

Syncretism in the folk literature of *char-chapori* Muslims of Assam

Md. ShalimMuktadir Hussain

***Abstract:** About 18-20 percent of the population of Assam is composed of Muslims who migrated from Greater Bengal (and later East Bengal) and settled in the chars and chaporis (riverine islands and river banks) of Assam. These people are recent converts from Hinduism: most of them being only third or fourth-generation Muslims and have, as a result, retained a number of rituals from their erstwhile faith. Their relative seclusion (due to geographical isolation) from the main streams of Islam in Assam and India until very recently means that a number of these rituals are practiced without any fear of ostracism or deviation from mainstream Islam. Moreover, extreme poverty and a very low literacy rate have further isolated them from knowledge about the development of Islam in other parts of the country. Finally, this very geographical and illiteracy-generated isolation has helped them maintain a number of syncretic religious beliefs and practices inherited from Sufism (which is practiced under several denominations, primary among them being the Pagla-panth or Mad-way and Fakira-panth or the Fakir-way). One of the rituals practiced by char-chapori Muslims is the veneration of barren trees during the Assamese festival of Kati Bihu (called Gassir Rati by char-chapori Muslims). The trees are girdled with an auspicious hay girdle and lamps are lit under them to protect them from being cut down. This stands in stark contrast to the tenets and practices of Islam. Similarly, there are a number of rituals surrounding quotidian activities like fishing, planting of seeds and harvesting where other elements of nature are venerated. The aim of this paper is to closely study selected rituals of the char-chapori Muslims, try to actively speculate on their origin and examine the manner in which they can contribute to and expand the ideologies of mainstream Islam.*

Assam is a land of many peoples. Through the centuries a number of communities and tribes from Myanmar, Thailand, Nepal, and Bhutan and other Indian states such as Bengal, Orissa, Bihar and parts of North-East India have made this state their home. Over time, these different cultures have co-mingled to give rise to a highly syncretic and intricate culture so that now it is almost impossible to refer to a standard Assamese culture. Moreover, there exist a large number of indigenous tribes in Assam with their own independent identity and their own distinct rituals, languages and festivals so that if at all one were to attempt an overview of the representative culture of Assam, it would be akin to a sensual kaleidoscope- a number of varied, seemingly un-connectable colours, dresses, food habits and languages which have over time made inroads into each other. However, the dangers of a plural state have reared their ugly heads again and again leading to a number of secessionist movements, state-sponsored programs and spontaneous acts of violence among the different communities living in Assam. Despite all these, Assam manages to maintain its multi-cultural plurality and move on with the tides of modernism.

The most recent community to make Assam their home is the community of people who migrated to the banks of the rivers Brahmaputra and Barak from erstwhile Greater Bengal during different times in history. Though most of these migrants were Muslims, they were recent

converts: low-caste Hindus who had accepted Islam to safeguard themselves against the oppressive force of their high-caste landlords. On their arrival to Assam, they settled in small hamlets on the occupied banks of the Brahmaputra (the *char-chaporis*), close to ethnic Assamese villages. Over time they underwent a process of organic and inorganic¹ Assamization. As a result, they adopted a number of practices from their Assamese counterparts. This paper will look at certain rituals through which the syncretism of this community is manifested. Due to the constraints of time and space, this paper will be merely descriptive with occasional attempts at analysis if and when required to support the description of rituals. The community under study here will be referred to as *char-chapori* Muslims or *char-chapori* residents. The same constraints will force upon this paper some generalizations. For example, the *char-chapori* Muslims belong to different Islamic denominations. The broad classification of Muslims under the Shia and Sunni heads does exist in Assam but alongside, there are large communities which follow the *fakira-panth* (the 'fakira-way') and the *pagla-panth* (the 'mad-way') bringing them closer to the Sufis in mainland India and the Bauls in Bengal respectively. Small groups also follow the *Krishna-panth* (the 'Krishna-way') and the *putul-panth* (the 'idol-way') which includes ritualistic worship of the image of Lord Krishna and other tribal totems along with traditional Islamic rituals. However, this paper will subsume all these varied groups under the title Muslims as my primary objective is to look at the manner in which Islamic practices mingle with Assamese rituals, rather than at theological questions.

The history of the *char-chapori* community can be traced loosely back to the late 1870s when a zamindar from Goalpara brought five hundred farmers from then undivided Bengal to work on his fields. More farmers followed them into Assam and settled on the river banks. In 1902, a descendant of the migrants, one Usman Ali Sadagar from Nagaon started an Assamese medium school and the Assamization of these people began. In the 1951 census a large number of these people chose Assamese as their mother-tongue. This caused a major imbalance in the demography of Assamese speakers. The reason for this sudden change in allegiance, as it were, was that in the 1911 census a large number of actual Assamese citizens had been wrongly categorized as Bangladeshis simply because they spoke Bengali dialects. During the following census, speakers of the Rajbanshi dialect were newly classified under the table of Assamese speakers. Because of this, the number of Assamese speakers rose by an astounding 63% (Guha 21). The acceptance of Assamese as their mother-tongue by the *char-chapori* residents justified the status of Assamese as the official language of Assam and the medium of instruction in schools. This is an example of what I had earlier referred to as inorganic Assamization.

However, between 1963 and 1969 a series of agitations and government sanctioned actions were taken against Muslims from the *char-chaporis*. They were referred to by the derogatory title of 'miyahs' and although most of them were second or third generation Indians, government action was taken to deport them to East Pakistan. According to some estimates 'more than three lakh of these people were herded into trucks like cattle and transported to East Pakistan'. (Hussain 275) Immigration has always been a touchy issue in Assam, even before the Assam Agitation of the 1980s, but in recent times, acts of violence in the name of identification and deportation of illegal

¹ More about this later.

migrants has led to a number of deaths and severe destruction of property. GolapBorbora writes that the 1931 census showed a sharp increase in the population of Bengali Muslims in Assam as compared to the two earlier censuses. He writes:

After the publication of the census report of 1921, the system of line permit was established in Assam- meaning that the lowlands around the Brahmaputra river were allocated to migrant Muslims and an imaginary line was drawn beyond which tribal farmers couldn't venture for cultivation... to increase the government revenue, poor Muslim farmers were brought from Mymensingh, Naokhali and other parts of East Bengal and given land permits to areas around the Barak and Brahmaputra rivers: this was a part of the official government policy. (Borbora 98)

In recent times, immigration from Bangladesh has diminished. According to Amalendu Guha,

It should be mentioned here that between 1971 and 1991, the influx of immigrants, whether from Bangladesh and Nepal or from Bihar has virtually stopped: in fact, the number of people moving out of Assam is more than the number of people entering it. (Guha 20)

However, this hasn't stopped several parties from assuming that immigration from Bangladesh continues unabated and that the *char-chapori* residents are somehow complicit in allowing immigration and harboring immigrants. This in turn, has led to some radical measures on the part of *char-chapori* Muslims. Their claiming Assamese as their mother tongue has already been mentioned earlier. Other attempts at assimilation include the acceptance of Assamese motifs like the *fulamgamusa*² and Assamese festivals like the Bohag Bihu. It is against these organic and inorganic processes of assimilation that the current cultural landscape of the *char-chapori* Muslims can be read.

The assimilation of Assamese and Islamic influences can be seen in the superstitions the *char-chapori* Muslims believe in. Foreexample, in most of the remote chars of Assam, the umbilical cord of a new-born baby is slit with a sharp bamboo sliver, as is the case in a number of tribal communities of Assam. In some instances, this can turn the wound septic. This and other diseases such as epilepsy are usually attributed to the influence of *pisachas* (demons) and *dainis* (female demons). These cases are treated by the village medicine-man or Oja. In case of the new born baby, entrails of a goat are burnt and the ash is smeared over the umbilical cord, though this practice can often lead to early death of the child. If after maturity a person suffers from a major disease or is on his/her deathbed, one ear of a male child is pierced and in case of a female child, she is offered to a relative along with an offering of betel nut and paan. (Khatun 120)

Other ways of treatment are reading *aayats* from the Quran over a glass of water and consuming it or wearing a written verse of the Quran rolled up in an amulet. If there are complications during labour, the mother of the pregnant woman or any other senior female relative spreads the aanchal of her sari towards the west and prays to God. On the walls of the house in which the child is born, dried branches of berry trees, bones of a cow and a broom are hung. Similarly, a machete and a knife are placed on the head of the child's bed and a small bonfire is made inside the room

²Fulamgamusa can be roughly translated as 'shawl/towel with floral designs on it' but it is one of the enduring symbols of Assam. It is usually gifted on auspicious occasions, especially on Bohag Bihu.

with rice husk and hay. Anyone who wants to see the child has to warm themselves by the fire first. The seventh day after a child's birth is considered to be an auspicious occasion when his/her fate is decided. On this day things that he will need later in life are placed beside his bedstead. These things include pen and paper, a dictionary, a few sheaves of grain, turmeric, ploughshare etc. (Hussain 309). These practices have been handed down to the char-chapori Muslims from their Hindu ancestors or have been borrowed from their Assamese neighbours.

The Magh Bihu is the principal harvest festival of the people of Assam. Among the char-chapori residents of Assam, it is celebrated under various names, one among them being Pushura. If one attempts to get down to the history of Pushura, one can notice that it is a tradition the ancestors of these people carried with them from Bengal. The word Pushura comes from the word 'Push' which stands for the Indian month of that name. An interesting part of the Pushura festival is the ritual of *magan* singing. Simply put, this is a similar to carol singing where cattle herders go from house to house singing *magan* songs and collecting money for a feast. The leader of this group is called the Sonahar or the Sonarai. When the boys go around collecting alms, they sing a number of complex and intricate songs which paint the Sonahar as a godly young unmarried man and claim that the money which will be collected will be used for his wedding. This practice is very similar to the practice of *husori* singing among the ethnic Assamese people, where similar to the *magan* tradition, a group of young boys go from door to door singing *husori* songs and collecting money for a feast.

The Kati Bihu is also celebrated in the *char-chaporis*. Since this is the season when nothing survives and not much is grown, this festival is also called the 'mora Kati' or dead kati. On this day a portion of the courtyard is cleaned and plastered with earth. On this spot betel-pan, daborigrass, mustard oil, bamboo shoots, turmeric, banana stem, jute seeds, sheaves of grain, a pot of water, coconuts, and vegetables are placed on it. These items are left overnight so that the dew may wet them and consumed in the morning before the first crow caws. The pot of water is used for bathing. This practice is called *Gasshi jaga* which gives the char-chapori version of Kati Bihu the alternate name of *Gasshi Rati* or *Gasshi* night.

One very interesting aspect of the Kati Bihu celebrations is the 'cutting the barren tree' performance. On *Gasshi Rati* young boys go out in groups with machetes and axes and put up a show of cutting trees which haven't borne fruit during the preceding season. One of the boys pretends to cut the tree while another defends the tree begging his friend to spare it for one more year as it will surely bear fruit the next season. The defense is sung in the following manner:

Gaaskatiyona, katiyonagoshai
Eibaar phal dharbe, kosaikosai.
Kati masher akale
Gaser phal beisaamra
Maarumbasarerdhar.

Translated it reads as follows:

Don't cut the tree, don't cut the tree my lord
Surely, surely it will bear fruit this time
In the famine of Kati
We won't cut more trees.

We will sell its fruits
And clear the year's debts.

The boy pretending to cut the tree relents. A rope of hay is then tied around the trunk of the tree and a lamp is lit before it. The boys kneel before the tree and pray that it provides fruit soon. It is also believed that giving a barren tree a few blows of the axe after sunset or at night restores the tree's vitality.

During the night, young boys go out and steal the offerings left out in the open. This is done in good spirit and the folk belief is that someone who manages to steal the *Gasshi* offerings will remain disease-free for the coming year. Ismail Hossain writes that actual thieves also have a belief of their own about this auspicious night. They believe that a safe and uneventful robbery implies that they will not be caught in the coming year. (Hossain 112). These rituals are not specific to Muslims alone. *Char-chapori* residents, irrespective of their religion and language take part in these activities. The protection of barren trees has far-reaching environmental benefits.

However, one curious ritual followed by *char-chapori* Muslims is of prime importance. This is the tradition of leaving a well-prepared meal in the fields (Hossain 113). A platter of sweetmeats is left in the fields as an offering to the fertility gods and one's ancestors. It is believed that this offering will bring the attention of the gods to the fields and thus result in a successful harvest in the upcoming year. Some *char-chapori* Muslims also leave a burning earthen lamp under a tulsi or holy basil plant. This is a direct continuation of the traditions that have been carried over from the Hindu roots of the *char-chapori* residents.

Another interesting ritual with pre-Islamic roots which has blended perfectly with the Islamic tradition of the *char-chapori* Muslims is the practice of *Lathibari* or *Sardarbari*. This is a form of stick-fighting which may have started life as a means of defense or offence in earlier stages of history. *Lathibari*, which is now an elaborate performance probably comes from *lathials* or *lathi*³-wielding troupes landlords maintained as bodyguards and to keep peace and order among their peasants. However, it now exists as a highly stylized performance that is performed on special occasions like marriages and births and on the festival of Muharram. It is usually performed before a large assembly where the village elders are seated on chairs and other members of the audience either squat on the ground or stand in a circle, thus forming a natural arena for the performers. The leader of a *lathibari* group is the *sardar* who sings songs throughout the performance to inspire his men and to keep the audience engaged. The overall performance of the *lathibari* shows some interesting examples of syncretism. The performance begins with a declaration by one of the performers where they announce the name of their group, the name of their *sardar* and pay their respects to him:

Sardar aamarImaan Ali
Roumariteghar
Taharcharaneamarhaazarosalam re....

Translated it reads as:

Our sardar is Imaan Ali

³Lathi- stick.

From Roumari

We bow before him a thousand times.

The members of the *lathibari* troupe then approach the elder members of the community, touch their feet and hold their hands, saying both their salaams and seeking their blessings.

The *sardar* of the team then announces:

Dhanidhanishobai bole

Dhanireniranjan

Aalahor name aijkaaami

Bandhlamkomor

Translated, it means:

All the rich people

Say that wealth is God

But I take Allah's name

And gird my loins.

The *lathibari* performance then commences in a flurry of whirling bamboo sticks. How this performance came to be a part of Muharram festivities can only be guessed at but the interesting intermingling of Islamic and non-Islamic rituals in the same performance make this art form very interesting. Over time, the saffron cummerbund worn by the performers has been replaced by a *fulamgamusa*. Similarly, *fulamgamusas* are also worn by the performers as a bandanna, bringing the costume of the *lathial* closer to the traditional costume worn by male Bihu dancers.

To conclude, I would like to look at another instance of syncretism in which pre-Islamic folk songs have been incorporated into an Islamic festival. For example, the *Fateha-e-dowazdaham* festival is celebrated by *char-chapori* Muslims with fervor and solemnity. On this day, women gather together and sing ghazals and bhajans. Among the obvious religious songs, some of the songs sung are secular in nature and deal with the well-being of the women's husbands. The following is taken from a song that deals with the nature of an unfaithful wife:

Asatarirpatitemun

Bhanganayer gula

Bhanganayer gula zemun

Thak-bak kore

Asatarirpatitemun

Jaleduiba more (Chaudhury 89)

Translated, this reads as follows:

The unfaithful (asati) woman's husband

Is like a broken boat

The broken bat

Tumbles and fumbles in the river

The asati woman's husband

Drowns in the river.

The use of the term *asati* is very interesting. The word itself is a negative form of the name of the Indian goddess Sati who symbolizes ideal womanhood. 'Faithful' is a very insufficient translation as the name Sati denotes a number of traditionally glamorized feminine virtues

including purity, good conduct and subservience. The use of this name and its negative form in a song sung during an Islamic festival points to the syncretism, not only of the language used by *char-chapor* Muslims but also of their religious beliefs and values.

Works Cited

Borbora, Golap. "Bideshi Bitaran Andolan Byartha Hoisil Kiyo? Etiyao Vastav Samadhan Upay Ki." *Asom Andolan: Pratishruti aru Falashruti*. Ed. Hiren Gohain and Dilip Bora. 2. Guwahati: Banalata, 2007.

Chaudhury, Kurban Ali. "Dharmiya Utsav." Chaudhury, Kurban Ali. *Miya Samajor Loka-sanskriti*. A Karim, n.d.

Guha, Amalendu. "Brahmaputro Upatakyar Asomiya Samajot Bahiragata: Ek Drishtipat." *Jagaran* (2011): 20.

Hossain, Ismail. *Asmor Char Chaporir Jiyon aru Samaj*. Guwahati: Publication Board, Assam, 2008.

Hussain, Anowar. "Char-Chaporibashi Purbabangiya Mulor Asomiya Musalmanor Samasya." *Jagaran* (2011).

Khatun, Kasema. "Char Chaporir Lok Sanskriti." *Jagaran* (2011): 119.