

HOLY SHRINES OF ASSAM

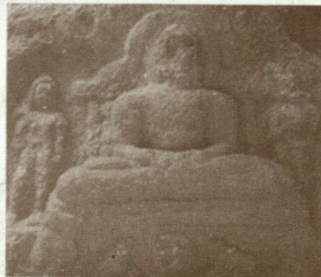
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Pradip Sarma

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Pradip Sarma



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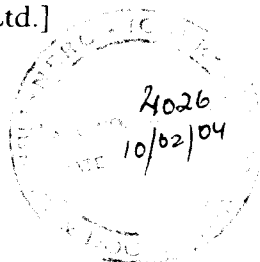
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I

A Few Popular Religious Festivals of Assam

Though most of major Hindu festivals of Assam are basically Brahmanical in theme and spirit like all other states of India, some of them are celebrated here with a special fervour peculiar to this region. A few of such festivals are described below.

Ambuvashi

Also known as Amati or Saath in Assamese, this festival is observed during the months of June-July when the local fruit bearing trees attain their peak period of production. As per tradition, it is believed that the mother earth passes during this time through a period of menstruation covering four to five days when the earth becomes indisposed to allow performance of any religious rite on its surface. The temple doors are kept closed during this period and even the farmers suspend ploughing of the fields for cultivation. This time is considered by the pious Hindu widows as a

period of austerity when they take their shelter on a raised platform or a bed-stead and also stack their food above ground which consist of fruits, gram, Sagu etc., and even water.

When the period of impurity comes to an end as per the almanac, the priests of the temples arrange a ceremonial bath of the deities as also a ritualistic spraying of holy water around the temple compound, only after which the temple doors are thrown open for the devotees. This time of reopening is a special occasion for the devotees who throng the campus of the temple for a *Darshana* of the deity. Individual families also perform the same methods of purification of the household by using holy water.

The *Ambuvachi* is celebrated with special enthusiasm in the Kamakhya temple atop the Nilachal hill of Guwahati. During this period a large crowd assemble here from different states and even from Nepal. The areas around the temple take on a festive look where a fair also takes place; and the day of opening of the temple door is marked by an unusual rush of visitors.

Ashokastami

This festival is a ceremony of holy-bath in the Brahmaputra river. This river is considered by pious Hindus as equal in sanctity to the river Ganga. In the month of Chaitra and on the 8th day of waxing of the moon, the water flowing along the northern coast of this river is supposed to have come down as a special holy stream from the sacred Himalayas. A dip in this stream with the chanting of Mantras from the Puranas is believed to enable a person to free himself from sadness for one full year since the time of this bath.

A speciality to be noted with this ceremony is that it is not connected with any ritual except the holy bath at certain fixed areas along the north bank of the Brahmaputra, such as, Biswanath (Sonitpur district), Ganeshghat (Tezpur town), Singri (Sonitpur district), Aswakrantra (North Guwahati) and Dhubri (Dhubri district). Though the ceremony should occur on the north bank as per Puranic tradition, certain sacred spots on the south bank also witness this communal bathing. It is to be noted in this context that almost all the places where this ceremony occurs is marked by fairs.

Durga Puja

Durga puja is celebrated in most of the states of our country. But, because of the prevalence of Sakti worship, Assam witnesses it on a large scale. Apart from the Devi temples of historical times, where this autumnal ceremony is observed elaborately, earthen images of the ten-armed *Devi*, together with her family members are installed in numerous pendals erected for this purpose in almost all the urban areas of the state.

Durga puja is celebrated for five consecutive days called *Sasthi*, *Saptami*, *Astami*, *Navami* and *Dasami*. During this period shops containing toys and balloons are set-up around the Puja Mandaps. At certain venues dramas and operas are also organised.

Durga puja is a *Sakti* worship. As such, sacrifice of birds and animals are indispensable during this time. Goats, ducks and pigeons are the normal creatures for sacrifice but buffaloes are also sacrificed at certain temples. In Guwahati, buffalo is sacrificed on the *Astami* day at Kamakhya and on the *Navami* day at Ugratara temple in the heart of the city. Among the vegetables, gourds are a

popular item of sacrifice. Buffalo sacrifice is also performed in some other temples.

The last day of the five day celebration of the *Durga puja* constitutes the concluding rituals at morning and immersion ceremony for the earthen images in the evening. The images are taken out in processions accompanied by music, slogan and merry makings, and immersed in a local river, a lake or a pond, as available. In Guwahati, some images are carried in large boats and even in motor-boats, along the up and down streams of the Brahmaputra, some of which are illuminated with decorative lights, till they are finally immersed into the river.

Dol-Utsava, or Fakuwa Phalgutsava

Known popularly as Holi in other parts of India, this festival of colours constitutes one of the major celebrations especially for the numerous Vaisnavite Satras or monasteries of Assam. An earthen mound of conical shape with a truncated top is raised and is preserved as a permanent annexe of a Satra, on the top of which is built an open shed using bamboo frame and thatched roof preceding the time of the festival. A Radha-Krishna image is installed under this shed and the festival is celebrated with rituals and performance of communal Samkirtana including throwing colours among the followers.

Among the big Satras of the state where Dol-Utsava is performed with conspicuous pomp and ceremony, Barpeta Satra has a name. Here, the festival is performed in a restraint but more devotional way and visitors from the different parts of the state assemble here during that period. The Satra authority as well as the residents of the Barpeta town accommodate the visitors as their guests even though they are not known to them.

The neo-Vaisnava Satras as well as the Visnu temples of Assam invariably contain an earthen mound within its compound, which may rise from a modest two meters to twelve meters. During the late-medieval Ahom rulers, some of these mounds were converted through royal patronage into a beautiful temple structure, known as the Fakuwa Dol. Consisting of a high plinth of octagonal shape resembling a stepped pyramid with an attractive temple structure over it, this structure appears some thing special in the backdrop of Indian temple architecture. Though most of these structures have already collapsed, one in the precinct of the Hayagriva-Madhava temple at Hajo and another at the Barpeta Satra have survived intact.

In certain areas, and more particularly in the district of Darrang, the Dol Utsava has taken a different form. This festival is celebrated in the month of Vaisakha (April-May) by installing the image of Radha-Krishna on the top of the mound, mentioned above, and the celebration is restricted to the normal rituals as well as the communal chanting of hymns accompanied by indigenous musical instruments. It is devoid of the use of colours as in the case of Phalgutsava. In the Mangaldoi Sub-division of this district, the different sanctuaries observe it by rotation on a fixed date of the month of Vaisakha, when fairs also occur in each of those sanctuaries.

Kangali Bihu or Tulsi Puja

Unlike the Hindu religious festivals which follow a lunar cycle, this ceremony is observed on the last day of the month of Aswin (September-October) every year. This, in fact, is the worship of the Tulsi plant which is considered by the Assamese Hindu Community as the incarnation of a Devi. The celebration consists of planting a Tulsi plant

in the yard of every family on that day and performing austere ritual in the form of offering fruits and soaked grams, and chanting of traditional hymns in adoration of the "Iulsi Devi". Though this ceremony seems to be very simple and is restricted to the confines of a family, it is connected with the raising of crops in the field. It is believed that the paddy shrubs unfurl the bunches of their young seeds on this day and the farmer community pays visit to the fields on this day to have a formal look at the first appearance of corns. They also enjoy bites of rice-cakes in a modest way to celebrate this day of promises.

The *Kangali Bihu* is considered as one of the three *Bihu* festivals of Assam. It is also known as the *Kati Bihu* as it is observed in the juncture of the months of Aswin and Kati (i.e. Kartika). The word *Kangali* means scarcity. As the corns in the field are yet to be ripe and people feel a sense of need for new crops, environment lacks the needed spirit for merrymaking. Obviously, this *Bihu* is observed without feast or festivity.

Magh Bihu or Fire-worship

This harvest festival is observed at the juncture of the months of Paush and Magh. It is one of the three *Bihu* festivals of Assam and is observed as a festival of feast and fire-worship.

A conical structure known as *Mezi* and made of bamboo and thatch or built with a heap of logs is erected by groups of people in their respective localities on the last day of the Paush and communal dinners are arranged among them on that night. At the dawn of that night or in the early hours of the following morning, this *Mezi* is lit with the chanting of Vaidic *Mantras*. Verities of cakes are offered to the burning *Mezi*. Then the people who assemble

around the *Mezi* take Tiloks at their foreheads from the ashes of the burnt up *Mezi*.

This unique fire worship takes a different form among certain communities who decorate the area around the *Mezi* with banana trees and flower garlands, and arrange *Samkirtana* next morning before it is lit with fire. The *Mezis* are generally erected on any open ground, such as, a sand-bar beside a river.

The days following the above fire festival are considered as days of feasting on snacks when every household prepares varieties of cakes using mostly powdered rice, sesame, molasses and other products received from the new harvests.

Maroi or Manasa Puja

Maroi is the local name of Manasa, the goddess of snakes. This worship is popular in lower Assam, particularly in the districts of Dhubri, Bongaigaon, Goalpara, Nalbari, Kamrup and Darrang. The day of worship of this *Devi* occurs on the 10th day of the Suklapaksa (waxing lunar fortnight) in the month of Ahar (May-June). She is worshipped both in aniconic form or by installing clay-image. The ceremony is arranged in some permanent *Sakti* temples, as also in temporary Mandapas annually.

Maroi is also known in certain area as Bisahari or Padma Devi. The worship is generally associated with the Beula-Lakshminster episode which is so popular in the Assamese society. Chanting of Sukhnani hyme based on this episode is indispensable during this puja.

Though this Puja is not as popular and numerous as the Durga Puja, its celebrations in public Mandapas have started taking the form of a festival with fairs and operas.

In a few places, huge clay images of Manasa are installed in newly-built temples and are kept open to the public throughout the year which is renewed by a new image only next year. In the famous Sakti-pitha of Kamakhya at Guwahati, the Deodhai or Devaddhani Nritya is performed in the most aberrant way by a type of male dancers during this time.

In certain parts of the Darrang district the *Sukhnami* was sung by a group of Musalman villagers traditionally who were invited to perform it as professionals during such celebrations. They were trusted subjects of the erstwhile Darrangi Raja who was a vassal of the Ahom rulers. The tradition, however, has died down in recent years.

Saraswati Puja

Also known as *Sripanchami*, this *Puja* of goddess of learning is celebrated during January-February each year.

Saraswati Puja is the most popular annual worship of the state of Assam. It is celebrated in each educational institution including music and art schools and even by sports and cultural clubs. We do not find any permanent or historical temple of Saraswati and, installation of clay-images in impermanent pandals is the rule.

Nowadays, Saraswati Puja is taken as an occasion for exhibition of artistic skill in many of the venues. Apart from modelling the images of Saraswati in varied ways right from classical style to the modern poses, the backdrop of the installed images as well as the gates to the pandals receive novel treatments which help in the attraction of visitors. The second day of the Puja is celebrated as a day of merriment when the images of the Devi are taken out in a procession. But like the Durga Puja, it does not end in the immersion of the image in a river

or a pond, but kept in a corner of the pandal or the institution till next year when it is removed as an old unwanted object.

Viswakarma Puja

This ceremony has gained popularity since only a few decades and is directly related to the increase of industries and business establishments in the state. Viswakarma, as we all know, is the divine engineer and architect and his devotees consist of workers and artisans serving in workshops, factories and business houses. The Puja is performed on a fixed date each year which is the 31st day of Bhadra (i.e. 16th to 18th September). There is no permanent temple, old or new, for this god and it is always performed in a temporary pandal by installing clay images.

Being a ceremony of the workers proficient in different fields, the occasion has grown into a day of display of skilled gadgets and scientific devices in some of the pandals. In popularity, this Puja can be placed next to Saraswati worship. Like Saraswati and Durga Pujas, the day following the Puja is taken as a day for taking out the images on a procession, but it is not associated with any immersion ceremony like the Durga Puja.