



Religious Beliefs and Practices of The Thengal Kachari Tribe of Assam and its Changing Trend: A Sociological Study

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Abstract: *Thengal Kachari tribe is an indigenous tribe of Assam, particularly in upper Assam. The tribe possesses a rich tapestry of religious beliefs and practices that have shaped its cultural identity. This paper explores the traditional religious practices of Assam's Thengal Kachari tribe focusing on rituals, festivals, and spiritual beliefs of Thengal Kachari tribe. It examines the sociological implications of their practices and how they have evolved due to socioeconomic, cultural, and environmental influences. This study intends to document and analyse the changing trends of traditional religious beliefs and practices in the Thengal Kachari tribe.*

Keywords: *Thengal Kachari, Religious Beliefs, Indigenous Practice, Sociological Study, Cultural Identity, Cultural Assimilation, Rituals and Festivals.*

Introduction

A huge number of indigenous people live in India. These people have indigenous traditions, customs, culture, values, and practices, yet untouched by the modern world's lifestyle. Researchers are attracted by these topics for further study.

Indian tribes have interesting and colourful socio-cultural features that are reflected in their daily lives. Thengal Kachari is a very significant tribe of Assam. According to Riseley, they derived their name 'Thengal' from an ancestor, who is said to have ascended to heaven leg foremost (Sengupta, 2003). Thengal Kachari belongs to the Bodo group of the Mangoloid family. The Thengal kacharis are presently found in Jorhat, Golaghat, Dibrugarh, North Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam. They have socio-cultural relations with the Assamese people. They have a long history of interaction with the non-tribal Assamese people which leads this tribe to modernize to a great extent. Hinduism has produced a significant impact on the tribes. Thengal Kachari culture is heavily inspired by Hindu



Assamese culture. While they largely adopted Hinduism and Neo-Vaishnavism over time, they still retain some of their traditional animistic beliefs and practices.

Historical Background of the Thengal Kacharis of Assam

The Thengal Kachari is a plains tribe of Assam, and like other Kachari tribes, it is an offshoot of the larger Kachari group. The Kacharis are also known as the Bodo-Kacharis or Boro-Kacharis in the Brahmaputra Valley, especially in districts like Kamrup, Sonitpur, Mangaldoi, Barpeta, and Jalpaiguri in West Bengal. However, they are commonly referred to as Bodo. Kameswar Brahma also wrote, "The Bodo people of the eastern part of Assam, who settled in the Cachar district, especially in North Cachar of Assam, call themselves Kacharis."

B.M. Das divided the Boros into eastern and western groups, including the Sonowal, Thengal, and Jharua in the eastern group. The Thengal Kacharis, belonging to the Mongoloid race like the Sonowal Kacharis, have physical features that closely resemble those of the Mongolian groups.

There are various myths, tales, and legends about the origin of the Kachari group. The history is largely silent on these matters. Some scholars and anthropologists have studied the topic and shared their opinions.

The Thengal Kachari tribe of Assam has a particular cultural heritage that is molded by their socio-economic situation, religious beliefs, and rituals. The cultural heritage of the Thengal Kachari tribe is threatened by rapid socio-economic changes and cultural assimilation. This research aims to document and analyse their practices.

Understanding the religious beliefs and practices of the Thengal Kachari tribe is essential not only for preserving their cultural identity but also for recognizing the role that spirituality plays in shaping their community dynamics. Religion among indigenous populations often serves as a frame for social cohesion, moral guidance, and cultural continuity, providing a lens through which to view their worldview and interactions with the environment.

Objectives:

1. To find out the religious beliefs and practices of Thengal Kachari tribe.
2. To analyze how these beliefs and practices influence the social structure and daily lives of the Thengal Kachari tribe.

3. To examine the changing trends of the religious beliefs and practices of the Thengal Kachari tribe.

Methodology:

In this research, some methods are adopted. To this research the basic methodological approach is descriptive and analytical method. The paper is based on secondary sources of data. This approach facilitated a comprehensive analysis of the religious beliefs and practices of the Thengal Kachari tribe ensuring a detailed understanding through existing literature and documented evidence.

Review of Literature:

- Tribes of Assam, published by Tribal Research Institute, have a collection of essays on different tribes of Assam. The origin their food habits, festivals, customs & rituals are documented after proper collection and documentation.
- Das, S.'s book "Life Style of Indian Tribes: Locational Practice" (1987) discusses the colorful lifestyles of tribal people of India. It discusses their traditional behaviors and cultural practices.
- Das, O. Kr's book 'Study of North-East India' (2004), published by New Delhi, Gyan Publishing House briefly analyses the Northeast area of India covering the geography, people, culture and economy of Northeast India.
- Sidney Endle's "The Kacharis" (1911) present in detailed about the larger Kachari community, with their subgroups, tribal culture, their social organisation, and historical evolution.
- M.M Chaudhury's "Tribes of Assam Plains" (2009) discusses the different tribal cultures of Northeast India including their historical background geographical distribution, and linguistic similarities.
- Binita Das's thesis, "The life and culture of the Thengal Kacharis of upper Assam," elaborates on the different aspects of the life and culture of the Thengal Kachari tribe, including their religious beliefs and practices.
- Bornali Chetia provides a complete study on the social and cultural life of the Thengal Kachari of Assam in her thesis, "Asamar Thengal Kachari Janagosthir Samajik Aru Sanskritik Jibon Eti Samikshtmak Adhyayan".
- In a research paper title "Indigenous Religion and Culture of the Thengal Kachari Tribe: A Study Based on Jorhat District of Assam" Dipika Kachari explored the rich cultural practices of Thengal Kachari tribe of Assam.

• Suravi Gohain Duwarah’s doctoral thesis, ‘Social Folk Customs of the Sonowal Kachari and Thengal Kacharis of Assam: A Comparative Study,’ provides an in-depth examination of the socio-cultural practices including religion of two prominent Kachari subgroups of Assam.

Findings and Discussion:

The Thengal Kachari community followed an animistic religion. They believed that every objects of the universe had its own god. They worshiped the sun, moon, trees, hills, and like other natural phenomena. Scarifies of animal is an important part of their worship rituals. The tribe believed that the spirit exist in any object may harm, and so they perform various rituals to appease these entities. They use jungles, agricultural fields, river banks as sacred spaces for worship. Sometimes they worship at “Than” areligious place in where some major traditional and religious works are done by them. They also performed some worships at various places, such as corner of a house, middle of a house cross road, bank of a stream, forest area paddy or any crop field at the time of the beginning of cultivation or even at places of hunting or fishing, etc. they offers food, flowers, and animal sacrifices to ensure the blessings of deity’s for prosperous life and protection. The Thengal Kachari people commonly worship several gods and goddesses. They perform various types of rituals and ceremonies.

TABLE:1

The table shows the various rituals of Thengal Kachari

Category	Sub Category	Rituals	Social Implications
A. Personal or	1. Life Cycle Rituals	a. Mritakak Diya (offerings to the Deceased) b. Biyoi Jagya (pregnancy ritual)	Maintains connection with ancestors Ensures community support during life transitions
	2. Protective and Healing Rituals	a. Shani Graha Chaul Khuwa Sabah b. Ronga-Rangoli Kukura puja c. Bataruwa Ai d. Bhitoruwa Ai e. Swargadew Puja f. Ai Sabah or Ai Sakam g. Pitha Khuwa Puja	Provides psychological comfort Reinforces belief in spiritual causes of illness. Promotes community care for the sick

Individual Rituals	3. Prosperity and Well-being Rituals	a. Lakshmi Shalar Puja b. Borsabah c. Opor Sobah d. Apeswari Sabah or Upar Sokam	Encourages positive outlook Reinforces cultural values of prosperity Strengthens household unity
	4. Agricultural Rituals	a. Bhang diya or kani Diya	Marks agricultural cycles Reinforces connection to land
B.Social or Public Rituals	1. Community-wide Ceremonies	a. Deo Sakam b. Bor Sabaha c. Gopini Sabah	Strengthens community bonds Reinforces collective identity Provides platform for social interaction.
	2. Nature-related Rituals	a. Habi Puja (Deoban Tradition) b. Bat-Bon Puja c. Bhekuli Biya (frog wedding for rain)	Emphasizes connection with nature Promotes environmental awareness Reinforces traditional ecological knowledge.
	3. Protective Rituals	a. Chang dangoria Puja (Gahori Puja) b. Chura Utuwa Puja	Provides sense of community security Reinforces belief in spiritual protection
	4. Seasonal and Agricultural Rituals	a. Tora Chira Festival b. Pani Tola Sabah c. Na-Khowa (new harvest celebration)	Marks important agricultural milestones Promotes communal celebration and sharing Reinforces agricultural traditions
	5. Adapted Hindu Practices	a. Durga Puja	Indicates cultural assimilation Demonstrates religious syncretism Provides connection to wider Hindu community

Personal or Individual Rituals

a. Mritakak Diya (offerings to the Deceased)

This “Mritakak Diya” ritual is very important and indispensable for the tribe. During the three Bihus, or other important occasions the community offers the person’s favorite foods and drinks, especially rice, rice beer, meat like duck, pigeon, pork etc, fish, fruits, snacks, and betel nuts etc on a banana leaf placed on a bamboo tray.

b. Shani Graha Chaul Khuwa Sabah

This ritual is performed to appease “Shani Graha” (Saturn) especially on Saturday. For this an odd number of devotees are invited and the household offers particularly red and black items such as black duck, black chicken, black-scaled fish, red rice (Bao Dhan) etc. This ritual is conducted to mitigate any astrological malefic influence (Shani Dosha).

c. Lakshmi Shalar Puja

The Lakshmi Shal is a special altar dedicated to the goddess Lakshmi. The household expects the well-being and prosperity through these rituals. The ritual is conducted in the Assamese month of “Bohag”. The Lakshmi Shal is usually located in the kitchen.

d. Ronga-Rangoli Kukura puja

This ritual is performed to appease the deity “Ga-Dangoria” for the well-being of pregnant women and children. In this worship a pair of red chickens that have never laid eggs, fried rice cakes, a pair of banana leaves, any gold item, and Sereka (Rice Beer) is required. Devotees intend to participate in this ritual and the priest leads all the activities.

e. Bataruwa Ai

If any member of the household falls ill and the “Mangalati” (a person who indulges in a traditional method of seeking auspicious timings) advises or the household decides to perform this ritual, the “Bataruwa Ai” ritual is performed. For this ritual raw beet-peas, banana, sugarcane, Sandah (a type of rice powder), soaked rice, pitha guri (raw rice powder), muri (puffed rice), duck are required. Here the priest and devotees pray by offering these items for the well-being of the household, and the householder receives blessings.

f. Bhitoruwa Ai

This ritual is performed within the home to protect the family, especially the children, from harm and misfortune. The housewife prepares “Payash” or ‘Paramanna’ (cooked rice with milk and sugar), and duck meat using branches of Aam

tree (mango) and the house wife decorated it in a agoli kalpat(banana leaf) to everyone in the house and to the neighbors.

g. Bor-Sabah

This ritual is distinctive to the Thengal Kachari tribe. For this ritual two young female pig, red rooster as per their capacity, rice cakes, sweets, sixty pots of ‘Sereka’ (rice beer) is required. Throughout the night, the devotees singing the names of deities and considering the pig as enemy and sacrifices it as a form of revenge. In this ritual offerings are made to the god and demon, maintaining the symbolic enmity between them.

h. Sargadew Puja

This ritual is performed to protect against the effects of lightening or thunderstorms. For this ritual instead inviting the devotees the ceremony is carried out with the help of the neighbor guest who come to the effected house after receiving the news of an impending storm.

i. Rati sewa

A notable religious practice observed by Thengal Kachari is Rati sewa. In this ritual one designated person (Deuri) purifies the pigs and rooster and kill them and offer their blood on a banana leaf to the deity to ward off evil and misfortune. Young’s are not allowed to this ritual.

j. Opor Sobah

The householder arranged this ritual when it is determined through divination that the deities are displeased for which some misfortune occurs in the household. In this ritual primarily prayers are offered to the goddesses of heaven, seeking their blessing and protection from their wrath, and the “Gupini” (Women devotees) bless the householders wishes to be fulfilled.

k. Ai Sabah or Ai Sakam

The Thengal kachari community performs this ritual with great faith and belief when someone of the house is affected by pox with a belief that the deity “Ai” has appeared. The worship is chiefly conducted by women devotees “Gopini”.

l. Apeswari Sabah or Upar Sokam

This religious practice is primarily conducted by the female devotees. This “puja” is performed for relief from some particular diseases such as child fall frequently ill, any girl of the house do not attain puberty at the proper age with a thought that such problem occurs due to the influence of “Apeswari” , the fairy Goddess.

m. Biyoi Jagya

The Thenga Kachari community performs this ritual when a woman becomes pregnant. In this ritual they dedicated a duck with the promise to offer a life in exchange for child's safe arrival and well-being. The ritual is performed after child's born and the umbilical cord of the child falls off.

n. Pitha Khuwa Puja

The Thengal Kachari community perform this ritual when someone's throat swells due to an illness they believed it to be the cause of deity, they perform the "Pitha Khuwa Puja". In this ritual they placed raw rice flour, a pot of milk, and jiggery and offered to the deity. They also touched the same offering to the affected cheeks of the affected person. By this they believe to reduce the swelling and cure the illness.

o. Bhang diya or kani Diya

They conduct this ritual before the cultivation starts. In this ritual the worship is dedicated to Lord Siva and his wife (the mother Goddess). They offer, 'Mah Prasad', Banana, paramanna'(cooked rice with milk and sugar) for appeasing Siva, and his wife and believe that by it their pets would be free from any kind of disease throughout the year.

Social Implications:

These practices strengthen community bonds and cultural identity. It offers psychological comfort, reinforce spiritual beliefs towards health, and promote communal care. All these practice preserve traditions, provide social support, and reinforce the tribe's worldview and values.

Social or Public Rituals

a. Deo Sakam

The ritual is performed by the community to appease various deities and spirits of their believe. The villagers gathered under a large tree in an open field pray for the peace and prosperity of their village and their distant relatives. Deo Sakam is unique as all the deities are collectively worshiped publicly. In the Deo Sakam, all deities are collectively remembered and worshipped ceremonially, various rituals and significance attached both inside and outside the Than Ghar.

Sacrifices performed Inside the Than:

1. Apeshwari or Apeshwara Sacrifice

2. Ap-Apeshwari
3. Gosani (Durga Devi)
4. Na-Poliya Deity
5. Ghar Dangoriya
6. Ga-Dangoriya
7. Jalkowar Jalkuwari (Jal Narayan and Jal Narayani)
8. Tekela
9. Bhukuli Ai or Bhuruli Gosani
10. Ai Sakam

Sacrifices performed Outside the Than:

1. Mahadev
2. Habi Dangoriya
3. Bat Tekela

Habi Puja (Deoban Tradition)

The Thengal Kachari performs this ritual in the Assamese month “Chot” before Bohag Bihu on a Tuesday evening during dark fortnight. They perform this ritual to ensure the safety of their pets and livestock, to increase prosperity, and to protect against evil, disease, and spirits.

Chang Dangoria Puja (Gahori Puja)

The tribe performed this puja to seek relief from prolonged illness, believed that this disease is caused by wrath of the guardian spirits or ancestral deities. The ritual performed very secretly on a Saturday or Tuesday by the eldest devotee of the Thengal Community.

Chuwa Utuwa Puja

The Thengal Kachari performed this puja to seek protection from smallpox, misfortune in the household believed to be caused by maternal spirits. The villagers collectively organize this puja by the river bank usually on the first Tuesday of the month of Jeth (Assamese Month). The offerings include ‘Mah-prasad’, betel nut, leaf, white flower, sindur, a white goat, a white pigeon and a white duck so on.

Bor Sabaha

The villagers gather at the Namghar (community prayer hall) to hold this Bor Sabaha. The villagers gather at the Namghar to perform continuous chanting and singing of devotional songs (Naam-Kirtan).

Initially, the devotees perform Kirtan (devotional singing) at the Namghar and after completing that they sit in two rows facing each other and continue chanting the Naam. After the chanting session, a group of traditional musicians “Mridangiya” performs with “Mridang”

a traditional instruments or ‘Gayan Bayan’ singing some devotional songs and Bhaona (Vaishnavite dance- drama). The “Deuri” a devotee distributes “Mah Prasad” to everyone.

Gopini Sabah

The Thengal Kachari community arranged “Gopini Sabah” once in a year especially on just after bohag bihu and before starts cultivation. In this ritual the female devotees gathered in the Namghar pray the Mother Goddess “Ai” and singing “Ai Naam”.

Bat-Bon Puja

Bat-Bon puja is a traditional religious practice of Thengal Kachari tribe. They celebrated it after the bohag bihu in the month of Jeth. They performs this puja in the eastern direction of the village under a tree on a Sunday. In this puja they place four pairs of red Cocks in four corners and another pair of cock and a duck is necessary for propitiating. They kill the sacrificed birds by hitting with a stick rather than any weapon. In this rituals they also offers Sereka(rice beer), Mah Prasad, Bhog , banana, coconut, betel nut etc.

Tora Chira Festival

In Wednesday of second week of Assamese month Chot they celebrated this “Tora Chira” festival every year. It is a pre bohag bihu celebration. For this celebration they went to the jungle and collect Tora tree and hunt wild animals to eat their meat in the festival. They tear(Chira) the collected tora tree and dried in the warm Sunshine. They perform Tora Chira dance holding the Tora trees on their shoulder. They eat meat of pork, deer, chicken etc with “Sereka” (rice beer).

Ayus Tola Sabah

The Thengal Kachari parents performed this Ayus Tola sabah if a child falls into water accidentally or dreamt of their child falling into water, They perform it at the site where the accident occurred. For this ritual required item are pair of betel nut and leaf, banana leaf, jakoi-Khaloi(Fishing implement made by bamboo), a duck egg, ‘Thuria Tamul’(betel nut and leaf). The child’s mother, and the invited guests perform rituals to reverse the child’s fate and bless the child for well being.

Bhekuli Biya

It is an important religious ceremony among the Thengal Kachari tribe during the rainy season. If their decrease of rainfall they perform this practices with a belief of rain for cultivation. They brought together a male (Dora) and female (Koina) Bhekuli(a type of waterfowl) for the wedding ceremony. In this ceremony they follows the specific rituals and customs and reciting mantras to invoke rain. After that they released the both Bhekuli into the water.

Durga Puja

The Thengal kachari community celebrates this puja with great respect adherence to the tradition. This ritual begin from the day of Mhalaya and install goddess Durga, and present offering. The first day is known as sasthi following Saptami, Maha Stami and Nabami. On Maha Stami they sacrifices goats, sheep, dicks, and some also offer buffaloes. During these days, they partake in light vegetarian meals, and maintaining complete vegetarian diet for worshiping the goddess “Durga”.

Gorokhiya Bhoj

The Thengal Kachari young boy celebrated this “Gorokhiya Bhoj” on Aghon month after gathering their paddy with their the covered boyand enjoying feast together during thr month of Aghon. The household invite five or seven covered boys and offers special meal with great respect.

Pani Tola Sabah

The Pani Tola sabah is celebrated particularly in certain region. The Thengal Kachari perform this annual function before starting the sowing season of their principal paddy specially in the month of Jeth (Assamese month) that is May-June. The duration of the function is three to five and if it is three days duration than it is known as ‘Tini Pani Tola’ and for five day duration ‘Pach Pani Tola’.

Na-Khowa

After gathering the newly harvested rice from the paddy field they enjoy the first batch of newly harvested rice with fresh vegetables, fish etc. While they celebrate this individually they also organizes a collective celebration in the fields. Initially they prayers are offered to the male deity, and freshly cooked food is presented on banana leafs.

Social Implications:

The social and public ritual of the Thengal Kachari tribe enhances community bonds and helps in cultural preservation. It strengthen social identity, social interaction, and reinforce traditional ecological knowledge. The nature related practices maintain the tribe’s relationship with the nature.

Changes:

In this study the researcher find that maximum numbers of indigenous worship and ceremony has been changed. The respondents elaborate that at earlier time they celebrated various type of worship and ceremony all of which are not prevalent in modern Thengal Kachari society. Major changes occurred due to the impact of modernization and adoption of Neo-Vaishnavism.

Here is an analysis of the changes

Impact of Neo-Vaishnavism

- Large number of Thengal Kachari people has moved from their traditional animistic beliefs and tradition of lord Shiva worship to Neo-Vaishnavism religion.
- Namghar (Religious prayer hall) has become the central in their religious and social life.
- After adopting the Neo-Vaishnavism traditional tribal rituals, beliefs and practice has largely replaced.
- The worship of tribal gods and goddesses has diminished but the beliefs of affect of supernatural forces on life remain some extent.

Impact of Modernisation

- Due to modernization many traditional customs, rituals, and festivals has largely changed.
- Practices of traditional folk medicine and magico religious treatment • have moved to modern medical care.
- Educated younger generations are less familiar with traditional customs and beliefs.

Conclusion:

The indigenous community of Assam Thengal Kachari has a unique religious beliefs and practices. This beliefs and practices shaped their culture and identity. Due to the adoption of Neo-Vaishnavism religion the community has losses its animistic beliefs, practices and rituals. This study documents their practices and analyzes its sociological implications. It is significant to preserve the tribe's traditional beliefs and practices to maintain the tribal cultural heritage.

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