Bihu, Durga Puja, and Ali-Ai-Ligang bring communities together in celebration, fostering a sense of unity and communal harmony.

However, amidst the celebrations and cultural festivities, Assam also faces the challenges of preserving its heritage in the face of modernization and globalization. It is imperative to recognize the importance of safeguarding traditional crafts, languages, and customs, ensuring that future generations inherit a legacy that is rich in cultural diversity and heritage. As Assam marches towards the future, it is essential to embrace progress while cherishing the timeless traditions and values that define its cultural ethos. By fostering a deep appreciation for its cultural heritage and promoting inclusivity and diversity, Assam can continue to shine as a beacon of cultural vibrancy and resilience, captivating the world with its timeless charm and unparalleled beauty.