

PREVALANT FOLK BELIEFS ASSOCIATED WITH RIVERS AND STREAMS IN ASSAMESE SOCIETY: SPECIAL REFERENCE TO DHEMAJI DISTRICT

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Abstract

In folk beliefs, which is one of the branches of folk culture, the picture of folk life becomes clear. Through folk beliefs, the thought process, mentality, preferences, of a community could be known, as also their ancient civilizations, culture and history. There are certain social benefits or advantages of folk beliefs. Assam is a riverine state. The Assamese people have a very close relationship with rivers and streams. The Deori, Mising and Kaibartya communities basically live on the banks of the rivers. In Assamese society, many folk beliefs related to rivers and streams are to be found. Right from the ancient days, people have believed in the sacredness and divinity of rivers, as well as in their supernatural and spiritual powers. Many stories relating to rivers are found in the Epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata. The water of rivers is regarded as holy. In order to study the various folk beliefs prevalent in Assam, as related to rivers and streams, field work in certain areas of Dhemaji had to be done. Alongwith field study, help has been taken from various relevant books, magazines in order to prepare and present the research paper.

Key Words: folk belief, imprinted, superstition, religious, auspicious, riverine

0.01 Introduction:

An important constituent of folk-culture is folk belief. Folk belief is born out of certain traditions, customs and habits which have been based on some reasonable assumptions adopted by any society. The picture of folk life becomes clear in the folk beliefs. Folk beliefs help to leave an imprint on the minds of people. We can get an insight into the minds of people through the folk beliefs. The Assamese people have a close relationship with rivers and water bodies. Several folk beliefs related to rivers and water bodies are to be found in Assamese society. From the ancient days people have believed in the greatness of rivers and also in their inherent supernatural and spiritual powers. The water of the rivers is regarded as holy. In riverine Assam, through this research folk beliefs based on rivers and water bodies, it is possible to know the past history, folk beliefs, cultures, work culture etc. of the Assamese people. In the research paper, **Prevalant Folk Beliefs Associated with Rivers and Streams in Assamese Society: Special Reference to Dhemaji District** an attempt has been made to analyse the folk beliefs associated with rivers and water bodies, prevalent in Assamese society.

0.02 Aims and objectives of the study:

Folk beliefs have gained a major right of place in the lives of the Assamese people. Through this study the folk beliefs related to rivers and streams can be known. Various kinds of rituals, customs and traditions are linked to these folk beliefs. Just as a study of the subject is important from the aspect of folk culture, so also its importance from the social aspect, cannot be denied. The aim and objective of a study of the subject under discussion are as follows:

- The importance of rivers in the life of the general Assamese people, is limitless. With the help of the research paper, an understanding of the status of rivers in Assamese folk life, could be had.
- Another aim of the research paper is to get description about the minds of the village people through a study of the folk beliefs prevalent in society.
- To gain a look at the various aspects of the folk beliefs having close connection to the folk rituals, tradition and behaviour. Many legends related to rivers and streams could be understood through such a study.
- To get a feel of the social advantages of the folk beliefs alongwith the negative aspects of the same.

0.03 Study area and methodology:

Apart from giving a glimpse into the various folk beliefs based on rivers, many rites and rituals, myths are also discussed. In the field study, the Puwasaikia Gaon, Kawoimaree Gaon and Ghuguha Gaon of Dhemaji District have been covered.

In presenting the subject analytical and descriptive methods has been used.

0.04 Source of information:

The primary information for the study has been collected by being field study in these specific villages. The secondary information has been collected from various reference books, magazines etc. The main source of material has been the various river and stream-related folk beliefs prevalent in Assam.

While writing this research paper, help from different books, newspapers and magazines have been taken. In the scope of the study, along with the river and stream related folk beliefs, various rites and rituals, legends and the social effect of these beliefs have been included.

1.00 Folk beliefs related to rivers and streams, prevalent in Assamese society:

One can get an introduction into the folk mind through the folk beliefs which are an important part of folk culture. As opposed to logic and reason, acceptance of tradition is the feature of folk beliefs. However, in some folk beliefs, one cannot deny logic and reason. This is not to say that folk beliefs can be recognized as science. Even though attempt is made to question the origin of a folk belief, in the later stages, it is only through superstition and loyalty that these are observed to be accepted by people. (Das, 2003)

Peoples' fear and suspicion also give rise to folk beliefs. Peoples' experiences and frequent repetitions down through several generations are amassed in the folk beliefs. In the journey of folk life the influence of folk belief is very important. In almost every country of the world, people accept some subjects which are beyond logic and reason. These are the folk beliefs. Assam is a state filled with rivers and streams. Various folk beliefs related to these rivers and streams are prevalent in Assam. Ancient mythological legends, various religious and auspicious activities related to the origin and course of rivers and streams reflect the importance of the rivers and streams in Assamese folk beliefs.

Some folk beliefs related to the origin of the main river of Assam, the Brahmaputra, are found in Assamese society. The word 'Brahmaputra' is masculine and the river is said to be the only male river in India. The ancient name of Brahmaputra is 'Lohitya'. 'Lohitya' is said to be the biological son of Brahma, born from the womb of Amogha and was the adopted son of Santanu, according to the *Srishatikanda* of *Padmapurana*.

On the other hand, it is found in the 82nd section of Kalikapuran that Parshuram, in order to atone for his sin of matricide, on the advice of his father, bathed in the Brahmakunda. After his atonement, he paved a way for everyone's benefit and allowed the holy waters of the kunda to flow out. (Sharma 2008)

In Guwahati, the Bashistha Ashram on Sandhyachal hillock, is the meeting point of three sister streams by the names of 'Sandhya', 'Lalita' and 'Kanta', which flow beside the ashram. In this way various opinions are to be found regarding the origin of the rivers.

Rivers are regarded as sacred. On any auspicious day, during various pujas, it is believed that bathing in the river helps to gain atonement for one's sins. According to Dr. Birinchi Kumar Baruah, in his book, *Axomor Loka Sanskriti*, the *Puranas* and *Smritishrastas* mention that several rivers and streams of Assam are regarded as holy. Among these, Brahmaputra, Swarnashri (now Subansiri), Mongola, Ballabha (Borolia), Bhattarik (Jia Bhorali), Briddha Ganga (BurhiGang), Dikkar Basini (Dikrong) etc are regarded as sacred. Bathing in the Brahmaputra on the Maghi Saptami of the month of 'Magh' (one Assamese month) and Ashoka Astami of 'Chot' (Assamese month), helps attain atonement. (Baruah, 1985)

In Lakhimpur district, the sacredness of the river Pichola is mentioned in *Picchilatantra*. Mention is made in the 'Ai naams' (one kind of Assamese devotional song) about Debi puja and Chandi path on the banks of the Pichola river. (Baruah, 1985)

Believing in the sacredness of the water of rivers and their ability to wash away sins, people immerse the ashes of the dead in rivers. The Assamese believe that if this is done, the dead will go to heaven. This belief is to be seen in different parts of the country.

In Dhemaji district, when girls attain puberty, they are bathed with water from the river, as is known from the field study. This ritual is prevalent in many parts of Assam. The same rituals are followed in marriage ceremonies in Assam.

Before crossing the river, marriage caravans consisting of boats, elephants or cars, sound the uruli (a thrilling sound uttered by women in concert on any joyful occasion); offerings of *tamul-paan* (areca nut and betel leaf) and coins are made in the middle of the river. Assamese people believe that if such rituals are observed, jal debota, jol kowaris who inhabit the river, are appeased. (Source: Muhila Gogoi, Dated :09.02.2019)

The rivers of Assam are filled with fish and other aquatic animals. During Bihu feasts, sometimes, when the waters of rivers dry up, the village people fish in the river. It is seen that some tribes of Assam offer prayers on the banks of the rivers before the community fishing begins. They believe that if this is done, plenty of fish could be caught and the spirits who inhabit the river, are not offended. (Source: Umesh Chetia, dated: 17.07. 2018). The rule is always to give a 'hari dhvani' (a holy sound) before catching fish. The womenfolk are not supposed to catch fish when the fish are in the process of spawning, because the belief is that fish will not collect in that area again. People also believe that the first big fish which is caught during the spawning, should not be eaten. It is also believed that, if this fish is eaten, the person will die by vomiting blood.

Many folklores are also associated with floods. When the mango tree flowers in proliferation or the toad climbs up on a tree or ants move to higher places, people believe these are signs of impending floods. Flood waters are said to rise as high as the toad climbs on a tree. When the waters of the rivers rise, people should never say that they are going to see the floods or even that they are going to see the water. In Upper Assam, when the river water rises, the villagers proclaim in the 'naamghar' (a place of worship) that they would organize 'Bhaona' (one kind of holistic assamese drama) after so that the embankment does not break.

Urinating or spitting on the river waters is forbidden. During pregnancy or during periods, women should not cross rivers. People who die as a result of snake bite, are put on banana-rafts and along with insense sticks and diyas, are floated on the river. People believe that in this way, the dead come back to life. In the *Padmapurana*, the myth of 'Beula-Lakshinder' is to be found. Rivers should not be crossed at night. Without making an offering of money to the keeper of the ghat, crossing the river by boat is forbidden.

Rivers are also associated with the outcome of dreams. Assamese people believe that seeing water rise in dreams signifies false blame for the dreamer. On the other hand crossing the river in dreams brings success in any endeavor as believed by Assamese people.

There is also a belief that *Jolkonwar* (a river god), *Jolkunwari* (a water nymph or river goddess), *baak* (an evil spirit supposed to abide in water and to eat fish) and other evil spirits inhabit the river. The Assamese people believe in the invisible and spiritual power of these spirits. *Baak* eats fish caught in fishing nets and by dragging the *Jakoi* (a fishing tool). It also eats fish from fishermen's *khaloi* leaving it empty. Every *baak* possesses a sling bag. The simple Assamese people believe that by sprinkling mustard and bhoot jolokia on the bag one can get control over the *Baak*. It is believed that *Baak* crosses the river in the boat along with the boatman. *Mikirs* believe that they can catch the *Baak* with the fishing net. (Barua: 1985)

The evil spirits of rivers and streams impersonate friends of the fisherman who set the fishing tools and after calling him out, kill him with blows. So it is advisable to go out at dawn to check for fish, only after the friends call him repeatedly. It is not advisable to announce a fishing outing for the next night. After reaching home from a fishing trip, a person is not allowed to go near a pregnant woman or a baby. It is believed that the evil spirits which had latched onto the fisherman may harm the others. In Assamese society there are stories of *Jol konwar* and *Jol kunwori* helping people. It is said that in the depths of the water, there are the kingdoms of the *Jol konwar*. If, for some reason *Jol kunwari*'s curse falls upon a woman, she may never have children. In the event of such a thing happening, the concerned woman should immerse herself upto her navel in the river and after the prayers are over, she should take a complete dip and without looking back should make her way home. Then only will she be able to conceive. When small children get the asthma disease, diyas and insense sticks are lit and along with seven white things, like flowers, rice flour etc. are allowed to float away. After that, the child should take a dip in the river and offer prayers, so that he is rid of the disease. (Source: Bhabani Gogoi, 02.12.2020)

In places which are inhabited by evil spirits, boats with people are known to sink. The boats are suddenly drawn into whirlpools and sunk. Assam is known as the land of witchcraft. People of all ages, rich and poor, high and low, are attracted to witchcraft.

Those who believe in witchcraft, believe that in order to break the spell of evil spirits, the water of three ghats should be fetched by a pre puberty girl and this water is used to bathe the afflicted person, while simultaneously, prayers and mantras are recited.

2.00 Social benefits of folk beliefs:

Just like the various aspects of folk culture, folk belief also has some benefits. Through a study of folk beliefs, it is possible to get an introduction into the folk mind of a society. Folk beliefs also give us a picture of the life of the local people. Folk beliefs help in bringing people together and pave the way for national love and also spreads cultural awareness. With the help of these, religious and spiritual knowledge can be gained. With the help of folk beliefs, people can know about past civilizations, culture and history. Folk beliefs can play a special role in maintaining peace and discipline in society and keeping unity among the people. Folk beliefs help to keep people away from bad deeds by giving moral lessons. As an example, the belief that a river cannot be crossed without paying the keeper of the ghat (a landing place of riveride) or boatman, reminds people to always pay before crossing the river. In this way, folk beliefs maintain discipline and keep the society from an immoral way of life. Similarly, the belief that the first big fish that is caught during the spawning, should never be eaten because the reproduction of the fish will be interrupted. This fish is believed to lead the way to other fish to lay their eggs. The ritual of sounding the uruli before a marriage party on boats, elephants or cars cross the river is an indirect way of reminding the boatmen, mahouts or drivers to be aware of the river. The belief the one should never urinate or spit on the river, is because if this is done, the river water gets polluted.

Folk beliefs have some negative aspects also. Brides and grooms and girls who attain puberty are bathed in river water, believing in its purity. Similarly, the river water is used through witchcraft for treating diseases, but in the present times river water is getting polluted, because factory wastes and garbage are dumped into it and use of such water results in various diseases, skin problems like allergy etc.

3.00 Conclusion:

At the end of the study of the topic, the following conclusions have been drawn:

1. Like most other folk beliefs, those related to rivers are also found among the agricultural societies.
2. Folk beliefs can easily attract folk minds. It is the same with folk beliefs related to rivers.
3. River related folk beliefs have both positive and negative aspects.
4. Many folk stories originate from the river related folk beliefs

At present, even in the age of development of science and technology, folk beliefs have gained a place in the minds of people, beyond reason and logic. As a result of modern education making the people logical, some folk beliefs have disappeared from society. People can be made aware of the actual advantages of folk beliefs after adjustments are made in some aspects of the same.

Being superstitious and believing in everything that is prevalent in society, is not acceptable. It is time to weigh the pros and cons of these and accept only the positive aspects. In any case, only through a detailed study of several generations of a society or a tribe, can one get to know its past culture, folk mind, culture, activity, rites and rituals etc. While discussing the topic under limited conditions, many aspects have been left out. By a detailed investigation of this topic, some other aspects of Assamese society can be discovered.

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Source of Information:

Sl. No.	Name	Village	District	Age	Occupation
1.	Muhila Phukan	Kawoimaree	Dhemaji	65	Retired Teacher
2.	Umesh Chetia	Ratanpur	Do	72	Retired Teacher
3.	Bhabani Gogoi	Ghuguha	Do	49	Housewife