

The Religious Culture of Assam: A Reflection

Kafil Uddin Ahmed
Assistant Professor
Department of Assamese
Janapriya College, Baniarapara,
Barpeta, Assam
Email: kalitajoy1972@gmail.com

Abstract

The present paper explores the rich and diverse religious culture of Assam, a northeastern Indian state, where traditional customs, folklore, and faiths such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and indigenous beliefs have converged, creating a unique spiritual landscape. This study examines the significance of festivals, rituals, and sacred sites in shaping the spiritual lives of the Assamese people, highlighting their role in shaping individual and community identities. Additionally, it investigates the impact of modernization and globalization on Assam's religious culture, revealing how traditional practices continue to thrive and influence contemporary society. By examining this complex interplay, the study sheds light on the enduring importance of spirituality in Assamese culture, where diverse traditions coexist and inform one another, fostering a distinct cultural identity that is rooted in heritage yet responsive to change.

Key words

Assam, culture, religion

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Received: 28-11-25
Approved: 05-12-25

Kafil Uddin Ahmed

The Religious Culture
of Assam: A Reflection

Vol. XVI, No.2
Article No. 36, Pg. 318-326

Similarity Check: 04%

Online available at
[https://anubooks.com/journal-
volume/jgv-vol-xvi-no2-july-
dec-2025](https://anubooks.com/journal-volume/jgv-vol-xvi-no2-july-dec-2025)

DOI: [https://doi.org/10.31995/
jgv.2025.v16i02.036](https://doi.org/10.31995/jgv.2025.v16i02.036)

**This article has been peer-reviewed by the Review Committee of JGV.*

Introduction:

Assam, a state in northeastern India, is distinguished by its diverse castes, sub-castes, and a remarkable unity in diversity, particularly in its religious culture. The state's breathtaking natural beauty, with its lush flora and fauna, majestic hills, and dense forests, is complemented by its rich spiritual landscape. Assam is home to people of different faiths, fostering a vibrant multi-religious culture. To truly understand Assam's religious culture, it is essential to delve into the various traditions that flourish within the state, including Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and indigenous beliefs, which have blended together to create a unique cultural identity.

Objectives: The objectives of this paper are:

- (i) To explore and analyze the diverse religious traditions and practices in Assam, understanding their contribution to the state's rich cultural heritage.
- (ii) To assess the significance of festivals, rituals, and sacred sites in shaping the spiritual lives of the Assamese people, promoting unity and diversity.
- (iii) To examine the impact of modernization and globalization on Assam's religious culture, identifying ways traditional practices adapt and continue to shape individual and community identities.

Methodology: This study employs a qualitative research methodology, integrating historical, sociological, and anthropological approaches to investigate Assam's religious culture. Data collection involves a thorough review of existing literature, analysis of sacred texts, and field observations, enabling a nuanced understanding of the complex relationships between diverse traditions and their impact on the state's cultural identity.

Discussion and findings:

Assam, a northeastern Indian state, is renowned for its cultural diversity, with numerous castes, sub-castes, and faiths coexisting in harmony. The region's spiritual landscape is intricately linked to its breathtaking natural beauty, featuring lush hills, forests, and fauna. A vibrant multi-religious culture thrives in Assam, with Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and indigenous beliefs influencing one another and shaping the state's distinct identity. This paper aims to explore Assam's rich religious heritage, examining the interplay between faith, community, and identity, with a focus on the state's diverse religious traditions and practices, as outlined below:

Saktism:

Saktism, a revered tradition, venerates the female goddess, Devi or Durga, as the supreme deity, embodying the ultimate divine force. This cult reveres her in

diverse forms and names, such as Kali, Uma, and Kamakhya, across various regions. In Assam, the goddess is worshipped as Sakti, particularly at Kamakhya, where she is depicted in iconic representations or symbolized by the Yoni, representing the creative principle. The Tantras prescribe the worship procedure for Sakti, involving mantras, Yantras, and the five makaras: matsya, mamsa, madira, mudra, and maithuna.¹ Two distinct procedures are outlined: Vamacara, where the five makaras are applied literally, and Samayacara, where symbolic substitutes are used. Saktism has profoundly impacted Assam's spiritual landscape, with Kamakhya serving as a pivotal center for the Sakta cult. The Devi Purana and Sadhanamala, a Buddhist Tantric text, acknowledge Kamakhya's sacred significance, highlighting its influence on Eastern India's religious practices. Key aspects of Shaktism include the worship of Devi in various forms, Kamakhya's importance, Tantric practices, and the significance of the five makaras, all contributing to the region's rich spiritual heritage.

Saivism:

Saivism, a philosophical tradition encompassing the Kashmir Saiva Darsana, a form of Advaita Vedanta, doesn't have clear evidence of being widely practiced in ancient Assam. However, Siva-worship was a prevalent and popular religion in the region from early times. The Kalika Purana notes that ancient Kamarupa was inhabited by non-Aryan tribes who worshipped Siva with unique rituals. The Yogini Tantra attributes the origin of the religion to Kiratas, and mentions Asura king Bana as a devoted follower of Siva.² The Kalika Purana describes Siva's worship according to the Vanacara tradition, while the Darang Rajvamsavali chronicles the Koch monarch's origin as Siva's progeny. The Koch dynastic chronicle records Siva's worship by the Koches, blending Brahmanical and tribal rituals. King Naranarayan's worship of Siva with Brahmanical rituals, and his subsequent direction to adopt tribal procedures, highlights the syncretic nature of Saivism in ancient Assam. Numerous Siva-worship centers thrived, including Jalpisa Ksetra, with notable devotees like Bhaskaravarmana, Vanamala, and Sridhara. The abundance of Siva-related holy sites in the Kalika Purana underscores Saivism's significant presence in Kamarupa, reflecting a blend of Aryan and non-Aryan traditions that continues to shape the region's culture and spirituality.

The worship of Siva is a deeply ingrained tradition in Assam, with various modes of worship practiced across the region. Siva is often revered in the linga form, a practice that persists to this day, with iconographic representations of the deity discovered throughout Assam, testifying to his significance in the region's spiritual landscape. The lingam, an upright stone pillar erected on a pedestal called yoni, is a ubiquitous symbol of Siva worship, with over a million lingas in Kamarupa,

highlighting the profound impact of Saivism on Assam's cultural and spiritual heritage. The practice of animal sacrifice, still observed in some Siva temples, underscores the complex and diverse nature of Siva worship in the region. Saivism's enduring legacy is reflected in the region's unique blend of traditions and practices, woven from diverse threads of influence, and continues to be an essential aspect of Assam's cultural and religious identity, inspiring and nourishing the faithful with its distinctive rituals and practices.

Vaishnavism:

Vaishnavism, the cult of worshipping Vishnu as the supreme deity, has a profound history in Assam. The region's kings claimed descent from Vishnu via Naraka, and Bhaskaravarmana was hailed as a progeny of the Vaishnava family in Banabhatta's Harshacarita. The Kalika Purana's Naraka legend credits Vishnu with establishing Naraka as Kamarupa's monarch. Epigraphic and literary evidence confirm the prevalence of Vaishnavism in early Assam, with the Umachal rock inscription recording the establishment of a Balabhadra temple. King Bhutivarmana's devotion to Vishnu is evident in his title, paramabhagavata. Various inscriptions, such as the Doobi Plates, Nidhanpur Plates, and Guwahati plates, showcase the widespread worship of Vishnu and his incarnations, including Krishna, Rama, and Balarama. Symbols like garuda, padma, sankha, and cakra underscore Vaishnavism's significance in Assam, influenced by the Pancaratra Samhitas. This tradition later evolved into neo-Vaishnavism, emphasizing bhakti and devotional singing. The worship of Vishnu as Hayagriva in the Manikuta hill at Hajo is particularly notable, reflecting the continued presence of the Vaishnava cult in Assam. This revered form of Vishnu remains an integral part of Assam's spiritual landscape, testament to the enduring legacy of Vaishnavism in the region.

Religious Rites:

The Hindu culture is characterized by a series of rites and rituals, including srauta and smarta, which are grounded in religious custom and tradition, with Smriti dealing with every aspect of human life. These rites were performed in Assam from the 4th century A.D., when Brahmanas settled in the region, and are evident in epigraphs that provide information about the life and conduct of rational beings, regulated by Dharmasastras. The Smrtis enjoin the performance of five great sacrifices, including deva-yajna, bhuta-yajna, pitr-yajna, brahma-yajna, and manusyayajna, which were performed by most Brahmins. The nidhanpur grant endowed land for bali, caru, and satra, with satras being sacrificial sessions performed by Brahmanas who have consecrated the 3 Vedic fires. Various sraut ceremonies, such as agnihotra, a form of haviryajna, were common, performed morning and

evening by yajamana or an adhvaryu priest, and were obligatory for Brahmanas. The Grant of Balavarmana describes Devadhara, an adhvaryu priest, performing vaitanika rites, and texts outline the priest's duties, including preparing the ground, building the alter, and performing the sacrifice. Agnihotra involved homa with cow's milk, and elaborate rules governed milking, boiling, and offering the milk to the garhapatya and ahavaniya fires. The Khonamukhi grant refers to a Brahmana who performed agnistoma and other sacrifices, one of the seven soma sacrifices, performed annually in vasanta.

In Assam, Ksatriyas performed elaborate sacrifices, including the asvamedha, while Brahmanas recited Sandhya thrice daily, took three baths, and observed fasts and vratas. The king Balavarmana took a vow to absorb himself in Mahesvara's spirit through fasts, and tapas or ascetic practices were integral to Brahmanas' lives. Assam's sacred places, or tirthas, are categorized into nine types, including Bithi, Pitha, and Rudrapitha, with notable sites like Siddhesvari, Kamakhya, and Hayagriva. These tirthas, often located on riverbanks or mountaintops, offered opportunities for worship, pinda offerings, and earning merit through charity. The region's rivers, like the Brahmaputra, were considered holy due to their association with tirthas. The Smritis and Puranas emphasized the importance of charity, with gifts like gold, horses, and land considered mahadana. Grants were made on auspicious occasions like monthly Samkrantis, with the Nowgong Grant of Balavarman and Guwahati Grant of Ratnapala being examples. These practices highlight the significance of religious rites in Assam's cultural heritage.

Buddhism:

Buddhism's presence in Assam is uncertain. The terms dharma and tathagata in Bhaskaravarmana and Indrapala's grants hint at possible Buddhist influence, but are inconclusive. Archaeological discoveries have not provided substantial evidence. The Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsiang's account of Kamarupa states that the people lacked faith in Buddha, and no Sangharama (monastery) existed, suggesting Buddhism may not have been prominent in 7th-century Assam.

The Tibetan historian Taranath, in his *History of Buddhism* (1608), however, refers to the introduction and prevalence of Buddhism in Kamarupa in later years. According to Taranath, the Buddhist teacher Dhitika was responsible for converting the people of Kamarupa from Sun-worship to Buddhism. Of Dhitika converts in Kamarupa was a *Siddha*, who organized a great feast for all the priests of the four regions in order to diffuse the Buddhist gospel. Again, Taranath refers to one Asvabhava who preached of the *Mahayana* doctrine in Kamarupa. Here it is important to note that when Asvabhava was in Kamarupa making converts and

teaching pupils, among the upasakas, a great sensation was caused by an accident with a poisonous serpent. The serpent attacked some of his pupils and they were immediately struck down, but as soon as some holy water was sprinkled over them, they recovered. What it reveals that Buddhist teaching prevalent in the province during the period. Asvabhava flourished during the time of king Govicandra was contemporaneous with Dharmakirti around 600 A. D.

According to another reference, this is cited as an evidence of the prevalence of Buddhism in pre-Bhaskaravarman period. Mention is made in Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* that king Meghavahana of Kashmir married a Pragjyotisha princess named Amritaprabha who caused by lofty *Vihara* called Amritabhavana constructed for the benefit of the *Bhiksus*. *Stupa*, the spiritual guide of her father, who hailed from Loh, also built the *Stupa* called Lo-Stonpa.⁵ M. A. Stein, however, opines that it must remain an open question whether we have not in Loh the name of some other Tibetan territory. In fact, following K. L. Barua, it can be said that a remote ancestor of Bhaskaravarman became Buddhist and Buddhism spread into Kamarupa long before the visit of Hiuen-tsang.⁶

Tantrikism:

Tantrikism or *Tantrism* is a system of yoni-worship or female-centered sex-worship. Tantrikism was allegedly begun thousands of years ago in India by women of a secret sect called *Vratyas*, the processors of the Devadasis or sacred harlots. *Tantrism* was closely associated with later written scriptures known as *Tantras*. Accordingly, it became known as *Tantrism*. Its main objective was the adoration of the *lingam-yoni*, sign of the male and female principles in conjunction (the god *Shiva* and the goddess *Kali*). *Tantrism* is more or less practiced in Assam, i.e., Kamakhya, India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet etc. The basic tenet of Tantrism was that the woman possesses more spiritual energy than the man and so the man could achieve realization of the *divinity* through sexual and emotional amalgamation with a woman.

We think that from the latter part of the 7th century A. D.,⁷ Buddhism underwent radical changes, developing into several forms of mystic cults known as *Mantrayana*, *Vajrayana* and *Tantrayana*. Thus, it is true to say that the later form of Buddhism can rightly be called Tantric Buddhism. According to Winternitz, it is a queer mixture of monistic philosophy, magic and erotics, with a small admixture of Buddhist ideas. Even B. Bhattacharyya remarks: "The vajrayana took into account all the good things, tenets, philosophical notions and theories, and incorporated all that was best in Buddhism and probably in Hinduism also, and it was owing to this that it attained great popularity. It satisfied every body, the cultured and the uncultured, the pious and the sinful, the lower and the higher ranks of people and

devotee.”⁸ In his *Early History of Kamarupa*, k. L. Barua says that the Vajrayana cult then prevalent in Kamarupa. As a matter of fact, we have evidence that *tantrikism* gained ground in Assam, which was already noted for the esoteric theories of *tantric Saktism*. Both the Tibetan and Indian sources provide us with materials regarding the prevalence of later Buddhism in the form of *Vajrayana* in Assam.

It is, however, important to observe here that the Tantric Buddhist literature locates some main centres of the faith in Assam and associates a few prominent Buddhist acarya with ancient Kamarupa. The *Sadhanamala* states four *pithas* of the Vajrayanists such as **Kamakhya**, **Srihatta**, **Purnagiri** and **Uddiyana**. Of these, the last one has the largest number of variation like Oddiyana, Odiyana, Odyana, Odryana etc. Like Kamakhya and Sylhet, Uddiyana belonging to Assam at least partially warrants the prevalence of Tantric Buddhism in ancient Assam according to scholars.

In fact, the monk were primarily responsible for spreading the various systems associated with *Vajrayana* were widely known as *Siddhas*, and according to the tradition, they were eighty four in number. Generally speaking, the scholars are belief that some of the prominent *Siddhas* of this traditional list, such as *Sarah*, Nagarjuna and Luipa, either hailed from or propounded their doctrine in Kamarupa. Here it is worthy to note that the Tibetan work *Pag Sam Zon Jag* (1747) refers to *Sarah* or Rahulabhadra as having been born of a Brahmana and a Dakini in the city of Rajni in the eastern country. This city of Rajni was probably the small principality of Rani (in Kamarup-Goalpara districts Assam) which was in later times a feudatory of the Ahoms. Similarly, Grunwedel and Tucci both hold that Sarah was a Sudra from Kamarupa. The disciple of Sarah was Nagarjuna. Nagarjuna was well-known in Kamarupa, Nepal and Bhutan. Luipa, known as Minanatha or Matsyendranatha, according to Tibetan tradition, was also from Assam.⁹ Again, Bagchi, in his introduction to the *Kaulajnana-nirnaya*, holds that Minanatha was born on a sea cost on an island called Candradvipa, in eastern India. He was originator of the doctrine of *kula*, a form of Buddhist mysticism developing out of Saktism. In his commentary on the celebrated *Tantraloka* of Abhinavagupta, Jayaratha refers to the story of the origin of *Kaulism*. From an original *Tantra* work, he quote a verse according to which actually the doctrine was acquired by Bhairavi, the goddess, from Bhairava, the terrifying god, and then from her by Mina, the Macchana, the great souled Siddha, in the Mahapitha of Kamarupa: *bhairavya bhairavat praptam yogam vyapya priye tatsakasattu siddhena minakhyena varanane kamarupe mahapithe macchandena mahatmana*.¹⁰ Minanatha, therefore, is credited with the promulgation of the doctrine known as yogini-kaula which became famous in Kamarupa: *Kamakhya giyate nathe mahamatsyodarsthitih*.¹¹ Even rahula

Sankrityayana refers to the fact that a work, i.e., *Bahyantara-bodhicitta-bandhopadesa*, was composed by Minanatha in a language which is very near or similar language to old Assamese language. Consequently, a vast mass of writings in early Assamese known as *mantra* (*vajrayana* tenets) or *mantraputhis* composed in mystic words and syllables contains magic formulae etc. bear the impress of the Buddhistic *Dharani sutras*. The *Tantras* explains the purposes of the various rites and the philosophy.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, it can be said that Assam's religious culture is a dynamic and vibrant entity, shaped by the convergence of diverse traditions and practices. The region's spiritual landscape is characterized by the coexistence of Saktism, Saivism, Vaishnavism, and Buddhism, each contributing to the rich cultural heritage. Saktism is marked by the worship of the Devi in various forms, including Kamakhya, Kali, and Durga, while Saivism is distinguished by the worship of Siva in different modes and forms. Vaishnavism has played a significant role in shaping the region's spiritual identity, with its rich history and legacy. Buddhism, although less prominent, has left a lasting impact on Assam's cultural landscape. The region's religious culture is also characterized by a range of rites and rituals, including *srauta* and *smarta*, which are grounded in religious custom and tradition. The *Smrtis* prescribe the performance of five great sacrifices, and the Nidhanpur grant endowed land for *bali*, *caru*, and *satra*, highlighting the importance of these rituals. Prominent Buddhist acaryas, such as Sarah, Nagarjuna, and Luipa, have contributed to the region's spiritual heritage, while the *Tantras* and the *Kalika Purana* provide a framework for understanding the complex web of traditions and practices that define Assam's religious culture. Assam's religious culture is a testament to the region's remarkable diversity and its ability to accommodate and assimilate different traditions and practices, creating a unique and vibrant spiritual landscape that is quintessentially Assamese.

References:

1. Epigraphia Indica, v, 181-8.
2. Yogini Tantra, 2.9.15
3. Farquhar, J. N. Outlines of the Religious Literature of India, Oxford, 1920, Pg. 183-6.
4. Barua, K. L. Early History of kamarupa, Pg. 142ff.
5. Stein, M. A. Trans. Rajatarangini, iii, vv. 9-10.
6. Barua, K. L. Early History of Kamarupa, op cit., Pg. 30

7. Neog, M. 'Buddhism in Kamarupa', Indian Historical Quarterly, xxvii, 2, p. **145**.
8. Bhattacharjee, B. "Origin and Development of Vajrayana", Indian Historical Quarterly, iii, 1927, Pg. **733-46**.
9. Chakravarti, Some New Facts about Matsyendranatha, Indian Historical Quarterly, v, Pg. **177-81**.
10. Tantraloka, Pg. **24-25**.
11. Kaula-jnana-nirnaya, Pg. **44**.