

# Symbolic Space and the Reliogisity of Godha Beel in Upper Brahmaputra Valley, Assam

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## **Abstract:**

The idea of space is highly interrelated with historical and social architype of a particular society. Its idea is itself connected with environment and subjective in many a way. To visualize and conceptualise the inheritance of an environmental entity, it is important to explore the interconnected dots in between subjective and objective spaces connected to it. This paper explores such a case of a wetland situated in the Upper Brahmaputra Valley. The study is qualitative and mainly based on key persons' interviews. The religious environmentalism involved in the constructed idea of environmental components glorify the traditional dynamics of human societies. Their way of life and believe system are built by such ideas and this study stands to exemplify such an illustration.

**Keywords:** Symbolic space, religion, folklore, Upper Assam, Traditional believe system

## **INTRODUCTION:**

The concept of space is associated with environment. However, it includes more than a mere physical description of nature. In fact, the space or spatial setting is considered in relation to the events which take place there and shape the communities' or individual's perception on that particular territorial framework to create definite value system (Taher, 2005). It is meaningfully defined by different geographers and philosophers. Immanuel Kant argued that space is not an external, mind-independent reality, but rather an a priori "form of intuition" (Yeşilkaya, 2023) (T. Ekong, 2022). Space has been construed by geographers both as a natural space governed by natural laws, and also as a social space studied by human geography (Dunford & Perrons, 1983).

In the formation of the subjectivity regarding a particular place, different factors play significant role and cause interplay in the minds of human. In many rural communities, myths and folklores frame this perception of a place and thus delivers its form of space. Outlook of a community totally gets influenced by these dynamics and resultantly a chain of systematic traditional systems come into existence to form the cultural milieu.

The research paper primarily focuses on the micro level study of Godha beel, a small wetland situated in the Merbil Gaon Panchayat of Dibrugarh district. Dibrugarh district is located in the eastern most corner of Upper Assam valley. Buri Dihing river is the prime river of the region. The wetland is situated in Godhabill Chamaguri village. A famous religious 'Bareghar Chaliha Sattrā Namghar' is situated in its bank. The Sattrā is an integral part of Assamese society, which is primarily a monastery-like religious, socio-cultural institution (Saikia, 2018). The research site Godha beel extends from 95°18'6846 E to 95°19'3798 E and 27°31'3617 N to 27°31'1480 N.

**Research methods:**

The research is based on qualitative research methodology. Field survey in the Godhabill Chamaguri village is done during the month of January 2018. Through observation method, villagers' attitude towards the wetland is traced. The prime data source on which this paper is based is key persons' interviews. The oral history of the place and particularly the folklore and myth associated with the wetland are recorded and transcribed for the research purpose.

**Result:**

The folklore of Godha beel is very interesting and captures the historical event of the region. This region as a part of Upper Assam, was under the reign of Ahom kingdom. Sukafa was the founder of the Ahom kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley, who originally migrated from Maolung of upper Burma and entered here on 1228 A.D. (Gogoi, 2016). The Ahom King and queen related to our folklore is Shiva Singha and Phuleswari Kunwari. Hazarika (2015) describes about their rule as follows:

Shiva Singha became the King in the Ahom state in 1714 A.D. He was under the influence of Brahmin priests who predicted or declared the end of his rule in 1722 A.D. So in order to save his rule he declared his chief queen Phuleswari Kunwari the Bar Raja or the chief queen to run the state of affairs on his behalf [...]. During her rule in a zeal to establish the Sakta religion as a state religion she started the persecution of the popular Vaishnava sect. she started the celebration of the Durga Puja under the royal patronage with much pomp and show. When she came to know that the Vaishnava Mahantas had refused to worship Goddess Durga, she ordered the Vaishnava Mahantas to be brought to the sakta shrine where the Durga puja was celebrated and forced them to bow down in front of the idol (Hazarika, 2015)

Such political dynamics created hurdle in the practice of Vaishnavism in the region. However, our folklore started after this period had passed. The folklore is associated with re-raise of Vaishnavism in the region. It reflects the glorification of a religious leader from Vaishnava sect and transcendence of his divine power to establish authority over this geographical space. The main protagonist of the folklore was Shri Ram Ata, a famous religious leader of Vaishnavism. He was born in 1587 (Hazarika A. C., 1967) and was contemporary of Ahom king Rudra Singha and Siva Singha. The folklore of Godha beel says:

After the demise of Phuleswari Kunwari, five Vaishnavite leaders decided to travel Upper Assam to spread Neo Vaishnavism. Among these five leaders, Shri Ram Ata and another two bhakat<sup>1</sup>(disciple of Vaishnavism) had reached this area after a prolonged journey. But when they reached, their feet were swelled badly and started to look like godha.<sup>2</sup> (swelled). Due to that reason, they decided to live there. But there was no water to drink. Then Shri Ram Ata had noticed a small stream of ground water on a track used by animals, originated from the pressure exerted by animal feet. He instantly put a gold ring on that spot and struck the spot with his walking stick made of gold. Suddenly, a large amount of water emerged and a wetland originated. Its name was kept as Godha beel due to its association with that incident (Dutta, 2018) (Das, 2025)

This folklore has multiple socio-cultural effects. According to the oral history, after the death of Shri Ram Ata; his funeral was performed on the bank of this wetland and his moidam (burial mounds of nobles) was there for many years (Das, 2025). It was believed that there were two bamboos near his burial mound

<sup>1</sup> *Bhakat* means devotee. In Assam, this term is used for the disciples of *ekasarana nama-dharma*, which is another name of Neo Vaishnavism preached by Srimanta Sankardeva. They gave up the worldly pleasures and take up the path of celibacy to dedicate their lives and love for the supreme God.

<sup>2</sup> *Godha* means swelled part of body

which were the witness of Shri Ram Ata's heavenly deport (Dutta, 2018). Though those bamboos are not present today, villagers still consider this place as sacred.

### Conclusion:

The prime output of this whole mythological angle of the wetland can be visualized in the traditional believe system of the villagers. They not only consider this wetland as an important natural component, but also respect it as a symbol of divinity. The wetland has already been uplifted to a symbolic space of spirituality in the perception of the local community. Villagers offer milk to the wetland in the name of Jal Kowar (deity of water), whenever someone in their family gets ill (Das, 2025). They always believe in the limited extraction of resources from the wetland keeping its holiness in mind. As in recent epistemological studies, Indian knowledge system gains a prime position- the exploration of such composite issues related to religious environmentalism is of utmost importance.

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