

TRADITIONAL PRACTICE, MYTH AND LEGENDS OF SONOWAL KACHARI OF ASSAM: A STUDY ON HAIDANG-HUSORI GEET

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ABSTRACT

Assam, one of the states located in north-eastern part of India, is the hub of different indigenous and aboriginal tribes. The Sonowal Kacharis, one of the Scheduled Tribes (Plain), constitute one of the largest tribal groups of Assam. With the population of 2, 35,881 (as per Census-2011), the Sonowal Kacharis are the fifth largest tribal group of Assam. They are a part of great Bodo group and concentrated primarily in the districts of Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sibsagar, Jorhat and Golagha. Like other tribal groups, the Sonowal Kacharis, too, have a rich tradition of oral literature. They have a great nos. of folksongs, especially, in Haidang Geet, Husori Geet and ballads, which are integral ingredient of their culture and tradition. These folksongs recount unusual happenings which are either taken to be true in their beliefs or incidents vaguely believed to have taken place. The stories are of purely fictitious formulations which are told and retold. Through singing those songs accompanied by dance and music, the Sonowal Kacharis recall their history, the struggles they had in the settlement in different places, the deeds of their heroes and legends, traditional deities, their beliefs, customs and traditions. The aim of the this research paper is to analyse the myths and legends in Haidang Geet and Husori Geet of the Sonowal Kacharis which play a major role in showcasing their culture and tradition. Data from primary and sources have been applied. Field visits and unstructured interviews are conducted and analysed before coming to the findings.

KEYWORDS: *Sonowal Kachari, Haidang-Husori Geet, Traditional Practice*

INTRODUCTION

It is universal that every culture has evolved its own mythology which defines its character and offers a way to understand the world. The Sonowal Kacharis are, too, no exception to this. Their folksongs have myths and legends in abundance which recount their thoughts in the creation of the universe and living beings, incidents of luck and fortune, mysteries dealing with cycle of life and fertility, deeds of deities and heroes, the stories dealing with those themes that underlie the present-day consciousness. Myth, in the simpler way, is a story that transmits from one generation to next orally that may be or may not be true and which involves supernatural or at any rate super-human beings. It is also found that Myth is always concerned with creation. Myth explains how something came to exist. Myth embodies feeling and concept. Many myths or quasi-myth are primitive explanation of natural order and cosmic forces.”¹

On the other side, legends are one of the genres of prose narrative regarded as true by the narrator and the audience, but they are setting as a period as less remote when the world was much as it is in the pace of modern. Legends are more often secular than sacred. They tell about migration, wars, victories and defeats, deeds of the past heroes, chiefs, kings and the successions of the ruling dynasties. As it is observed that the ‘myths, legends, and folktales have been

accepted as the three basic forms for narrative of universal distribution. These three have generally taken as 'prose narrative forms' in western folklore scholarship. It is, however, to be noted that these three-fold classification of narrative does not apply to folklore material in all societies, and secondly, such narrative genres are not necessarily in prose form in all societies. Thus in north-eastern societies, both tribal and non-tribal, the lines between the three categories-myth, legend and tale-are not very clearly drawn and even in the notion of distinction between them is present, separate term to designate them are not available. While folktales normally do have the prose character, the other narrative items which have contents normally associated with myths and legends are more often than not in the verse form and they are chanted or sung."²

In the folksongs of Sonowal Kacharis especially in Haidang Geet, Husori Geet and in the ballads there are some popular myths and legends which reflect their rich culture and tradition.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- This research paper will attempt to bring forth a brief historical and socio-cultural background of the Sonowal Kacharis
- To highlight the myths and legends in Haidang Geet, Husori Geet wherein the history and tradition, socio-cultural and religious life of Sonowal Kacharis are reflected.
- To showcase the identity of the Sonowal Kacharis.

HYPOTHESIS

- Folksongs of the Sonowal Kacharis are the oral accounts in their specific identification.
- Sonowal Kacharis are aboriginal people of Assam

METHODOLOGY

Methods of systematic investigation and analysis are followed in this research paper. Both primary and secondary data are used in preparation of this research work. Interviews and field visits are also conducted in collecting relevant data.

MYTHS AND LEGENDS IN HAIDANG GEET AND HUSORI GEET

Haidang Geet

Haidang Geet, the oldest and the first folksong of the Sonowal Kacharis which can be regarded as the oral history of the Sonowal Kacharis. It is divided into eleven sections. The first section is about the creation of earth, the sky, fire, air, water, land and other elements. In the second section, mystery of the creation of the creatures is described. 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 the fourth section, how the lineage of the Sonowal Kacharis with seven khels (divisions) and fourteen bonshas (clans) were created is discussed. From fifth to eight section how and whom Khiring Raja (another name of Siva) married is discussed. In the ninth and tenth sections, a description of worshipping different gods along with Lakhimi (goddess of wealth) is found. In the eleventh section, the prayer is offered to Baithou (Siva) to pardon the people for any sort of omissions committed by them while worshipping different gods.

Husori Geet

Husori Geet, another popular folksong of the Sonowal Kacharis, is an indispensable part of Rangali Bihu. The Sonowal Kacharis traditionally use a bamboo trunk along with two poles to support the bamboo. They hit the bamboo, and sing

Husori Geet. So, the other name of Bohag Bihu in Sonowal Kachari language is Khuti Bihu. Husori Geets are divided into four sections according to their specific features as:

- **Barae-mantra:** This particular song is chanted before the start of the Husori, wishing welfare of the members of the family of a particular house. The song also reminds and glorifies Bali Raja.
- **Puhari-geet:** This particular song is basically about the society. It is also about the rules of the society, anger of the people, human desire, ups and downs in one’s journey of life, customs and traditions etc. are expressed through riddles.
- **Thio –geet:** This particular type of song expresses the happenings to the day-to- day life of the people. It also deals with the reality of nature and the story of a great person.
- **Bor-geet:** This particular song expresses custom and tradition, culture and past glory of human society. It is closer to Haidang Geet.

Myth of Creation of Animals

“Ha iyah eta, dutā, henu paroise.

.....

Ha iyah adi jugar Kachari haidangde.”³

(SECTION-II, HaidangGeet)

(It is so wonderful in the earth that a mighty bird lays eggs one after another up to nine. The mighty bird places eggs under her body for hatching. Out of laid eggs, three remained rotten. Haidang Geet is the oldest song of Kacharis.)

This section of the Haidang Geet narrates about the mythical bird who laid nine eggs one after another. She began to hatch them for several days. One after another six eggs began to crack and from each came out a particular species of uron, buran, gojon and bhramon. But other three eggs did not break. Those three unbroken eggs were namely Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh-the Creator, the Preserver and the Destroyer respectively which have unseen and unlimited powers, and control all the species of the universe.

Myth behind the of King Bali’s Domahi Bihu-

“Ae girihot bhal.....

.....

Jugar hey niti niyam karisu.”⁴

(Barae-mantra)

(We pray for the prosperity of the owner of the house....Out of the contradiction with guru Sukramuni and error of judgement Bali got to go to Patalpuri. After every 363 days there is the celebration of Bali’s bihu for two months.)

This song is a reference to Bali Raja, who once agreed to give anything what the dwarf Brahmana wished. The dwarf Brahmana asked for three steps of land and the King complied. Lord Vishnu, who had incarnated as Brahmana, grew

to a gigantic figure, measured the Earth using one off step, and the entire universe in his next. Mahabali, realizing Brahma to be Lord Vishnu in disguise, let Brahma to his third step on his head, causing him to down in the netherworld, which is the Sutala. Mahabali had just one wish, to be able to return to his Kingdom once every year and meet his people. Brahma granted this wish and hence people welcome their beloved King by merry-making and spontaneous dancing that make them feel more happy to see their King returning to the kingdom in sound health. The enjoyment in the form of dancing, singing and feasting lasted for two months until Bali went again to Sutala as per the grant by Brahma.

Legend behind Hogra Nritya

“Hatot karfai lo heroi dadai

Mar oi balisarai.....”⁵

(Puhari-geet)

(Fix the arrow on the bow and kill the wagtail Uncle)

The song recounts king Hogra’s hunting expedition to Rangdoi Chapori with his nephew and other followers. On the way they saw a sleeping balimahi (wagtail) bird with its two legs pointing towards the sky. This was taken to be a bad-omen and immediately the nephew asked Hogra to fix the arrow on his bow and hit the bird. The wounded bird in severe pain cursed the king that he would have to face some unnatural situations during his hunting period. Accordingly, the king faced the same as he had delay return and had miserable life in later period of life.

Legend about settlement of Sonowal Kacharis at Saikhowa Ghat

“Hemali rajyate karo rang dhemali

Etiaburhiaaikandibo lagibo

poriothajolot.”⁶

(Thio-geet)

(Playing with Rohimola at Halali is a joy....Now the old lady starts crying)

This song narrates a sad account of how the captive Kachari soldiers were forced to do hard works in extreme conditions at Sadia. Once they were ordered by Sadiakhwa Gosain to uproot a jutuli (a kind of tree) and replant nearest to his daughter Rahimola’s weaving shed. They failed to do so in spite of their several attempts. It was later the Khiring Raja came forward to rescue them along with other Kacharis by guiding them to cross the Brahmaputra but out of a wrong doing by an old lady the route taken by them was suddenly filled with heavy water, the current of which washed them away though most of them could reach the other side of the river called Saikhowa Ghat.

Legend about Bahua Nritya

Ji kalot Mahadeve dacha jangya nakh karisil.

.....

Mahanonde akhrohil bahuwar mon.”⁷

(Bahua bihu-geet)

The song narrates about Sati who threw herself into the sacrificial fire and sacrificed her life in failing to bear the insult by her father Daksha which led Siva to fill with terrible anger and out of his matted hair he threw a hair on the ground, therefrom which emerged a fierce looking person known as Veerabhadra. Siva ordered him to go to Daksha's place and destroy everything. Accordingly, Veerabhadra went to the sacrificial place and eventually beheaded Daksha.

When his anger subsided, an army of his followers, devotees and wives of Daksha persuaded Siva to restore Daksha's life. The goats were readily available at the site of sacrificial ritual as they were frequently used as sacrificial animals. Subsequently, Siva relented and restored his father-in-law's life by transplanting the head of a goat on the beheaded body.

Myth about the Origin of Husori

“ Koilakhar Sankare Husari srajile

.....

Debota Gosani aai.”⁸

(Puhari-geet)

(Sankar of Koilakh created Husori...other traditional deities spread it)

The song is a reference to Siva, who taught Susaboni (known to be daughter of Brahma) the song and dance of Husori. She came to earth and roamed about and attracted people through her dancing performance at Sadia. On the request of the Kacharis, Susaboni went to heaven and then to Kailash where Siva gave her the lessons in Husori dance and music to perfection. She came to the earth amidst the Kacharis at Sadia and taught them dancing and music related to Husori to be performed by them every spring.

Legend of Monikonwar and Phoolkonwar

“Sankhadeo Rajare putek Monikonwar

.....

Maloti barite paril.”⁹

(Monikonwar-Phoolkonwar Geet)

(Monikonwar, the son of king Sankhadeo.....fell onto the garden of Malinibai)

This song narrates tragic fates of both Moniram and Phoolkonwar. It tells about how Monikonwar met his fate after he was taken to deep water by a river-nymph. In the later years, the grown up Phoolkonwar in search of his father set on a wooden winged horse, fell onto the garden of Malinibai and there was suddenly rain in the place that remained drought for last twelve years.

(The Sonowal Kacharis believe that of Phoolkonwar and Monikonwar Geet could make clouds weep; therefore, the womenfolk of this tribe sing this song in the months of May and June to bring rain to the earth.)

Legend of Dutiram-Jonaidoi behind the Formation of Seven Khels

“Jonadoi gabharu Patmadoi saraiti

.....

Pogha singi singi jai.”¹⁰

(Thio geet / Jonadoi Gabharur Geet)

(Jonadoi is as beautiful as wagtail...cannot keep in tight long as the rope being torn into pieces)

This song recounts the love making between Dutiram Kachari and Jonadoi, the daughter of Sadiakhowa Gosain. Jonadoi eloped with Dutiram Kachari against her father's wish. Later on Sadiakhowa Gosain avenged Dutiram and Jonadoi on the day of their daughters' wedding in having destroyed and killed several Sonowal Kacharis of seven villages in the hands of Singfou Raja and his soldiers. It also tells how few of the Sonowal Kacharis could escape Sadia and the seven newly married couples to the daughters of Dutiram Kacharis and Jonadoi, settled in other places that led to formation of seven Khels of Sonowal Kacharis

ANALYSIS OF THE SELECTED MYTHS AND LEGENDS IN HAIDANG GEET AND HUSORI GEET

Demographically the Sonowal Kacharis constitute one of the major tribal groups of Assam. Although the Sonowal Kacharis are the devout followers of 'Ek Saran Naam Dharma', which is against worshipping other gods and goddesses or without sacrifice, yet they hold sacrificial worship to their traditional deities. Like other Kacharis, the Sonowal Kacharis, too, worship Baithou (Lord Siva) and observe Baithou Puja in which Haidang Geet becomes an essential part. Although basically it is a religious song, yet it contains deeper historical significance in respect of past life, a culture and tradition of the Sonowal Kacharis.

In the beginning of the Haidang Geet, there is the reference of the creation myth of man and other animals. This myth reflects the beliefs of the Sonowal Kacharis not only the creation of animals but also the mysteries in the creation of other elements of the universe and the universe itself.

There are references to Khiring Raja, Bali Raja, and Gojai, Hogra and other traditional deities and kings in Haidang Geet. These references are found in elaborate forms in Husori Geet out of which myths and legends could be traced which the Sonowal Kacharis celebrate on regular occasions.

In performing Husori by the Sonowal Kacharis in every household, the Barae-mantra is sung in the very beginning. This Barae-mantra reminds every Sonowal Kachari the deeds of Bali Raja, his influence over heaven and earth, and the way he became nowhere which led him to go to Patalpuri out of his error of judgement. The objective of this legend is to advise every Sonowal Kacharis to have second thought before any decision so that one does not suffer as great Bali had suffered in his later part of life.

A similar message, the Sonowal Kacharis try to convey among its folk in their performance of Bahua Nitya. There are myths among the Sonowal Kacharis behind Bahua Nitya that remind of how and under what circumstances Daksha Raja was beheaded.

The Sonowal Kacharis, therefore, perform Bahua Nitya in praise of Lord Siva. It signifies the beginning of a new life, a peaceful society and the eradication of bad omen.

Another performing folk art that relates a similar message as the above mentioned performing art is the Hogra Nritya. This Hogra Nritya is born out of Hogra, a legendary king of the Sonowal Kacharis who was cursed by a wagtail on his way to a hunting expedition. Hogra Nritya represents the story of the king and the difficulties he faced out of the curse of the wagtail. This is to convey a message as to how a little wrong doing could lead to an unexpected consequence.

There are other popular legends that tell about the displacement and settlement of Sonowal Kacharis from Sadia to Tinsukia district and other places. One such legend recounts the settlement of Sonowal Kacharis at Saikhowa Ghat in Tinsukia district.

Another legend recounts the love making between Dutiram Kachari and Jonadoi and formation of seven Khelsof Sonowal Kacharis.

Another popular folktale found among the Sonowal Kacharis in the form of ballad is Phoolkonwar and Monikonwar Geet which narrates the tragic fates of both Moniram and Phoolkonwar. The Sonowal Kacharis believe that of Phoolkonwar and Monikonwar Geet could make clouds weep; therefore, the womenfolk of this tribe sing this song in the months of May and June to bring rain to the earth.

The Kacharis, in one way or other, claim themselves to be the forerunners in creating and popularizing Husori dance and music in the entire region. One such myth, regarding the origin of Husori, narrates about Susaboni Konwari, the desired daughter of Brahma, whom Lord Siva taught the lessons of Husori which she handed over to the Kacharis in Sadia. The Sonowal Kacharis, therefore, claim themselves to be the first of have bought Husori from heaven to earth.

After analysing the collected data (primary and secondary) one would sum up that the Sonowal Kacharis are reach in oral literature. Their folksongs, especially Haidang Geet and Husori Geet, tell us about their society and culture, customs and traditions, rituals and beliefs, struggles and hardship they faced in their settlement in different places, worshipping their traditional deities and celebration of the deeds of their kings and legendary figures based on myths and legends to showcase the identity of the Sonowal Kacharis

IN SEARCH OF THE ABORIGINALITY OF THE SONOWAL KACHARIS

Sonowal Kacharis, one of the dominant tribal groups of Assam, have a close affinity with the Barmans in the district of Cachar, Dimasas of North Cachar Hills District and Bodo Kacharis in the districts of Lower Assam. "In fact it is heard to draw an exclusive ethnic line between the Bodo Kachari and Sonowal Kacharis as both these sections originated from the same stock. It is believed that those 'Bodo' people living in upper Assam during the reign of Ahom kings accepted Assamese language like the Ahoms as they were in that region. They were called in accordance to their occupations. So those Kacharis collected gold in the bank of Subansiri are called 'Sonowal'¹⁰ But this claim has been refuted by many scholars, especially prominent the historian Rajani Kanta Hazarika in much researched historical work 'Mangool Kachari Gupta Etihah' (pp-189)

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

- Sonowal Kacharis maintain dual religious system
- The contents of Haidang Geet and Husori Geet show that they are the oldest forms of folksongs of the Sonowal Kacharis.

- The Sonowal Kacharis bear distinct identity in performing Haidang and Husori Geets.
- There may few who engaged in gold (xon/son) washing got the suffix 'Sonowal' to their greater tribe Kachari. But all the Sonowal Kacharis did not engage in the gold washing profession.

Analysing all the data, one would conclude that the Sonowal Kacharis have a tradition of rich oral literature. Their folksongs, especially Haidang Geet and Husori Geets tell us about their society and culture, customs and tradition, rituals and beliefs, struggles and hardship they faced in their settlement in different places, worshipping their traditional deities and the celebration of the deeds of their kings and legendary figures based on myths and legends to showcase the identity of the Sonowal Kacharis.

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