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'Sorogdeo Puja' of Sonowal Kacharis Tribes of Assam: A Case Study

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Abstract

*The present study explores the **Sorogdeo Puja** (also known as **Sogdeo Puja**), an important traditional ritual observed by the Sonowal Kacharis of Assam. The Sonowal Kacharis are one of the Scheduled Tribe communities of Assam and are also found in several other states of North-East India. Traditionally, their religious beliefs were based on animism, which emphasizes the worship of natural forces, ancestral spirits, and supernatural beings believed to protect the community from hardships and misfortunes. Their religious practices are broadly classified into household worship and community worship. Household rituals are performed to ensure peace and prosperity within the family, whereas community rituals are conducted for the welfare of the entire village.*

*Among the various community rituals, such as **Baitho Puja**, **Gojai Puja**, **Lokhimi Tola Sobah**, and **Sorogdeo Puja**, the present study focuses specifically on **Sorogdeo Puja**, examining its traditional practices, beliefs, and cultural significance. The ritual is primarily dedicated to **Indra Devata**, the deity associated with rain, prosperity, and agricultural fertility. Sorogdeo Puja continues to be observed in several Sonowal Kachari villages, particularly in Silapathar (Dhemaji District), Jokai, Naharkatia, Jamira (Dibrugarh District), and Borpathar and Dangori (Tinsukia District). The study is based on field investigations and highlights the ritual's role in preserving the cultural identity and traditional religious heritage of the Sonowal Kachari community.*

Introduction

The Sonowal Kacharis are recognized as a Scheduled Tribe (Plains) of Assam and constitute one of the major branches of the larger Kachari community, alongside the Boro, Dimasa, and Thengal Kacharis. Their largest concentration is found in Dibrugarh district, although significant populations also inhabit Jorhat, Sivasagar, Lakhimpur, Nagaon, Sonitpur, Darrang, Tinsukia, and Dhemaji districts of Assam.

Agriculture forms the backbone of the Sonowal Kachari economy. Rice is their staple food, while fish and meat constitute important components of their traditional diet. Rice beer has traditionally been consumed during social and religious ceremonies. The community is organized into seven principal clans, namely ***Bali Khitiri, Chiripuria, Amarabamiya, Dhulial, Ujani Kuchia, Namoni Kuchia, and Tipamia***, each deriving its name from a particular locality. These clans are further divided into fourteen sub-clans (Khels), which are again subdivided into several lineages (Bangsha), including *Betari, Gezepi, Phatowal, Makrari, Neskatar, Hagumiri, Nakrari*, and others.

Although the Sonowal Kacharis accepted **Mahapurushiya Vaishnavism** under the influence of **Srimanta Sankardeva**, many of their indigenous religious beliefs and traditional rituals continue to survive. Most members of the community are followers of the **Auniati Satra**, and after initiation they are known as **Sarania**, while higher stages of religious discipline are referred to as **Bhajania, Bhakat, and Medhi**. Alongside Vaishnavite practices, the community continues to preserve several indigenous rituals that reflect their ancestral worldview and cultural heritage.

Traditional rituals occupy a significant place in the religious life of the Sonowal Kacharis. Ceremonies such as ***Bathou Puja, Kesaikhati Puja, Gojai Puja, and Sorogdeo Puja*** are performed in different regions of Assam. While certain rituals vary according to clan traditions and geographical location, ancestor worship remains a common feature among almost all Sonowal Kachari families. These rituals not only express religious faith but also reinforce social unity, preserve oral traditions, and strengthen cultural identity across generations.

Among these ceremonies, ***Sorogdeo Puja*** occupies a unique position because of its association with the worship of **Indra Devata**, agricultural prosperity, and the preservation of traditional beliefs. The ritual combines mythology, customary practices, and community participation, thereby serving as an important symbol of the cultural heritage of the Sonowal

Kachari people. The present study seeks to document the ritual, its associated beliefs, and its continuing significance within contemporary Sonowal Kachari society.

Materials and Methods

¹ The present study is based on both **primary** and **secondary** sources of data. Primary data were collected through intensive fieldwork conducted in selected Sonowal Kachari villages where **Sorogdeo Puja** is traditionally observed. Information was gathered using qualitative research techniques, including **participant observation**, **personal interviews**, and **case study** methods. Interviews were conducted with village elders, ritual specialists, community leaders, and elderly members who possess extensive knowledge of the ritual, its origin, and associated customs.

Secondary data were obtained from published books, research articles, journals, edited volumes, magazines, and other relevant literature on the Sonowal Kachari community and their religious traditions. These sources were consulted to supplement the field data and to provide historical and cultural perspectives on the ritual.

The information collected from both primary and secondary sources was carefully compiled, compared, and analysed using a descriptive anthropological approach. This methodology facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the origin, ritual procedures, beliefs, and socio-cultural significance of **Sorogdeo Puja** within the Sonowal Kachari community.

Findings

The study reveals that **Sorogdeo Puja** is one of the most significant traditional community rituals of the Sonowal Kacharis. It is primarily observed by clans belonging to the **Tuguri**, **Baitoj Devota**, and **Lukiri** clans and is dedicated to **Indra Devata**, the deity associated with rain, fertility, and agricultural prosperity. The ritual reflects the community's indigenous religious beliefs and their close relationship with nature and ancestral traditions.

The origin of Sorogdeo Puja is closely associated with a popular oral legend of **Bitu Kunwar** and the mythical bird **Borsorai**. According to the legend, a mother sent her seven sons to capture the bird, but they were swallowed by it. The gods in heaven were unable to rescue them until **Bitu Kunwar**, believed to possess divine powers, undertook the task. Through his wisdom and bravery, he killed the **Borsorai** by striking its eye with an arrow and rescued his seven brothers from its stomach. Although the brothers initially refused to recognize him as their youngest sibling, they later accepted him after learning the truth. The legend symbolizes courage, sacrifice, divine intervention, and the triumph of righteousness over evil. Even

today, this story forms an integral part of the ritual tradition and is transmitted orally from one generation to another.

The field study further indicates that *Sorogdeo Puja* is regarded as one of the largest and most sacred rituals among the Sonowal Kacharis. Community members firmly believe that neglecting the ritual may invite illness, misfortune, and social discord, whereas its proper observance ensures prosperity, good health, abundant harvests, and family well-being. Consequently, the ritual continues to occupy an important place in the religious and social life of the community.

The ritual is generally celebrated once every two or three years because of the extensive preparations and financial resources required. Numerous ritual materials are collected from nearby forests, and several families often organize the ceremony collectively to share responsibilities and expenses. This collective participation strengthens kinship ties, promotes cooperation, and reinforces social solidarity within the community.

Although the ritual is primarily dedicated to ***Indra Devata***, offerings are also symbolically made to numerous other deities. Traditionally, sacred offerings are prepared in banana-leaf packets containing ritual items such as flowers, rice preparations, leaves, and other sacred materials. In some villages, 120 packets are prepared, while in others the number is reduced according to local customs and available resources.

The study also reveals that Sorogdeo Puja is generally performed after the sowing of paddy seeds or during the Assamese month of ***Fagun*** (February–March), reflecting its close association with the agricultural cycle. Before the main ritual, the household undergoes a purification ceremony known as ***Khin Bhonga***, during which ***Santi Jal*** (holy water) is sprinkled to remove ritual impurity. Events such as childbirth, death, puberty, the entry of a snake into the house, or an eagle sitting on the roof are traditionally regarded as causes of ritual impurity, making purification essential before conducting the ceremony.

The ritual requires the collection of numerous traditional materials, many of which are obtained from forest areas. These include ***Sorog flower petals***(a type of flower; used only petals), ***Pura Pitha***(Pura pitha (grinding of rice powder which cooked in fried pan packed with banana leaves), ***Modor Mera*** (residue of rice beer), ***Mesaki***(a type of leafy vegetable found in forest), ***Mejenga***(a type of leafy vegetable found in forest) Nephaphu (a type of leafy vegetable), Kokora bhat (a rice cooked before a day), Bhet gas (a type of cane which is bitter to eat), *Hukhan puti mass* (a dried fish), Thola bhat (soaking of lahi rice packed in a ko- paat: a type of leaf and cooked in fried pan), Anguli pitha (a cooked rice cake made in the size of

finger packet in a banana leaf) Ko paat (a type of leaf found in forest), Egg, Boiled banana, A pair of betel nuts and leaves, Sereki (Weaving wheel round with thread), A plate filled with betel nuts and leaves, coins, thread, ring, a pot filled with water A bamboo bowl with grains, earthen lamb, water pot, *chaleng chadar* (a type of cloth), Rice, vegetables, meat for feast and several other locally available plants and ritual objects. The use of these indigenous materials reflects the Sonowal Kacharis' traditional ecological knowledge and their close relationship with the natural environment.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Sorogdeo Puja is not merely a religious ceremony but an important cultural institution that preserves the oral traditions, indigenous beliefs, social organization, and cultural identity of the Sonowal Kachari community.

Rules for Celebrating Sorog Deo Puja

Besides the major ritual items, several other essential materials are required for the successful performance of *Sorog Deo* Puja. A knowledgeable priest, who is well acquainted with the ritual procedures and oral traditions, is indispensable for conducting the ceremony. At the beginning of the ritual, the priest holds a bamboo knife and a black cock while offering prayers and narrating the sacred story associated with *Sorog Deo*.

The prayer recited during the ritual is:

"Kathbaji lora pai, khurao parbat bogai, anguli naikia madal bojai, buao chatur hoi, andhoi distri pai, ogyaane gyan pai, nedhani dhani pai."

This prayer invokes prosperity and well-being. It expresses the wish that crops and seeds may grow abundantly, even old oxen may remain productive for cultivation, those without sufficient labour or resources may successfully cultivate their fields through wisdom and mutual assistance, and both the wealthy and the poor may enjoy prosperity. Thus, the ritual is essentially an invocation to the Sun God for agricultural abundance, social welfare, and economic prosperity.

One of the distinctive features of *Sorog Deo* Puja is the offering of 120 ritual packets (*topola*), each dedicated to a particular deity. Therefore, a sufficiently spacious area is selected to accommodate all the offerings. The ritual site is usually prepared in an open space belonging to the host family. The ground is levelled, and a raised earthen boundary is constructed around the sacred space. Rice flour is then sprinkled over the entire ritual area as a symbol of purity and sanctification.

At the centre of the ritual ground, three miniature houses are constructed using banana trunks and bamboo. These structures, complete with small staircases, are erected approximately 3–4 feet above the ground, symbolizing their offering to the Sun God. The structures are generally prepared four to five days before the ceremony. Among the three houses, the central one is built taller than the other two and is dedicated to *Bitu Kunwar*, while the entire structure is collectively known as *Indrapuri*.

The 120 offering packets are arranged systematically around the miniature houses according to the order of the deities. Each packet contains a banana leaf, an earthen lamp, betel nut, betel leaf, coins, rice, and other ritual items. Two hollow bamboo cylinders are placed beside the ritual structures—one filled with water and the other with rice beer (*jou*), both serving as ritual offerings.

After the arrangement of the offerings, a black cock is ritually sacrificed. Its blood is sprinkled over each of the 120 offering packets, beginning from one end and continuing to the other. The intestines of the sacrificed cock are then tied to the miniature houses as a protective measure against evil spirits and misfortune.

Subsequently, a white hen is sacrificed in honour of the Sun God. Its meat is later cooked and served to the guests participating in the communal feast. In contrast, the meat of the black cock, being the principal sacrificial offering, is consumed only by the priest and elderly ritual specialists, locally known as *Bhakot*, along with senior community members such as *Meseki* and *Mejenga*. According to traditional belief, younger people are prohibited from consuming this meat, as it is considered ritually inauspicious for them.

Upon completion of the sacrifices, the family members pay their respects by bowing before the priest, elders, and other participants. The head of the household then ceremonially carries *Lakhimi* (a symbolic representation of prosperity and abundance) from the ritual site into the house or, in some families, to the granary. A thread is extended from the ritual site to the house using a traditional weaving wheel, symbolically connecting the sacred ritual space with the household and inviting prosperity into the family.

When two or more families jointly celebrate *Sorog Deo Puja*, each family separately carries its own *Lakhimi* to its respective house. This marks the formal conclusion of the ritual.

Deities Worshipped in *Sorog Deo Puja*

Although *Sorog Deo Puja* is traditionally dedicated to the thirty-three crore Hindu deities, the ritual symbolically represents them through 120 offering packets. It is therefore impossible to

identify every deity individually. However, some of the principal deities invoked during the ritual include **Suyra Devota, Sijuto Sarathi, Chandra, Chandra Sarathi, Indra, Indra Sarathi, Baieuo Devota, Barun, Agni Devota, Bitu Kunwar, Hath Buri (the Seven Brothers and their Mother), Sath Bhai Kokai, Sani, Bura-Buri, Durga, Malini Matri, Gojai Maina, Mitok Devota, Noh Phurukh, Noh Bhoni, Kunwar Devota, Maigor, Bahumuti Matri, Fesa, and Gatiguri**. These deities collectively represent various natural forces, ancestral spirits, protective beings, and divine powers associated with fertility, agriculture, prosperity, and the well-being of the community.

Conclusion

Sorogdeo Puja represents an important element of the cultural and religious heritage of the Sonowal Kacharis of Assam. Despite the widespread acceptance of Mahapurushiya Vaishnavism, the community has successfully preserved many of its indigenous beliefs and ritual practices, demonstrating a unique synthesis of traditional and Vaishnavite religious traditions.

The study highlights that Sorogdeo Puja is deeply rooted in mythology, ancestor worship, agricultural life, and community cooperation. The ritual serves not only as an expression of religious devotion but also as a mechanism for maintaining social harmony, strengthening kinship relations, and preserving the community's collective identity. The participation of multiple families in organizing the ceremony reflects the values of mutual cooperation and collective responsibility that continue to characterize Sonowal Kachari society.

However, modernization, urbanization, changing lifestyles, and declining interest among younger generations pose significant challenges to the continuity of such traditional practices. Therefore, systematic documentation, academic research, and community-based conservation initiatives are essential for safeguarding this valuable intangible cultural heritage. Greater awareness among younger members of the community and institutional support for documenting indigenous traditions will contribute to the preservation and promotion of Sorogdeo Puja for future generations.

In conclusion, Sorogdeo Puja is not merely a ritual of worship but a living expression of the history, beliefs, cultural identity, and traditional knowledge of the Sonowal Kachari community. Its continued observance reflects the enduring strength of indigenous cultural traditions in contemporary Assam.

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