

RELIGION AND FOLKLORE: AN UNMAPPED LINK IN SASONI MERBIL REGION OF NORTH EAST INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Religion is an integral but very complicated part of human society. In different periods of human civilization religion played a great role as a unification force of human society. But the analysis of religion is not such simplistic in nature. It is also associated with multifaceted dynamisms, from where diverse social structures have originated. Different mythologies and folklores, those are related to some particular religion have indirectly provided validity to different forms of believe system that the particular religion has claimed. In Sasoni Merbil region of Upper Assam, folklore of a *Jal Kowar* is very famous and till today its impact can be seen in different rituals performed in the region. This research mainly focuses on the analysis of this folklore from a critical angle. As Sasoni region was once a famous learning centre of Neo Vaishnavite religious doctrine, a hidden but amazing link in between this religious doctrine and the famous folklore can be seen. The research is totally based on participatory rural appraisal. Different historical texts collected from the field are used for the study. The analysis has shown versatile links of different social systems of the region with the religion. It also shows that the folklore has worked as an important medium in establishment of religious belief system among the communities and indirectly this has resulted into a social hierarchy.

Keywords: Folklore, Hierarchy, Sasoni Merbil, Jal Kowar, Religion

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INTRODUCTION

Folklores are the integral part of socio-cultural lives of indigenous human groups. According to Alan Dundes, folklores constitute the essential path for the transmission of cultural knowledge from one generation to another (Folklore As A Mirror Of Culture, 2007). Particularly, in indigenous societies folklores play a pivotal role in spreading the rituals and traditional knowledge system, from where different kinds of traditional belief systems come into existence. Religion is another significant part of human life. Religious traditions define and form the identity of a human group and provide peculiarity to it. 'Religious traditions are both internally complex and extraordinarily diverse' (Dawes & Maclaurin, 2012). It influences communities believe systems and their perceptions to look the things. There is a significant but very less explored side of religion, which could not be overlooked. According to Karl Marx, religion is a pure illusion (Uchegbue, 2011). 'Furthermore, Marx does emphasize that believe in gods is a disappointment symbol to drubbing in class struggle' (Latief, 2011). This radically negative standpoint about religion is very essential for research, as it opens up the doors for the evaluation of religion-which forms the most vital part of human lives and their cultural behaviours.

The link in between folklore and religion can be evaluated from different perspectives. 'On the other hand, folklore is very much an organic phenomenon in the sense that it is an integral part of culture' (Amos, 1971). Inherently, folklores are the result of action and interaction between different cultural ingredients. As religion is the most important cultural ingredient of society, it has great influence in the framing of folklores. In most of the cases, relation between religion and folklore shows a two way of interaction. Sometimes, folklore provides legitimacy to the religious principles. Whereas, in the other way, critical evaluation of folklore shows that religion plays a great role in the formation of folklores. In recent years, research related to construction and deconstruction of 'Folk religion' is very significant.

'New scholarship during the last decades, however, has deconstructed the meaning of 'folk' as a traditional and conservative village-based community. 'Folk religion' came to denote shared beliefs and religious practices that are embedded in communities and social networks but do not have institutional bases' (VALK, 2014).

In this research, which is inspired by such study of 'Folk religion', an attempt has been made to understand the relation between religion and folklore in a rural background. A deep inspection is performed here to look into the nature of folklore and their inherent meaning to establish some religious supremacy.

STUDY AREA

Sasoni Merbil is a historically significant region of North East India, the eastern most part of India. It is situated in the Dibrugarh district of Assam. The indigenous society of Sasoni Merbil is constituted of two major tribes. One of Sonowal Kachari and the other one is Ahom. At present, majority of them follow Hinduism as their major religion. Other than these two tribes, a major portion of the inhabitants of the region belongs to general category, which is also regarded as the upper caste¹ people of the Indian society.

Sasoni Merbil has incredibly enriched episodes of historical events. 'Historical evidences of the disciplic succession of *Noga Norottam*² to *Ek-Saran Nama Dharma*³ in this region and the presence of Shri Shri Saliha Bareghar Satra⁴ as an emblem of such splendid heritage has glorified the significance of the region in the chronological graph of North East India' (Das & Deka, 2019). *Ek-Saran Nama Dharma* has been working as a promoter of the unification process of different communities of the region, from where an essence of cultural assimilation has already conceived and flourished throughout the region. Under the strong influence of this *Ek-Saran Nama Dharma*, majority of Ahom and Sonowal Kachari families had accepted this doctrine, leaving their ancient forms of religion. This transformation had ultimately incorporated them in the larger mechanism of cultural assimilation and social integrity.

The focal point of the study area is the Merbil wetland. It has an area of 1550 square kilometre, with amazing natural bow shape. There is an island like landmass amidst the wetland, which is connected with the mainland through a small rocky track. This island is well known as

¹ Caste means hereditary class system of Hindu society, which creates social hierarchy.

² Noga Norottam was a disciple of Sri Ram Ata. He was a chief of Nocte ethnic group of Tirap in the 17th century. His original name was Lotha Khonbao. He was well known for his bravery and saintly nature.

³ Ek-Saran Nama Dharma is a doctrine preached by Sankardeva. It means complete surrender to one God, i.e., Vishnu

⁴ Shri Shri Saliha Bareghar Satra is a Satra of Upper Assam, situated in Sasoni Merbil region. Satras are the institutional centres of Ek-Saran Nama Dharma in Assam

‘Merbil Island’. In 2010, ‘Sasoni Merbeel Eco Tourism Project’ had started to preserve the biodiversity of this island and the wetland. Since then, different environment conservation policies have continuously been executed under this project, so that multiplicity of natural resources of the wetland as well as the island could be saved from hysterical extraction process. The research theme of this paper revolves around this Merbil wetland and the traditional believe systems associated with it.

Figure 1: Location Map of the Study Area

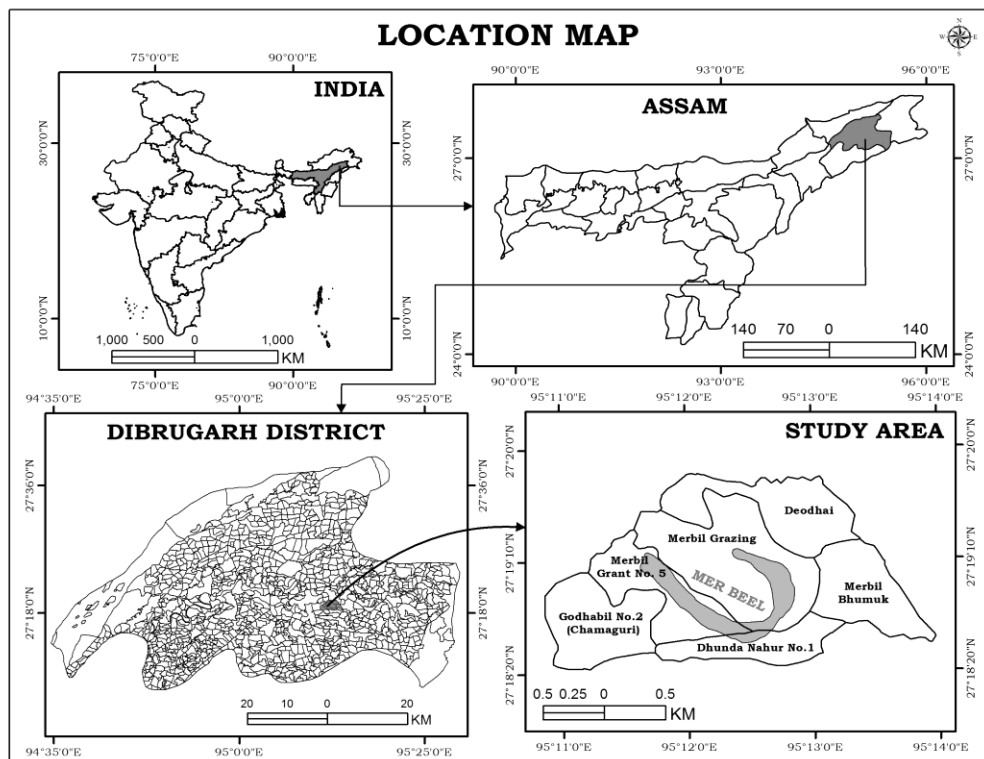


Figure 2: A View of Merbil Wetland



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research basically follows a participatory rural appraisal. It is very fruitful, especially while we are dealing with research problems of rural areas. That is why; Robert Chambers outlined its distinctiveness through the following lines:

‘PRA has been called “an approach and methods for learning about rural life and conditions from, with and by rural people”. The prepositions have sometimes been reversed in order to read ‘by, with and from.’ The phenomenon described is, though, more than just learning. It is a process which extends into analysis, planning and action’ (Chambers, 1994).

Through PRA, different cultural attributes of rural society of Sasoni Merbil have been analysed. Different rituals and social systems are being learned and properly recorded for further use of the research work. The folklore, which is the main element of the research paper is recorded and documented. Five key respondents are interviewed to explore the dynamics of historical events related to the study area. Different historical texts are collected to trace the

blend of religion and folklore. Nomol Dutta, a famous personality of the region has provided valuable information related to history of the region.

RESULT

The wetland Merbil is not merely a wetland for Sasoni Merbil region. It plays a pivotal role in the socio-cultural lives of the villagers. In the traditional believe system, this wetland is placed in a very soaring position of esteem. It is believed that it is the home of *Jal Kowar*, a very powerful deity. This mythological character is so strong in the believe system of the villagers that till today different kinds of rituals are practiced to offer respect to this deity. The main source that provides validity and vigour to this believe system is a folklore, which is linked with the Neo Vaishnavite religion. The folklore is as follows:

‘Wife of *Shri Ram Ata* (a Vaishnabad leader) had accidently once pronounced that she would dedicate her daughter *Diti Aaidew*⁵ to the Merbil. After that, when *Diti* got her menstruation, *Ata* dreamt that *Jal Kowar*⁶ had been asking for marriage with her. Terrified by the dream, *Ata* decided to leave their previous homeland and shifted to this area nearby to Merbil wetland. Being annoyed with such attitude of *Ata*, *Jal Kowar* sprouted out furious water channels around *Ata*’s new home and entwined it with a massive wetland of ox bow shape, which is afterwards named as Merbil. Occurrence of such dreadful incident had made the other *Bhakats*⁷ very frightful and they convinced *Ata* to dedicate *Diti Aaidew* to the *Jal Kowar* to get shot of from future occasion of such vicious consequences. Accordingly, a majestic arrangement had been made for the marriage and surroundings of the wetland were cleared for marriage ceremony. On a precious day, *Bhakats* started to pray the *Jal Kowar* and after a long prayer, the *Jal Kowar* appeared in a giant boat, made of gold. Only few *Bhakats* and *Ata* could see him by virtue of their pure heart. Then *Diti Aaidew* was sent to that boat and slowly it was disappeared in the wetland’ (Gogoi, 2018)

⁵ Aaidew is a title given to a princess or to the daughters of gentlemen of rank. This meaning is provided by Hem Chandra Barua in The Assamese-English Dictionary- Hemkosha

⁶ Jal Kowar is a deity. Traditionally it is believed that Jal Kowar lives in water.

⁷ Bhakats : monks of the Vaishnabad tradition

It is difficult to trace the exact period of first imprint of human in this region. According to the book 'Norottam', Lotha Khonbao took *Saran* in *Ek-Saran Nama Dharma* during 17th Century A.D. in Sasoni Merbil region. From this evidence, it is obvious that in 17th century, Sasoni was a leading centre of Neo-Vaishnavism learning. The folklore clearly states the reason for which *Shri Ram Ata* had shifted his settlement to this region. It is not known that whether the wetland Merbil was present before the 17th century or it is truly an outcome of some natural event of 17th century.

A clear coherent relation between folklore and religion can be seen here. This folklore is mainly about two male figures: one is the powerful deity of Merbil wetland and another is the saintly Vaishnavite leader as well as religious reformer. The folklore had undoubtedly established the superiority of the Neo-Vaishnavism; providing validation to the family linkage of *Shri Ram Ata* with a deity. The part of the folklore, where it is said that only *Shri Ram Ata* and few *Bhakats* could see *Jal Kowar* on the marriage day by virtue of their pure heart is another positive input towards this believe system. As a whole, through this folklore, a social hegemony of Vaishnavite leaders had been developed in the minds of indigenous people and ultimately a larger consent among mass had increased about its soundness.

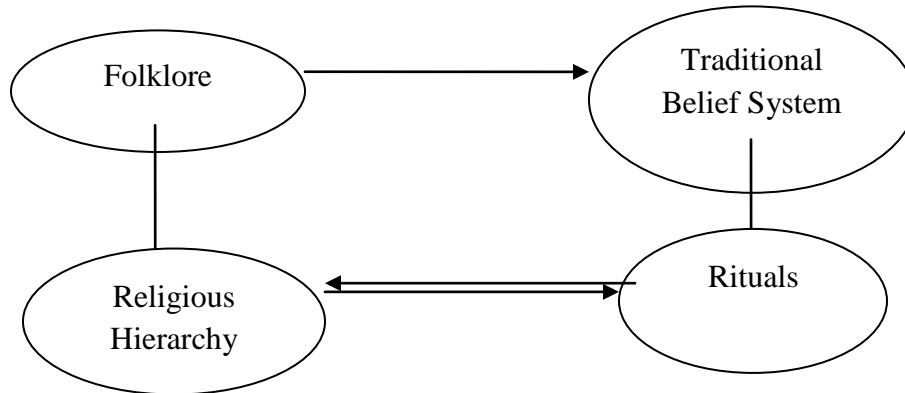
Moreover, this folklore has also paved the way for different religious rituals associated with the wetland. Before fishing in Merbil, villagers always offer *Pitha Gurir Topola*⁸ as a tribute to *Jal Kowar*. Whenever, someone gets ill, villagers offer milk to the *Jal Kowar* so that he or she could get well by the grace of the deity. During field study key respondents said that, in earlier period whenever someone used to catch big fish, traditionally at first he used to offer a part of it to the *Bhakats* for their consumption. Villagers also refrain themselves from excessive extraction of resources from the wetland and throwing waste in the water, as they believe that it will make the *Jal Kowar* angry. Thus, a series of religious belief and their different kinds of manifestations have provided Merbil a very intricate identity, as a 'Wetland of Mystery'.

⁸ Pitha Gurir Topola means a bundle of rice flour

DISCUSSION

In Sasoni Merbil, the relation of religion and folklore can be perceived as shown in the figure 3. This relation has given birth to some traditional belief system, which has again assimilated in the cultural attributes of indigenous societies of Sasoni.

Figure 3: Relation of Folklore and Religion in Sasoni Merbil



Though the North East Indian society is not caste based, yet it is not totally equalitarian in nature. Social stratification based on different kinds of socio-economic system is very predominant here with diverse manifestation forms. In Sasoni Merbil, Neo Vaishnavism has influenced the society in two different ways: in the first one this religious doctrine has unified different tribes of the region through a common bond of religious belief and socio-cultural benevolence, whereas in the second one like most other religions of the world it has provided an undeclared supremacy to a particular group of religious leaders. Resultant development of this uneven power relation was social hierarchy. 'Hierarchy is only one kind of stratification where the strata are arranged vertically' (Gupta, 1996). Folklore and rituals have again encouraged this hierarchy and put the idea of holiness in the conscience of the mass. Though in this case marginalisation has not created from this process of hierarchy, but this has definitely given birth to societal structural differences in traditional belief system.

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