

Indian Knowledge System in Practice: The Folk Traditions of the Sonowal Kachari Tribe

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Abstract

The Sonowal Kacharis are one of the oldest and most culturally rich communities in Assam. They possess a unique treasure of indigenous knowledge. Their traditional practices including folk songs, dances, oral narratives, festivals, and rituals have made significant contributions to the Indian Knowledge System. These traditions not only reflect the identity of the tribe but also offer a sustainable model of living in harmony with nature. This paper seeks to study the relevance of tribal knowledge systems in contemporary times and their inclusion in the broader discourse on Indian heritage and education. It also emphasizes the importance of preserving the cultural heritage of the Sonowal Kachari community amid growing modernization and cultural decline. Overall, the study explores the rich folk traditions of the Sonowal Kacharis and highlights their valuable contributions to the Indian Knowledge System. This paper is based on the data collected from the people of Ouphalia village in the Tingkhong block of Dibrugarh district through personal interview. The descriptive method was used in this study.

Keywords: Sonowal Kachari, Folk customs, Folk dance, Folk song

Introduction

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) refers to the rich and diverse body of knowledge, practices, and beliefs that have been developed in the Indian subcontinent over thousands of years. India's cultural landscape is rich in diverse and vibrant indigenous knowledge system. These systems are deeply rooted in local custom, cultural practices, beliefs and environmental relationships. They offer valuable insights into sustainable living, community integration, traditional health practices, spiritual beliefs, folk traditions and artistic expressions. Sonowal Kachari is one of the largest tribe in Assam among the various ethnic groups that preserve this traditional wisdom. This indigenous group mainly living in Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji and some parts of Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland. This recognized Sonowal Kachari tribe of Assam has rich folk traditions encompassing oral literature, folk music, dance, craft, healing practices etc that reflect their strong connection with nature and their ancestral perspective.

This research article aims to study the folk traditions of the Sonowal Kachari tribe as a part of the Indian Knowledge System. By focusing on their ritual practices, folk music and dance etc, the study seeks to highlight how indigenous knowledge is not only preserved but also practiced and adapted in contemporary settings.

Objectives

The objectives of the paper are given below

1. To introduction about Sonowal Kachari tribe of Assam
2. To discuss about the folk traditions of the Sonowal Kacharis

Methodology

The descriptive method has been adopted for this study. Both primary and secondary sources have been used for data collection. Primary data were collected from the people of Ouphalia Sonowal Kachari village in the Tingkhong block of Dibrugarh district, Assam. Various articles, books and other relevant materials have been used as secondary sources.

Introduction to the Sonowal kacharis

The Sonowal Kacharis are considered to be one of the ancient tribal communities of Assam. It is the plain tribe of Assam of Mongolid origin and belongs to the Tibeto – Burman linguiste family. Edward Gait writes : The kacharis are the aboriginal or earliest inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley. In the Brahmaputra Valley the kacharis call themselves Bodo or Bodo Fisa (Sons of the Bodos). In the North Kachar hills they call themselves Dimasa, a corrupted version of Dima Fisa or 9 sons of the great river.

The Sonowal Kacharis donot have any authentic written documents about their origin and historical background. The rich oral chronicles in the form of narratives have helped the elderly generations to come to a conclusion about the origin of this tribe. The Sonowal kacharis are one of the scheduled Bodo tribes (plains) of Assam. Presently the sonowal kachari have settled in Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivsagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji and some parts of Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland.

According to the 2001 census report, the population of the Sonowal Kachari is 2, 35,881 and their literacy rate is 81.4% in Assam. Among the total scheduled tribe population of Assam, the Sonowal Kacharis constitute 7:1 percent of the population. Demographically they form the third largest plains tribe of Assam

According to a summary made by three organizations namely All Assam Sonowal Kachari Students Union, Sonowal Kachari Jatiya Parishad and All Assam Sonowal Kachari Nari Santha, 2012 the population of the tribe is about five lakhs and occupy third position among the scheduled tribe population of Assam*. As per records of Sonowal Kachari Automomous Council there are 743 villages with a total population of 1, 97,660 under the council area.

Folk Traditions of the Sonowal Kachari

The Sonowal kacharis have great faith in religion. They are the devout followers of ‘Mahapurushia Baishnav Dharma’. Though they have accepted Mahapurushia Vaishnavism but a significant number of them embraced Ekasariania Dharma and some still follow their indigenous traditions.

Some of the folk customs related to belief and religious practices are as follows

Baitho Puja: Baitho Puja is a significant folk festival of the Sonowal Kachari people, deeply rooted in their traditions and beliefs. This puja involves specific rituals and is associated with folklore about its origin. According to legend, a shepherd boy sacrificed locusts to appease Baitho or Khiring, believed to be a form of shiva. Since ancieant times, the tradition of establishing and worshiping the Baitho Shal(Than)has continued as a sacred practice.

Baitho Puja is observed for three days in the second week of chat (Chaitra), fourteen days before Bohag Bihu. The main celebrations take place at the Baitho Temple in Borpathar village, located in the Dangri area.

In recent times, the worship of Baitho (Shiva) has spread beyond its traditional setting. The rituals take place in the second week of the month of Chat (chaitra), with worship beginning on Sunday night. Sacrifices and pujas are performed on Monday, followed by the singing of Haidang songs on Tuesday morning. This unique sequence of rituals is an important cultural tradition of the Sonowal Kachari community. So Khring Khring Baitho Puja is a worship of the struggle between man and nature, the struggle of life and the great purpose of creation. Khring Khring Baitho Puja is the worship of the combined force of the creator, sustainer and destroyer of the universe, the originator of the four types of living beings (those that fly, burn, move and travel), and the master of the five elements. From a religious and cultural hold a profound belief in humanity and the human race, emphasizing the importance of maintaining balance among the five fundamental elements of nature: Kshite (earth), Up (water), Tej (fire), Marut (air) and Byom (space). Baitho Puja reflects the Sonowal Kachari's belief in humanity, nature and cosmic balance. It highlights their deep-rooted traditions and eco-spiritual philosophy, emphasizing the need to live in harmony with the environment.

Baghdeo Puja: Baghdeo Puja is a traditional festival of this tribe. This Puja is held in the forest, in a secluded place. Tiger is worshipped by the Sonowal Kacharis since the primitive days immediately after the 'Baitha puja' is over on Tuesday. So tiger worship is held on next Wednesday in a forest. For the worship, a portrait of a tiger is drawn on the work of cultivation without any obstacle. The name of 'Gojai Guru' is thus related with agricultural economy of the people.

The Sonowal Kacharis have a folk belief that when Lord Shiva was late in coming back from the paddy fields, then Parvati roared like a tiger in order to panic him. Then Lord Shiva taking the dila of the plough start hitting the earth and the mother earth is made ready for cultivation.

Gajai Puja: Gajai Puja is the ancestral puja of the Sonowal Kacharis. Gajai is also known as 'Guru' or preceptor who gave company to the Sonowals when they migrated towards eastward and who is also believed to be an upholder of the religious belief of 'Kirata'. As 'Gajai Guru' is popular in the socio-religious life of the Sonowals, so he is respected by them and every Sonowal village, therefore worship him once in a year.

In this puja, an elderly person acts as the Purohit and one who performs the Behari system of Xokam does the puja. Several items like sawal, aluwa, kukura, madhapurukhar ras, xak paat, sandoh, gur and tel are required for the puja. The randhoni and the barik take the 'aluwa Kukura' and bow down before the bhakats. Then the aluwa kukura is burnt alive and then meal is prepared. After the food is cooked, the first share is offered to Gajai and remaining others are kept for the devotees. Rice beer drinking is must during the feast. The people then make salutation to 'Gajai'. 'Gajai bhoj' is held in the forest by the adults of villages in the Assamese month 'Jeth' (May/June).

Swaragadeo puja or the worship of the Sun-God: Swaragadeo puja (the worship of the sun-god) is an important household worship. The 'Sun-God' is held in high reverence in all ages because of being the source of light and life of all living beings and plants. They celebrate this puja in the Assamese month of Ahin and sometimes in the month of Phalguna. This is conducted by the Sonowal Kacharis for the wellbeing of the family. The purpose of performing this worship is to obtain good harvest and help men and cattle to remain free from diseases.

The worship is generally held after the harvesting season and it is held by the head of the family with the help of an aged person who is regarded as the priest.

The offerings consist of rice-beer, cakes of different varieties, boiled rice, boiled unripe banana, egg, a black hen, wine, dry fish etc.

Khatriya puja: This puja is celebrated on the second Monday of the month of Aghun . The puja is performed during the night. In the previous night i.e. Sunday night thirty three tupula are tied in the name of tetrish kuti debotas . This puja has much resemblance with the Baithou puja . The basic difference is that in Baithou puja hog and hen is sacrificed but in khatriyo puja, goat, duck, pigeon and hog are sacrificed. The khyatriyo puja is celebrated in the Behari and Henduriya system. In the celebration of this puja, worship of both prakriti and purukh is done . They offer prayer to the tetrish kuti debota in the Bhuruli Sal , but fire is not lit. This puja is also known as ‘Asar kata puja. According to Pramud Sonowal – “Like the Baithou puja, they sacrifice goats or ducks in this puja with the same customs as they sacrificed the ‘Gorokhiya’ with the ulu kher in Baithou puja . The ‘Bura Maduri’ family of the sonowal kacharis perform this puja . The place of worship is made in a symbolic way to signify the appearance of ‘Gajai guru’ by erecting earthen mound. They believe that Gajai Guru give them a lesson on the struggles of life and how to survive in one’s life. To signify this they place jathi, xel and such other items near the earthen mound.

Sonowal Kacharis Folk Dance

Haidang Dance: It is a part of the haidang geet. When haidang song is presented then a nortoki (Dancer) putting on Jema Tongali and taking feathers of peacock in her hand dances to the tune of flute, khuti–Tal and Bahor –Taka. This ‘haidang’ dance is the symbol of production and haidang song narrates the creation . This haidang dance is performed in keeping with the worship of ‘khring khring baitho’. After the baithou puja, haidang songs and dances are performed at the baithou puja place .In this dance, nine pair of bamboo sticks , one flute and two pairs of khuti taal (Instrument used in Indian subcontinent)are used. In the haidang dance, nine people from the village take a handmade bamboo sticks in their hands and produce sounds by beating the sticks.

Hugra dance: The word ‘Hogra’ means pig. For Barboli of Baithou puja, people go to the forest for hunting pig to sacrifice it in the Baitha puja. During the period of pig hunting , hunters have to face many problems. These problems are expressed through dances and such dances are called ‘Hugra dance’. This dance is mainly about acting. The Soowal Kacharis believe that the ‘Hugra’ dance originated from the story of their ancient hero Hugarbir’s hunting .They perform this dance after finishing husori at Bohag bihu . By selecting the place for this dance performance, an artificial forest is created with the help of tree trunks. Near the forest the villagers danced with ‘Toka’, ‘Dhol’ and with the beats of hands clap.

Bohuwa Dance: Bohuwa dance is a traditional dance performed by Sonowal Kacharis. This dance is a male-dominated dance. Generally this dance is observed to drive away the evils from the village. The Sonowal Kacharis celebrate Sat Bihu after the seven days of the Bohag Bihu. Competitions are held during the Sat Bihu. After the end of the competition “Bohuwa” comes out. Two members including one male and one female wearing the barks of tree dance to the tune of Mridong. This dance is known as Bohuwa dance.

Kula-Burhir Dance: In the society of Sonowal Kacharis, the Kula-Burhir dance is performed during the small wedding (tuloni biya) of a girl. In this wedding at the day of ‘Gathiyong Khunda’ night, after taking the bride under the wedding tent, the seven woman in white dresses performed the dance in front of the bride with a stick (Lakhuti) in one hand and holding a ‘kula’ on her head with the other hand, danced in front of the bride. At the kula on the head, there is a pair of betel nut with betel leaf and a bunch of hay. This dance is performed with the desire that the girl should be a mother of a healthy and strong child in future and to avoid the dangers of demon and ghosts.

Sonowal Kacharis Folk Songs

There are two categories for the songs of Sonowal Kacharis. The songs performed by woman are called 'Nam' and the songs performed by men are called 'Geet'. The nam performed by Sonowal Kacharis woman include: Dhai Nam (Nichukani geet), Aai Naam, Lakhimi Nam, Gosai Nam, Apeshwara Nam, Bia Nam and Bihu Nam. The geet sung by men are- Haidang songs, Huchori songs, Phul konwar songs, Moni Konwar songs, Janagavru songs, Bihu songs and Hagra dance songs etc.

The Haidang Geet: The oldest and the first folk song of the Sonowal Kacharis is Haidang Geet. This song deals with creation of the universe and is divided into eleven sections. The first section deals with the creation of the earth, sky, fire, air, water and land. The second part deals with the mystery of the creation of life. In the third section, there is a comparative account of gods and devils and how they were worshipped by the primitive people is discussed in this section. In the fourth section, how the lineage of the Sonowal Kacharis with seven divisions and fourteen lineage was created is discussed. From fifth to eighth sections how and whom 'khring' god (another name of Siva) married is described elaborately. In the ninth and tenth sections, a description of worshipping different god along with Lakhimi (goddess of wealth) is found. In the eleventh section, the prayer is offered to god 'Baitha' to Pardon the people for any sort of commissions committed by them while worshipping different gods.

The Huchori Geet: The Huchori geet reflect the heritage, consciousness and unique characteristics of the Sonowal Kacharis. There is a series of Sonowal Kacharis huchori geet, which are derived from the gods of Shiva (Baitho) and Parvati.

The Borgeet: Borgeet belong to Huchori geet. In general, Borgeets are a transformation of Haidang geet. In Borgeet, the past, history, literature, philosophy, arts and culture of the Sonowal Kacharis are included. However, the melody and method of singing in Haidang and Borgeet are not the same.

Monikonwar Geet: Monikonwar geet is a traditional folk song of the Sonowal Kacharis. These songs are associated with the legendary love story of Monikonwar and Lakhimi. This geet is performed during traditional occasions and cultural events.

Dhai Nam: Every mother loves her child. When a baby cries, then mother of the baby tries to stop the cry by singing different songs. Such songs are known as dhai nam.

Biya Nam (Marriage song): The Sonowal Kacharis don't have their own marriage ritual. Those who live with the Ahom follow the rituals of the Ahom while those who live with Hindus follow the rituals of Hindu. The sonowal kacharis perform their marriage ceremony like the general Assamese people. They sing marriage songs in their marriages.

Aai Nam: In Sonowal kacharis folklore, it is believed that Goddess Parvati can cause and cure diseases, including spring diseases (like small pox, measles and chickenpox). Aai sabah is performed when pox appears in the village. Gopinis sing Aai nam to satisfy Aai Gossani.

Gossain Nam: Being afraid of the Ahom King Godadhar singha, the Satradikar of the Auniati Satra Sri Sri Keshab Deb Mahanta fled to Sadiya with eight of his disciples. Here he spread Vaishnav cult and in this case women were more attracted towards this new religion and they sang songs by praising Sri Sri Keshab Deb Mahanta which are known as Gossain Nam (Prayer song).

Lakhimi Nam: The main occupation of Sonowal Kacharis is agriculture. Therefore, they worship their god and goddesses as well as the goddess of agriculture i.e. Lakhimi aai. The Sonowal Kacharis celebrate Lakhimi aai in different ways at different times of the year. The goddess of agriculture is usually worshipped in two ways, privately and socially.

After the harvest of paddy, they bring Lakhimi from their respective fields and place them on the flower beds of the barns. They take down lakhimi, who is carefully placed on a bamboo pole in the middle of the field, with a lighted lantern, put it in a branch lift it on his head, sing the name of Lakhimi and put it in barn. This is how the gopinis sing the name of lakhimi aai while bringing her home, expressing gratitude and seeking blessings for future harvests.

Apeswara Nam: To get rid of the people from the evils of spirits, females hold Nam kirton to satisfy those spirits. The gopinis gather at sacred sites like river banks, ponds or courtyards and conduct rituals to ward off misfortunes and purify the surroundings. The female devotees singing religious songs have come with peacock's feather in their hands. All the devotees seat at a place to sing songs in praise of Apeswara.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that the traditional folk life of the Sonowal Kachari tribe holds great significance. The Sonowal Kachari is one of the oldest tribes in Assam and the third largest in terms of population. Their traditional folk customs, dances, songs, and rituals reflect the unique identity of their community. They have preserved their indigenous knowledge through ritual practices, religious beliefs, folk music, dance, and customs, and have successfully passed it down to the next generation. These elements form the cultural identity of the Sonowal Kachari tribe. Preserving the folk traditions of the Sonowal Kachari is crucial, as they continue to hold relevance in today's changing world and contribute significantly to the preservation of the nation's cultural heritage.

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