

Hindu and Tribal Folklore in Assam

By

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Assam is the easternmost corner of India and its culture is predominantly Hindu. The religion described as Hinduism is a body of beliefs and customs traceable to various sources—Aryan and non-Aryan, Indian and non-Indian, modern and old. It is absorptive in character and has an attitude which has found itself expedient in dealing with people of various grades of development—from those believing in a super-soul to worshippers of stones and trees.

Whether one is an avowed Hindu or not, the Indian way of life has touched local communities all over the country. In fact, there has been an excellent cultural synthesis, as evidenced in the observance of rites and ceremonies and in the possession of beliefs and tales and songs and sayings. Indian folklore is as much the Hindu's as it is the tribal's. There are differences, but there is a large common ground where the Brahman and the so-called tribal meet at their mutual ease. I will make an attempt to substantiate this thesis from material taken from Assam.

One has to speak of the tribes with certain qualifications. The so-called tribes are not exactly tight self-contained communities; converts from them have formed the basis of the Assamese people. Indian scholars at present have tended to describe the tribes as Adivasis or original settlers. An invading chief in the thirteenth century called the local people he met on his way into Assam *sthana-giri* or original masters of the land. It is also not true that tribal converts have remained always at the bottom of the caste ladder. They have risen on the rungs of the ladder and have held positions of power and influence for reasons other than caste. It was, for instance, a Kachari king who in the fourteenth century caused to be written the

version of the *Ramayana* that we cherish most at this time. Many Indian saints have risen from the lower castes and they have been revered even by Brahmans. That is, I suppose, what India is. In recent years, of course, the trend towards racial and cultural fusion has been impeded by forces which have turned caste and tribe into political commodities. And politics, as you know, is not a very clean game.

Indian traditions have their primary roots in the Vedas and the great epics the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Aryan mythology has percolated down to the consciousness of the tribals. I have just spoken of Kachari patronage of Assamese Hindu literature. This tribe, rather widespread in the plains of Assam, trace their lineage to Hirimba, the wife acquired by Bhima during his sojourn in this part of India. Kacharis describe their old kingdom—now non-existent—as Heramba Rajya. Bhima actually did not visit Assam, but ancient geography migrates, that is, when a certain culture spreads, the older myths and legends are carried over to a new region and the new settlers feel at home if they find themselves linked with respectable traditions which they had obtained elsewhere.

There is a Puranic myth in which the Vedic god Brahma as Prajapati or Creator performs his work of procreation by incestuous intercourse with his own daughter.¹ This old myth the Kacharis of the Lakhimpur district give us in a modified form² The Sonowal Kacharis of Lakhimpur explain the origin of the institution of Huchari carol singing in the Springtime Bihu festival thus: Brahma had a daughter by an Apsara or celestial maiden. The unrestrained god later set his eyes on his grown up daughter and wanted to enjoy her. King Dharma (another name for Jama or king of death) took up the matter and weighed his scales of justice. He found the girl guilty and drove her out of heaven. She came to earth and roamed about. When Spring came there was a thrill of new life throughout the universe and the gods remembered this girl who was pining away in misery and loneliness. They went to Vishnu and spoke to him about her. Vishnu sent them to Bathou or Mahadeva. Sitting under a peepal tree Bathou gave them lessons in

1. There are several versions of Brahma's creative activities, but the description given in *Matsya-purana*, Chaps. III & IV, is relevant here.

2. P. Goswami, *The Springtime Bihu of Assam*, 1966, pp. 57-58.

Huchari dance and music. The gods then went to each divine household, danced and sang and thus collected various articles. With these they rehabilitated Brahma's daughter. The girl looked up again in all her youthfulness and sense of joy. She started dancing while the gods accompanied her on their instruments. Her bewitching dance softened the heart of King Dharma and she was recalled to her divine home. But the dance and music remained on earth, to be performed by the Kacharis every Spring, "when the annual Bihu comes and the trees change their leaves." This myth is just an elaboration on the old Hindu myth of Prajapati and his incestuous love for his daughter.

In this myth the Kacharis have traced their dance and music to Bathou or Mahadeva. Many of the tribes in Assam and in other parts of India trace their music and dance to a divine origin. Hindus have traced their music and dramatics to Mahadeva as is recorded in Bharata's *Natyashastra*.

Kacharis are Hindus, while the Khasis dwelling around Shillong the State capital are mostly Christians. Khasis are forgetting their older traditions, but their belief in the snake god U Thlen is still there.³ It is often heard that even now the lonely pedestrian is waylaid in out of the way places for blood from his nose and pairings of his nails for the purpose of worshipping the snake god maintained in certain families. U Thlen is a source of well-being and wealth. Reverence for the snake is there all over India—the snake as keeper of wealth or maintainer of well-being. In western Assam Hindus and tribes alike worship the snake goddess Manasa in the rainy season. A part of the ceremony is the recitation of a myth recounting how a certain merchant stood dead against the worship of the goddess, how through wile and trickery she killed off all his sons, how his youngest daughter-in-law had her dead husband revived, and how at last, as a compromise, the merchant agreed to offer worship to the goddess with his left hand, his right hand being retained for the worship of Mahadeva, his primary object of veneration.

The Syntengs, allied to the Khasis, at one time worshipped goddess Shakti and even offered her human sacrifices. The Syntengs near Shella call Mahadeva U Blei Synteng or god of

3. Mrs. Raffy, *Folk-tales of the Khasis*, 1920, pp. 58-67; another version is found in P. R. T. Gurdon, *The Khasis*, 1914.

the Syntengs.⁴ Khasis are matrilineal and call their chief deity Ka blei Synshar, goddess of the world. *Synshar* is obviously derived from the Sanskrit word *samsara*, the world. The god Viswakarma is well known in Hindu mythology. He is the Hindu Vulcan. According to Khasi belief, God found these people deficient in craft, therefore he sent down the young god Biskormo or Viswakarma to teach them techniques.⁵ The Khasis however pestered him to give life to what he had made. This made him go back to heaven and it is thus that the Khasis failed to learn much from him. For the Assamese peasant woman Viswakarma has often a female entity—he has turned into Bihkarmi Ai or Mother Viswakarma. There is also the belief that formerly Viswakarma had been in Assam, but for certain reasons he went westwards and therefore it is that carpenters from the western parts of India are superior to Assamese carpenters.

The Mishmis of NEFA or North-east Frontier Area at the foot of the eastern Himalaya, trace their ancestry to Rukmavir, elder brother of Rukmini, to carry off whom Krishna came all the way from Dwaraka in Gujarat. The ruins of Kundin Nagar, Rukmini's city, are shown, but this is perhaps another instance of a migratory legend, getting stuck to a particular place. The Deuris dwell in the Lakhimpur district, not very far from the Mishmis. They worship at their shrines Kundi and Mama, equaled to Mahadeva and Parvati. Like most of the tribes of Assam they belong to the Tibeto-Burman stock. It is interesting to note how Hindu mythology has been absorbed by these people. Here is, for instance, a Springtime love song and it refers to Krishna and his abduction of Rukmini:⁶

Dear Remseiba, Srikrishna of Mathura carried off Rukmini;
I have not gone to carry you off. Even then you do not care for me.

Miri songs, in the same manner, allude to Hindu gods and goddesses like Vasudeva and Kamakhya.

To come to the festivals of the land. The major festivals of Assam are obviously Brahmanical, like Durga Puja, Jan-

4. P. K. Das Gupta, Role of Hindu Deities. . . , *Folk-lore*, 1961, pp. 29-33.

5. The myth is given in Mrs. Raffy's *Folk-tales of the Khasis*, 1920; see also P. R. T. Gurdon's *The Khasis*, 1914.

6. The songs quoted in this essay are from P. Goswami, *The Spring-time Bihu of Assam*, 1966.

mashtami or Krishna's birthday, Holi or Phakua, birthdays of medieval Vaishnavite saints, etc. This short list has left out the Bihus, chiefly two, occasions on which most of the people, Hindu or tribal, really stir themselves. To take Bohag Bihu, the Spring-time festival, it is itself a synthesis of various influences, Aryan and Mongoloid, Assamese and pan-Indian. It combines house-cleaning, prayers to God or the gods, rites for cattle welfare, Huchari carol singing, dances of a sexual character, and extending from this last, songs of an erotic type which can be used as a lovers' language. All the plains tribes participate in the Bihu festival and those who are up in the hills perform rites allied to those performed in the plains. Hindu boys while bathing cattle recite:

Eat gourd, eat brinjal,
grow from year to year,
your mother is small, your father is small,
may you be a large one.

Kachari herdsboys recite:

Eat your gourd, eat your brinjal,
grow up from year to year,
to spite your mother and your father
you will be large ones;
do not be short-statured like your mother,
be large like your bullock father,
like the frog in the corner of the garden
may you be sleek and long.

This April I was invited to a Kachari village some sixty-five miles to the west of Gauhati—the city wherefrom I come, and among the dances I saw, there was one known as *Amrit-manthan*, that is, churning of the seas for nectar, on a theme borrowed from Hindu mythology. Kacharis perform the *Bhatheli* ceremony.⁷ They plant a tall decorated bamboo in a field, make a small hut close by and offer there eatables, a black pigeon and a black goat for their gods and goddesses and pray to them that they cause no harm to the village and that they leave the people in peace and go downstream. Kacharis symbolize the departure of the gods by putting the offerings and the pigeon and the goat on a raft and letting it loose in the river. *Bhatheli* means going

7. P. Goswami, *The Springtime Bihu of Assam*, 1966, p. 40; for *Bhatheli*, see same book, Chap. IV.

downstream. The ceremony seems to recall what J. G. Frazer describes as the public expulsion of evils, "a general riddance of evil spirits at fixed times, usually once a year, in order that the people may make a fresh start in life, freed from all the malignant influences which have been long accumulating about them."

Now this Bhaitheli ceremony has its parallel in the Bhathehi festival observed by Hindus—and even tribes—in lower Assam. Here also a tall bamboo is indispensable. The bamboo is properly trimmed and decorated, then either planted or kept leaning on a tree. Sometimes even two bamboos are seen. People have forgotten why these bamboos are planted but many of them bow down to them and sometimes Krishna is worshipped at their foot. The festival, however, reminds us of the ancient Indradhvaja ceremony described in the *Mahabharata*, *Brihatsamhita*, Kalidas's *Raghuvamsam*, etc. It was a ceremony performed by kings for the purpose of propitiating Indra, the Vedic god, and thus acquiring strength for them and well-being for their people. *Kalika Purana*, composed in Assam about the tenth century, observes that the king who "raises the staff of Indra" and worships him rules long and becomes affluent. The ceremony of Ind-pole or Indradhvaj is found in various parts of India—in West Bengal, among Mundas, Gonds, Murias, etc. Thus, it is seen that tribes even in Assam have retained the memory of a very old Brahmanical ceremony. Dalton (1872) mentions Garos having bamboo shrines before every door and having carried lofty bamboos decorated with clothing and having a yak's tail at the head.

In certain respects it is difficult to differentiate a festival as Hindu or as tribal, for both Hindus and tribals participate in it, for instance, in Bhathehi, Durga Puja and Manasa Puja. Even Muslims take part in the recitation of Manasa mythology. In an agricultural society the concern for crops holds a central position in the collective consciousness of the people, hence their trust in a crop goddess. Hindus worship Lakshmi or Sree as the goddess of wealth and crops. The tribes too have their counterparts to Lakshmi, though under various names. Tribes like the Kacharis and the Nagas have myths to explain the origin of rice.

Bohag Bihu, as has been mentioned already, is a Springtime festival and an occasion for much dancing and singing. There are thousands of songs in Assamese and the tribal languages

like Kachari and Miri. The songs are often poetic, with refined sentiments and striking imagery. Sentiments and themes in Assamese songs find their parallels in the tribal languages. To give a few instances:

Assamese: My mind does not settle at home, dear,
nor does it settle outside,
as the teased cotton floats
so to float do I long.

Rabha: As the teased cotton of the plains is floating
hearing your voice my mind too wants to float.

Assamese: To drink water there is no cup
and there is no leaf,
to bring you there is no money,
please wait another few days.

Kachari: The *khaliha* fish of the brimming lake,
aah, why do you put so high a price?
to pay for you is required many rupees,
but being poor, where will I get so much?

In respect of ballads, perhaps because of a more realistic background that they need, we may notice differences between those found in Assamese and those that are among the tribes.⁸ Some of the tribal ballads would necessarily be mythological in character, but Kacharis and Nagas have ballads of a romantic kind, a type not common in Assamese. Tribal ballads have not been recorded adequately yet, though some material is found in the monographs written by Hutton, Mills, etc. The ballad known as *Haidang Geet* and recited by the Sonowal Kacharis of Lakhimpur has absorbed Hindu ideas like *dharma* and *karma*.

Let me turn to the Märchen before I conclude. J. H. Hutton recorded among Angami Nagas a tale known as The Rat Princess and the Greedy Man.⁹ It can be summarized thus: A man finds a rat, puts it in a box, and the rat turns into a beautiful girl. The man wants to marry her to the greatest man so that he can become rich himself. So he approaches the king; the king says water is more powerful than he is, water says the wind

8. See P. Goswami, *Ballads and Tales of Assam*, 1960, Chap. II, and *Folk-literature of Assam*, 1965 (ed. 2), Chaps. II and IV.

9. J. H. Hutton, *The Angami Nagas*, 1921, pp. 272-273; Dr. Hutton discusses the tale in J. P. Mills' *The Lhota Nagas*, 1922.

is more powerful than he is, wind says the mountain is more powerful than he is, and the mountain says the rat is more powerful than he is. The man returns home and finds the girl turned into a rat as before. Hutton traces this tale to Japan. We find a parallel nearer home, in the *Panchatantra* tale Mouse-maid Made Mouse Again. In the tale Mouse-maid Made Mouse Again a hermit out of pity changes a mouse into a girl. When she comes of marriageable age, the hermit wants to give her to the most superior groom. So he approaches the sun, but the girl wants one more excellent than he is. The sun says the cloud is superior to him. The girl rejects the cloud. So the hermit summons the wind. He too is turned down by the girl. The wind says the mountain is superior to him, but the girl rejects the mountain too. The mountain says, "Mice are superior to me." So the holy man summons a mouse and the girl likes her groom and wants to be changed into a mouse again.

We have in the Naga tale the king, water, the wind, the mountain and the rat as the series of prospective grooms; in the *Panchatantra* tale we find as the parallel series—the sun, the cloud, the wind, the mountain and the mouse. The transformation of a mouse or rat into a girl and the seeking of a powerful groom are the basic motifs in both the tales. This is only to show that not even the Sanskrit classics have escaped notice in the tribal world.

There are other tribal tales which remind us of their pan-Indian affiliations. It is not possible in a short paper to illustrate all this. I will give you only one example. In certain tales found among the Assamese speaking population as well as among the Mikirs and the Nagas the trickster is often persecuted by his neighbours, but to the profit of the trickster. It may be that the trickster's cattle are killed off. So he takes the hides and goes out to sell them. At night he takes shelter in a tree. Thieves come up and divide their spoils at the foot of the tree. The hides fall from the trickster's hands and the thieves flee in fear. So the trickster gets all the money. There are parallels to this motif (K 335) among the Santals, in sub-Himalayan Uttar Pradesh, and in Kashmir.

Trickster tales are widely spread in Assam and would seem to be a Mongoloid contribution to the State's composite culture. There are also animal tricksters—the monkey, the jackal or fox, the hare or rabbit, and the bat in NEFA. As it seems, all kinds of tales are found in Assam, including romantic tales and

formula tales. The tribes have tales illustrating wisdom as they have proverbial sayings. In the area of beliefs too, a lot is held in common by Hindus and tribes, say, in respect of omens and charms and such philosophical concepts like fate and karma. Assam people do not seem to have any fear of the butterfly.¹⁰ Kachari weavers are eager to "learn how to make the design of a butterfly on a flower" while Khamptis make designs of the butterfly on their cloth bags and Mishmis recount how cloth designs made by their first weaver turned into butterflies.

10. P. Goswami, *The Springtime Bihu of Assam*, 1966, p. 94.