

# **Indigenous Wisdom and Sustainability: Through the Lens of Assamese Culture**

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## **Abstract**

Indigenous wisdom embodies the cumulative wisdom, innovations and practices developed from generation to generation within communities especially among rural and indigenous communities. Passed down through generations, these indigenous wisdom or traditional knowledge reflect a deep understanding of ecosystem, bio-diversity and sustainable resource management offering valuable insights for addressing modern environmental challenges. Assam, with its rich cultural heritage and bio-diversity hold a prestigious and wealthy indigenous wisdom rooted in traditional customs, beliefs, culture, oral and written literature of its rural and indigenous communities. This traditional knowledge or wisdom of indigenous people of Assam is a rich repository of ecological wisdom, interwoven with region's literature, folklore and cultural practices. It encompasses sustainable practices of many natural resources such as agriculture, nature conservation, biodiversity management etc. Human relationship with the environment shapes everything from how we produce food and energy to the policy we enact and the lifestyles we choose. Sustainability requires an understanding that humans are not separate from nature but are connected by an interconnected bond in which our actions reverberate through out ecosystems. For the continuous developmental progress of mankind it requires collaborative human relationship where communities work together to promote eco-friendly practices, respect bio-diversity and embrace cultural wisdom that values harmony with the nature.

This paper aims to explore interrelationships between Assamese traditional knowledge or the indigenous wisdom and environmental sustainability with special focus on Assamese culture. By analyzing the Assamese oral or folk tradition to folk beliefs and cultural elements to rituals and festivals we aim to uncover how does these cultural beliefs & narratives portrays values of environmental sustainability, supports ecological stewardship and played an important role in encouraging the maintenance of ecological balance. This paper is expected to explore a deeper understanding of the values of Assamese culture as a resource for environmental sustainability.

## **Introduction:**

Indigenous wisdom or Traditional knowledge refers to the accumulated wisdom, practices, and beliefs developed by indigenous and local communities through generations. For centuries it is transmitted orally , through customs , rituals, beliefs and practices and also served as repositories of sustainable practices, evolves as a responsible factor to ecological and social changes and as a guiding mentor of the communities in their harmonious co existence with nature. Assamese culture ,with its agrarian roots and deeper spiritual connection to nature is a repository of traditional ecological knowledge vividly captured in its folklife, folk culture, folk literature , poetry, prose, novels etc which are not only artistic excellence of expressions but also act as blueprints for environmental sustainability. This study aims to emphasize

and uncover into the unique contributions of Assamese culture insights into sustainable living and environmental ethics which knowledge is essential for addressing contemporary environmental challenges while also preserving the cultural heritage.

### **Aims and Objectives of the paper:**

Aims & Objectives of this paper is to →

1. Examine how indigenous wisdom embedded in Assamese culture contributes to environmental sustainability.
2. Identify specific cultural practices and beliefs from Assamese society that promote the conservation of bio-diversity, sustainable use of natural resources and ecological harmony.
3. Highlight the traditional ecological practices in Assamese society and Assamese culture.
4. Emphasizing the relevance of indigenous knowledge and wisdom for contemporary environmental sustainability.

### **Methodology:**

The methodology adapted for this study is descriptive in nature. This paper employs a qualitative approach, drawing from literary analysis, ethnographic studies and historical records.

The sources of this paper is based on secondary data like books, journals, periodicals, research papers, research articles, intent etc.

### **Discussion:**

#### **1.00 Indigenous wisdom and Environmental sustainability: An understanding through the Assamese Culture**

Assamese culture which is deeply rooted in indigenous wisdom or traditional knowledge has offered numerous examples of practices, festivals, rituals, beliefs which reflect a harmonious relationship between natural environment and human life that promote environmental sustainability. Assamese culture and society is intrinsically tied to its natural environment. The elements of nature like hills and plains are full of bio-diversity, rivers, forest, fertile plains has shaped the regions way of life as well as the culture of this region. We can see that Assamese culture reflect a profound understanding of environmental sustainability focusing on various traditional practices, indigenous knowledge, festivals, folklore, folk culture, folk beliefs etc. In this part we will try to highlight on environmental sustainability which can be figure out from Assamese culture & Literature by focusing on the points like Indigenous Ecological Wisdom, Agricultural practices and sustainability, Festivals and Ecological Harmony, Holistic ecological management of the people, community participation, Rituals and Sacredness of Nature, Use of medicinal plant and health awareness, Preservation of wetlands and forests, community driven irrigation system, Bio-diversity conservation, Folk beliefs and nature conservation, Rituals and Taboos around hunting and deforestation etc.

1.01 Assam is basically an agrarian land where the cultural identity is deeply rooted in its agricultural life of the people. The agricultural life of this land is closely associated with its cultural integrity influencing its traditions, festivals, rituals, cuisine and daily life. Traditional knowledge about agriculture and its relationship with environment preservation is passed down through generations which is preserving the Assamese way of life. Traditional farming methods which rely on organic and traditional farming techniques and by avoiding excessive use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides it reduces soil degradation and helps in promoting biodiversity. Use of indigenous and climate resilient crops like local varieties of

rice, tea plants, Banana trees, bamboo which are adapted to regions environment are also helpful in environmental sustainability by requiring fewer resources. Moreover traditional Assamese farming protects native flora and fauna, especially through the cultivation of diverse rice strains, tea, jute, oilseeds, Sugarcane, Potato, Banana, Areca nut and other crops. Likewise tea gardens and bamboo groves in Assam act as natural carbon sinks, helping in combat climate change. The tea gardens of Assam which plays a significant role in shaping Assamese culture is also contributing to environmental sustainability in several ways like by maintaining vast expanses of green cover, which help in reducing carbon dioxide levels and mitigating the effects of climate change; by supporting the ecological balance and contributing to oxygen production, by providing shelter to various species of birds, insects and small animals etc. Tea plantations are often located on slopes, where they also help prevent soil erosion. Assam's tea culture fosters awareness about the environment through community envelopment as well as the cultural integration of tea gardens in festivals and traditions emphasizes the importance of harmony with nature which inspires sustainable lifestyles. Like that Bamboo which is an integral part of Assamese agriculture is deeply woven into Assamese culture plays a vital role in promoting environmental sustainability. Bamboo which is used for constructing houses, making tools and products like baskets, mats, furniture, and musical instruments and many other crafting traditional items like fishing traps etc helps in a sustainable resource based lifestyle. Traditional Assamese people often use bamboos for making walls, roofs and fences showcasing its sustainable and cost- effective utility. Bamboo which is one of the fastest-growing plants is also a sustainable alternative to wood which is helpful for reducing deforestation. It is here to be mentioned that the folk beliefs and religious concept of the Assamese culture which is mainly centered on two aspects, one of that is the bamboo civilization.(another one is the agricultural fertility cult). Assamese culture is inseparable with bamboo centric culture which refers to bamboo folk beliefs, worshipping of bamboo, using of bamboo as folk medicine, using of bamboo as folk instrument, folk ornaments, folk art and architecture etc.

The folk culture of Assam is so closely associated with bamboo that for that reason Assamese culture is also called as bamboo culture. Assamese society celebrates many festivals where they worship bamboo which are called as bah-puja(bamboo worshipping) like Bhotheli, Sori, Suwori, Bah - Biya, Jong Khong Puja, Hasi Maranga, Bash puja etc in various places of Assam over the year. This kind of inclusion of rituals and festivals or worshipping of bamboo in Assamese culture indicates the importance of the use of bamboo and the knowledge of the indigenous people about environmental sustainability. Again coming back to the agricultural cult we can see that the indigenous irrigation systems like ponds and canals also support sustainable water usages and groundwater replenishment. Moreover the traditional practice of jhum cultivation or shifting cultivation among tribal community of Assam which includes methods to let land rejuvenate, demonstrating an early understanding of soil fertility. Despite some misconceptions we can say that it helps maintaining in soil fertility and conserving biodiversity. Again we can say another thing that, the mishings who resides along riverbanks have knowledge of flood- resistant agricultural practices that can serve as climate adaption techniques. Likewise other indigenous communities of Assam such as Bodos, Karbis, Rabhas, Tiwas etc possess their unique ecological knowledge which reflect a deep understanding of local bio diversity climate and natural resources. Apart from many festivals which are basically interdependent in Agriculture symbolizing prayers for fertility and gratitude towards nature actually fosters awareness about resource conservation during lean agricultural seasons.

1.02 By infusing religious and cultural significance into environmental practices, Assamese culture cultivates a sense of responsibility towards nature. The festivals and rituals of Assam which are deeply rooted in its agrarian lifestyle and natural environment, reflects a profound respect for ecological harmony

and environmental sustainability. These cultural practices promote environmental conservation, bio-diversify and sustainable life. Some of these examples are discussed below:

Bihu, which is the national festival of Assam we can see that Rongali Bihu encourages the rejuvenation of nature and agricultural fields, celebrating the cycle of renewal, Kati Bihu reflects resource conservation during difficult times and promotes the nurturing of plants and in the celebration of Magha Bihu reflects the sustainable use of harvested materials and abundance of nature. Practices of worshiping like lighting lamps during Kati Bihu near 'Tulsi' plants or Paddy fields symbolize reverence for plant life and emphasize natural pest control. Community feasts during Magha Bihu use resources sustainably by promoting minimal waste. Moreover Bihu songs are itself a celebration of nature and season which shows the close relationship between the people of this region with nature. These songs are also full of references to the flora and fauna of the region as well as the reflection of the lives of the people of Assam with relevant to practicing farming, harvesting, fishing culture of the Assamese people.

For example :following is an example of a Bihu song with its meaning

Lyrics of song	Meaning
Chute goi-e- goi -e bohage palehi Phulile bluebeli lota jethor khor marile kothia Xakale Kothia rubole nai. Meghe gorojile boroxun Aahile do mati upor koribor hai.	Usually in Spring season, plants like Bhebeli lota (a medicinal plant) blooms. But the advent of summer has dried the paddy seedlings; no seedlings are available for transplanting.
Chotote chokori dodai o Bohagat babori dodai o jethote amona dhan, Goru Bihur dina dodai o bostra dam koriba dodai o tete paba haikunthet sthan.	But commencement of sufficient rainfall has again inspired the farming community to prepare their land for paddy cultivation.
Do maati maijai dim kothiya moi bulai dim guchi guchi kori ruba hera nachani xari xari kori ruba.	Women are busy in weaving traditional gamocha in the month of Chaitra (15 <sup>th</sup> of March - 15 <sup>th</sup> of April) for welcoming the month of Baisakh (Bohag Bihu is celebrated during Baisakh) and the farmers get ready for cultivation. To get heavenly peace people provide foods and clothes for needy people.
O bandhai oi chukor mati dorat dangori erila biriya bhagile batol Chutike bahere biriya bonalu dangori anime buli dangori amute biriya bhagile batote porole guti.	After proper land preparation line transplanting has been performed by women maintaining the proper number of seedlings / hill. During transportation of harvested crop (rice bundle) from field to the storage proper care has been taken to reduce post harvest loss.

Similarly, some of the major festivals of diverse tribal communities also play a significant role in promoting ecological harmony and environmental sustainability. Kherai Puja of Bodo tribe of Assam is a celebration where the community people prays to 'Bathou', the supreme deity associated with plants and nature promotes tree worshiping and respect for plant life and reinforcing bio-diversity conservation. In like manner 'Bwisagu' the Bodo New Year celebration encourages care for livestock and promotes the agricultural cycle. Ali-Ai-Ligang and 'Po Rag', festivals celebrated by the mishing tribes of Assam promotes sustainable agriculture and highlights the importance of indigenous rice varieties. In addition, 'Dobur Uie' ritual by mishing people performed to appease natural spirits and seek blessings for a good harvest shows respect for nature and beliefs in maintaining harmony with environment. 'Rongken', a community festival of Karbi tribe which advocates the worshipping of deities to protect forests and ensure the well-being of people and crops highlights forest conservation and sustainable use of natural resources. 'Sagra Misawa' a spring harvest festival of Tiwa tribe of Assam, where rituals are performed to thank natural spirits for their blessings reflects gratitude for nature and promotes eco-friendly agricultural practices. Another unique barter fair celebrated by Tiwa people of Morigaon district which is known as 'Jonbeel Mela' is a fair where tribes exchange goods without currency encourages low waste, eco-friendly economic sustainable trade and traditional systems of resource sharing. So, precisely we can say that many

tribal festivals which are involved in worshipping of plants, forests, animals fosters biodiversity conservation and seeds showing during festivals promote ecological restoration.

1.03 Apart from these festivals the people of Assam celebrate some rituals which have offerings and prayers for the protection of rivers. Rivers and water hold a deep cultural and spiritual significance in Assam as the state is crisscrossed by numerous rivers including the mighty Brahmaputra. Rivers act as a vital source of water, food and transportation for human and wildlife alike in almost every civilization. They have also been instrumental in the development of human societies. The Brahmaputra in Assam is a massive river that has influenced the region in numerous ways along with the cultural aspect of this region. Rivers like Brahmaputra, Barak, Manas, Kapili, Dibru, Suwansiri etc are revered as life giving entities in this land. Many rituals and festivals in Assam like Brahmaputra worship, Ashokastami festival (which is celebrated by bathing in the river Brahmaputra), Doult utsav (Where pilgrims take ritualistic baths in rivers as part of the celebrations) etc reflect the people's reverence for these vital natural resources and it also fosters awareness about the need of cleanliness of the rivers as polluted water is considered an affront to deities. All these things reinforces the importance of preserving the quality of water sources and it shows the importance of water as a sacred resource.

1.04 Other than this festivals like Jonbeel mela, Khar beel Mela, Oram Beel mela (By Gobha king), Parshali Mela (By Demoria king) which are associated with communal fishing traditions encourages sustainable fishing practices and community based water management which in result helps in maintaining ecological balance in rivers. Many rituals of these land also involve in planting trees along riverbanks which are actually very needful to prevent soil erosion.

1.05 Further more, one of important elements of nature which has a remarkable importance in our folklife or traditional life is the use of medicinal plant and its importance that has been mirrored through our customs and literature. The use of many medicinal plants like Tulsi, Neem, Mango, Banana trees, fruits like Elephant apple, lemon use of betel leaves and areca nuts which are an integral element of Assamese culture plays a vital role in environmental sustainability. From banana saplings to banana peels, banana roots, banana flowers, banana leaves every part of banana tree is very useful to mankind, which is very environmental friendly in nature. That is why it is said in 'Dakar Boson' - "Tinisho Sathizupa Ruba Kol/Maheke pokheke Sikunaba Tol / Pat Possla Labhote Khaba Lonkar Boniz Ghorote Paba" - which means plant 360 number of banana trees/ clean it in a month or fortnight/you will get the leaves and peas in profit/ you will find the merchant of Lanka at home itself -this proverb in Dakar Boson reminds us the use and utility of Banana plants in our life and how we should keep it clean, which in return will give us plenty of benefits in every possible way. Banana's are nutritious fruit, Banana leaves and stalks of banana tree can be used to make baskets, mats even furnitures, banana leaves can be use as natural food wrappers or plates, banana peels can be composted to create organic fertilizer as they are rich in nutrients like potassium, phosphorus and calcium, Likewise mango leaves are often use as natural decorations in many rituals and festivals of Assam and in Assamese marriages also there is a custom of garlanding the mango leaves on a door or threshold. This custom not only reduces reliance on synthetic decorations that are non-biodegradable but after use also as mango leaves decompose naturally it enriches the soil without causing pollution unlike other artificial materials like plastics. Mango trees are source of food, shade and habited for various species, fostering biodiversity. As mentioned in Ayurveda it can be also said that when mango leaves are used in functions the air that flows out would be useful to a human body in multiple ways. When the couples makes round's around the fire, mango shots and twigs are used as fire stocks as the gases released have some health benefits.



**Findings:**

- In this era of globalization and modernization we almost neglected what we have learned from our traditional knowledge which in the root cause of decline of our entire civilization.
- Assamese Traditional knowledge which inspires us for community practices has the solutions for a sustainable way of living.
- Traditional knowledge of Assamese Culture & Literature helps in strengthen moral ethics for a generation which can encourage and opens up door for environmental sustainability.
- Assamese traditional practices, like agriculture aligned with natural cycles and festivals such as Bihu, reflect a deep connection with the environment. These traditions encourage sustainable resource use, the use of eco-friendly materials .
- Assamese folk literature, including proverbs, folk songs and tales, often underscores themes of coexistence with nature which symbolize the harmony between humans and their environment, promoting love and respect for natural resources.
- Indigenous knowledge in Assam has historically aided biodiversity conservation. For instance, the use of sacred groves and traditional herbal medicine highlights community-driven efforts to preserve ecological balance.

**Conclusion:**

Indigenous wisdom or the Traditional knowledge serves as a crucial foundation for building a Developed India by fostering environmental sustainability through its traditional practices and values. Traditional wisdom by practicing community-based resource management, agro ecological farming, and sacred conservation practices can emphasizes the sustainable use of natural resources and inspires humankind to live in a harmony with nature. Promoting traditional knowledge in education and policymaking can empower communities to uphold environmental ethics, paving the way for a prosperous and environmentally resilient India.

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