Preserving the Cultural Heritage in Terms of Traditional Religious Practices: A Study among the Tai Ahoms of Assam

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Abstract: Cultural heritages carry a unique identity for a particular community or a society to the outer world. Traditional religious beliefs and practices of a particular community as a part of their cultural heritage maintain the age old identity of that particular community. Religious practices may be observed in a patterned scriptural way or through oral traditions.In thelightof globalization many age old cultural heritages both tangible and intangible in nature going to be vanished from our world. Though in some society the members from elderly class and priestly classesare trying their best to preserve their traditional cultural values, but the modern younger generation is less bothered about their heritages. In this context the present paper focuses on the socio-religious practices of the Ahom people in a particular geographical setting of the state Assam in India. Religious beliefs, practices and values have great role to play in every society since the origin of the community living in the particular society. Through preserving their age old traditions a society or a community can manifest their unique identity to the greater world. The study revealed the consciousness and awareness of the people about their own tradition and customs. Observations and discussions are made on their present religious practices, their rituals related with marriage, birth and death and moreover how much they are concerned andworried about the preservation of their very own cultural heritages.

Keywords: *Cultural heritage, Religious practice, Preservation*

Introduction

Cultural Heritage can be manifested as the ways of living developed by a community and transmitted from one generation to next generation, including values, customs, practices, places, objects, artistic expressions, beliefs. Cultural heritage is the backbone of a society which affirms the identity of a nation to the outer world. Cultural Heritage mainly comprises either Intangible or Tangible Heritage (ICOMOS, 2002). Beside these natural heritage also exist which comprises the natural geographical landscapes, sacred forests, birds, animals and so on. The tangible heritage includes historical sites, buildings, monuments, and objects in museum, archives and any other legacy of physical artifacts. Intangible heritage includes traditions, customs, practices, folklores, crafts, skills, and knowledge inherited from one generation to the succeeding generation and passed on for the benefit of future generations. All these heritages enable us to form a unique identity and communicate its importance to the outer world.

Religious practices as a part of cultural heritage play a great role to maintain the unique cultural identity of a community or a nation in a greater extent. Cultural heritages like religious scripts, shrines, rituals, sermons, veneration, festivals, feasts, trances, music, art, dance etc. pass on the traditional religious practices generation after generation of a particular community. Religious practices are unanimously followed by the community members in a patterned way which is prescribed by religious institutions or sometimes orally transmitted to succeeding generations (George and Park 2013). Present study will focus on the traditional religious practices performed by the Tai Ahom people of Moranjan Gaonvillage situated in the state of Assam in North East India.

The North East Indian state Assam accommodates many ethnic groups of people in its lap with their diversified cultural heritages. This state became a cultural hub with various unique identities. Many people entered in its heart from distant corner and settled down here since time immemorial, they also were assimilated in the main stream of culture. Some of them lost their traditional identity and were absorbed fully in the main stream culture of the state. There are some group of people also who somehow follow their age old traditional cultural practices or sometimes a syncretic form of cultural identity grew up through the assimilation of various cultures. The Tai Ahom people entered in Assam through the Brahmaputra valley from the eastern side i.e., from the valley of the Irrawaddy River in 1228 A.D. They penetrated in this state under the leadership of the great Ahom king Chaolung Sue-Ka-Pha. These people originally belonged to the Tai race that scattered in a greater part of South East Asia and Southeast China. Under the leadership of Sue-Ka-Pha these people spread over a greater part Assam and by the first half of the sixteenth century, the Ahom kingdom flourished in size. After the conquest of Chutia and Kachari kingdoms the Ahoms became an unresisting power in the Brahmaputra valley (Buragohain1994).A group of Tai Ahom people came to Moranjan area and set up the Moranjan Gaonvillage in 1615 A.D. These people also were assimilated in the mainstream of state cultural flow (Barua1978).

In the present context the study aims to understand whether the Tai Ahom people of this Village totallyhave forgotten their traditional religious practices or are somehow maintaining their age old identity through traditional religious practices. This study also focuses on the rituals and festivals performed by the villagers at different phases of their lifecycle.

Methodology Applied

In every research a proper methodology should be followed in order to systematically solve the research problem. For conducting the present study the following methodology was followed by the researcher. This type of study necessitated data of extensively qualitative in nature. Apart from consulting the secondary data sources for the present study the data collection was done by using two techniques- i) *in-depth interviews* of some purposefully selected people related to this study; ii) collection of data using *schedules, questionnaires* to measure the religious status of the respondents.

Studied Village and its People

Moranjan Gaon village is situated in the district Charaideo of Assam in North Eastern part of India. Earlier it was in the district of Sibsagar, Assam. The village is situated within a latitude of 27.0674° North and longitude of 94.9117° East, with an area of 229.74 hectares. Sonari is the new District

Headquarter of the village. According to census 2011 the village code of Moranjan Gaon is 293203.The nearest important town from the village is Moranhat, approximately 18 kms far from the village, where the villagers used to go for marketing, medical treatment and higher studies. Nearest railway station is Moranhat railway station.

There are three hamlets in this village, namely; Uttar Moranjan, which is also known as Changmaichuk; Moranjan and Dakhin Moranjan, which is known as Deodhaichuk. Actually Chuk means residence. The Uttar Moranjan i.e., the northern part of the village is inhabited by the Clans Changmai and Bhuyans. The name Changmai Chuk came into existence from the clan names. The Dakshin Moranjan i.e., the southern part of the village is inhabited by the Mohans and Deodhai Clan's people from which the name Deodhai Chuk came into existence. The Middle part of the village which is known as Moranjan is in habited by the clans Mohan Deodhai, Phukan and Chetiaphaids.

As per the Census 2011 the village has 114 households with a total population of 557 out of which male population is 280 and female population is 277. As per this study the number of households and total population expectedly increased. At present the number of total household is 135 and the total population is 565 out of which male population is 278 and female population is 287. The village is homogenous in nature. All the population of Moranjan Gaon village belongs to the same community i.e., the Ahom community.

Findings and observations

In every society religion has a unique and important role which conveys an identity for the people of that particular society to the rest of World. Religion of Ahom people is not an exception, Their very own traditional religion also migrated with them and journeyed into the distant land at an early time The journeyed from southern part of China through Myanmar to North eastern part of India.On the way they met with various people of different religious believers and their religion amalgamated with others and at present it is difficult to find out the original religious form in some Ahom society. At present it becomes a syncretic form of religion which they follow. They practice some Hindu rituals to a greater extent with their own traditional beliefs. Therefore it is difficult to curve out the original form of their traditional practices from this syncretic one.

The Ahom people of this village though follow Hindu religion but at the same time they preserve their age old traditions connected with their religious beliefs and practices. The Ahoms are mainly ancestor worshipers. They worship their ancestor as saints. Traditionally the Ahoms had no particular gods or goddesses to worship. Any ancestor after death attained sainthood and are worshiped by the fellow community members. They believe that even after death the ancestors remain with them forever and look after their welfare. The supreme ancestor is known as PhaTuo Sing Frong Hung and he is considered as the supreme God of the community. The villagers individually worship their ancestors or sometimes worshiping is done at community level.

The Ahom believes in their own creation myth and they have particular world view. Their creation myth have a common link to creation myths of other Tai groups of Myanmar, northern Thailand, and Southern China and even with Chinese creation myths as a whole. Traditionally they follow their epic *Peng-ka-ka*, in which there is myth regarding creation of the Universe exists. It was written in Tai language. They believe that at the very beginning of time the whole Universe was a

ball of flesh, during the long time span it blasted and created the Solar system including the wind, water etc. in our planet earth. After that it gave rise to flora and fauna in the earth. For this reason their traditional worshiping is primarily divided into three categories, i.e., worshiping of the Universe, worshiping of the Solar system and lastly worshiping of the eternal phenomena like water, wind etc. They have special terms for these three categories namely; *Phratushingphrong hum, Ban Phi* and *Lang kuri (*Gogoi & Gogoi1994). They believe that they have a connection with the Dragons of China, they also believe that Dragons have wings and they can fly freely. For this reason some of them decorated their houses with the symbol of Dragons.



A villager is standing in front of a village house in which a symbol of a flying Dragon is seen

Traditionally the Ahoms are animist in nature and they sacrifice animals like pigs and fowls in every religious ceremony (Barua, 1978). In the wake of the new religious faith of *Shankara Deva's Neo Vaishnavism* some Ahom people became *Vaishnavite* and in course of time with the influence of *Vaisnavism*, the institution of 'Namghar' came into existence in the village (Barua, 1978). But now no one follows the Vaisnavism or any other religious beliefs except for their traditional one which is known as the *Phralung.* Among all the members of this village the *Mohans* and the *Deodhais* perform all the traditional rites and rituals (Sengupta and Charavarty, 1995). They have the right to conduct the rituals for the appeasement of the supernatural spirits. Earlier though they came into the fold of Hinduism but at present they have gone back to their traditional religious practices. The reason for such transformation may be due their sentiment for their traditional religious beliefs or they might have realized the importance of preserving their traditional cultural heritage.

The Ahom people conduct various rituals to safeguarding their family members or community members or for the welfare of their crops in a greater extent. Their socio-religious ceremonies may be divided under two broad categories – (1) Family level ceremonies- which are performed by the family members along with their kin members in a household or in own land, and (2) Community level ceremonies- in which rituals performed by all the community members of the Ahom group of people from different corners gathering together in one place. The timing for performing any ritual may vary. Some ceremonies are performed regularly after a certain period of time whereas some ceremonies took place after a long time gap.

Damak Diya is the main ceremony performed at individual level in every year to commemorate their ancestors and appease them with offerings. They believe that by performing this ritual their ancestors are propitiated, which will help them to prosper. As this ceremony is confined to the family members, the head of the family got the right to perform the ritual. They offer beetle-nut and leaves, rice-beer and different varieties of fruits which are available during that period of time to

their ancestors. They also offer fowl or pig to their ancestors. They perform it in a corner of their kitchen. Local priest come and chant hymns from their traditional scriptures.



An Ahom priest is performing a ritual related to ancestral worshiping in their



Offerings made to the deceased ancestors in a corner of the kitchen

Their ancestor worshiping can be divided into three categories, i.e., *Griha-dam* or *Dam-phi*, *Chang-Phi reign* and *chao-phi-dam (*Gogoi, & Gogoi, 1994). They worship their ancestors up to four generations within their house premises, particularly in the kitchen; they call it *Griha-dam* or *Dam-phi reign*. The worshiping of their ancestors from fifth generation to thirteen generation (i.e, nine generations in total), done outside the houses but within their own homeland and they call it *Chang-phi reign*. It is also done at individual level. The third category of worshiping is done at community level for their ancestors to fourteen generations up. This grand community worshiping of ancestors is known as *Me Dam Me Phi*. It is performed for commemoration of the dead ancestors fourteenth generations upward and of the supreme ancestors. *Me Dam Me Phi* is worshipped openly in the midst of nature. At present it becomes a socio-religious festival than to a ritual. The ceremony is done to an octagonal *Ho-Phi* constructed temporarily by bamboo sticks and thatches. In this ceremony the *Chao Phi dam* or the natural forefathers (supreme god) and *Dam Chao Phi* are worshipped. Animals like pigs, hens are sacrificed in this ritual.

It is quite interesting that the villagers do not follow any fixed timing for performing the religious ceremonies. Generally as per their convenience they perform most of the ceremonies. Most of the ceremonies performed during the month of October and April because in these months of the year they harvest their agricultural products and moreover the climatic condition also remains pleasant. One more important thing related with their traditional culture is *Laopani* , a locally made rice beer without which no ritual can be considered as successful. It has some medicinal value also. Ahom people take it after their hard work to re-energies their body. All the villagers prepare *laopani* at their home. During any kind of ritual some amount of *laopani* is offered to the ancestors and after which the other people can have it with a great pleasure.

Marriage, birth and death rituals are the other important socio-cultural phenomena which are unique and connected with the religious traditions of a particular community. This study also focused on the customs and practices related to the villager's marriage, birth and death ceremonies.

Marriage

The traditional marriage system of the Ahoms is known as *chak-long.* Only a few portions of the villagers are following *chak-long* which is performed by the priest with traditional rituals. Most of the villagers follow the marriage pattern of the greater Assamese culture. Mainly the Ahoms are an endogamous community i.e. they restrict their marriage within their own Ahom community but exogamous in the case of clans. Presently there are a few members who do not bother about all these restrictions; they marry outside their own community or within same clan. Among the Ahoms a girl from the King's clan cannot marry a boy from the Priestly clan but a boy from the King's clan can marry a girl from the Priestly clan. The tradition of maintaining a detailed genealogy (*Banshawali*) helped them to maintain their marriage restrictions.

While performing the traditional marriage system, *Chak-long*, they follow their age old customs and rituals related with this. After the settlement of marriage, the first thing they do is *Jurandiya* which is actually a ceremony where bridegroom party carries the bride's dress and ornaments and other objects used for grooming the bride. The main part of the ceremony starts after *Jurondiya.* A circle drawn on the ground, which is popularly known as *Mo-rol* with a beautiful design of lotus of seven different colors. Within the *Mo-rol* 101 earthen lamps are lit. At the same time three priests collectively perform the ritual. An extra person is engaged for lighting the lamps and arranging other objects for the ceremony. The all three priests recite the hymns from their traditional text while the ceremony is going on. Bride and bridegroom are seated in front of the *Mo-rol. Rik-khwan* is another important part of *Chak-lung.* It is also called as *Ayutula* or *Panitula* ceremony in which the female folk go to the tank, pond or river to bring out the *Khwan* or *Ayu* (Water). On the day of *chak-lung* a community feast is given by the bride's party.

Birth Ritual

Presently some changes related to birth have taken place due to the availability of medical facilities. Previously the delivery was done in the house only and a specially trained woman of the village looked after and helped to deliver a child. Bamboo sliver was used to cut the umbilical cord of the baby. At the moment of birth of a child, the family members beat drums to inform the villagers. The placenta is buried deep in their homeland preferably at the back side of the house where people do not usually go and walk on it... It is not disclosed to outsiders so that nobody can do any harm

through black magic or by any other means. The mother's movement is restricted within a room. A fire is lit near her bed for healing the womb soon and it also gave her strength (Sengupta and Charavarty,1995).

After the third day of birth, the mother is given a special meal with tender colocasia shoots (*kacchuthur*) cooked with black pepper powder. This ritual is known as *kacchujaalkhuwa*. A ritual is performed when the umbilical cord dried and dropped off the baby. This ritual is called as *Bajoliuwa*. The infant is taken out by the mother's mother and sacred water is sprinkled on the mother and child for their wellbeing. After 9 to 21 days of birth, a ceremony is performed which is called *Hudihuwa* it is performed for the purification of the mother and baby. After this ceremony the mother is free to go out and leads her life as usual.

Death Ritual

The Ahoms cremate the bodies of the dead. The villagers stick to their age old habit of burning the dead. In this village the observers of the traditional religious belief i.e., *Phralung* observed a ritual after the third day of death, which is known as *Tiloni*. In this particular day *Phralung* people take local rice beer (*laopani*) with a vegetable curry and salt and after that ritual the relatives can take salt and boiled food from the house of the dead. This is one type of purification ceremony observed by the *Phralung* people. On10th day of the death another ritual is observed by the villager, known as *chum phun ban phi* (ancestor worship). To commemorate the deceased ancestors they place three *Mehenga* (raised plater made of bamboo sticks) in their kitchen where they offer egg, betel nut, vine, rice, mustard oil, turmeric etc. They sacrifice a pig or hen and is offered to the deceased. They usually placed all the offerings in the north eastern corner of the kitchen. This ritual is called as *damotdiya* or *Dam phi*. On the 11th or 13th day they observed a ceremony which is called *kaj* in which they perform some traditional rituals and give a feast to the villagers.



After worshipping the ancestors, *laopani* is being served with vegetable curry and salt

Discussions

The present findings and observations suggest that some sections of the Ahom people residing in Moranjan Gaon village still adhere to their age old cultural heritages. Though some people previously converted into other sects of religion but with time they realized the importance and value of their own culture and retraced their very own tradition. Though the villagers from priestly classes and the elderly section are still trying to preserve some religious texts and oral traditions which are bearing their age old unique identity as a part of their cultural heritage but the younger

generation is ignoring these and are eager to assimilate the greater Assamese culture. In this regard more awareness and consciousness are needed to preserve their valuable cultural heritages.

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