



**OBSCURE RELIGIOUS
PRACTICES**

Among Some VAIṢṆAVAS of Assam

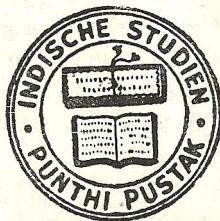
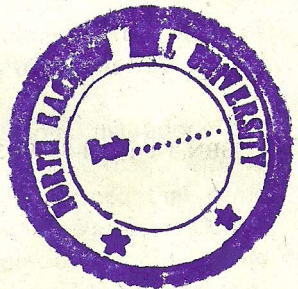
Narendra Nath Dutta.

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OBSCURE RELIGIOUS PRACTICES
AMONG SOME VAIŠNAVAS
OF ASSAM

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PUNTHI PUSTAK

CALCUTTA

1990

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Obscure Religious Practices Among Some Vaiṣṇavas of Assam.

Detailed description of the practices of Rāti-khowā cult prevailed in Upper Assam Region by Dr Narendranath Dutta M.A., B.T., PhD., Bahona College, Jorhat, published by Sri S. K. Bhattacharyya, proprietor Punthi Pustak, Calcutta, first edition, 1990.

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First Edition, 1990

Price Rs. 190.00

ISBN No : 81-85094-31-4

Published by
S. K. Bhattacharyya
Punthi Pustak
136/4B, Bidhan Sarani,
Calcutta-700004

Printed at
Arunima Printing Works
81, Simla Street
Calcutta-700 006

ASBU Library
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PREFACE

Religion stands on faith and belief of a particular group of society. But due to its rigidity, some rites seem to have emerged and the followers of these practices solemnise these very secretly. In this way, some hidden cults have occupied the place of religious ceremony in the society. Generally, such functions are held secretly where magic, sorcery and even necromancy play important parts. The elderly monks of such practices occupy a reverential position in their circle and have been able to gain supremacy over the common people.

In Assam, a dark period of history in the sphere of religion prevailed upto the first half of the fifteenth century A.D. Some hidden and jarring cults overwhelmed the people of the soil, and through ignorance, some embraced these corrupt practices as religion. But Śaṅkaradeva (1449-1568 A.D.) put an end to these. He propounded the Vaiṣṇava bhakti cult, and put more emphasis on 'śravaṇa' (listening) and 'kīrtana' (chanting) of the Name and Glory of Kṛṣṇa-Viṣṇu. People irrespective of caste and community embraced the faith of Śaṅkaradeva and thereby a society devoid of rigidity in case of caste and community came into being.

As time passed, Vaiṣṇava sattras (religious institutions like maths) grew in abundance and these institutions became centres of disseminating the message of bhakti. It seemed that some of them have deviated the main stream of the Vaiṣṇava Order. Since very early period of history, people of various ethnic groups living in Assam have followed some traditional rites and practices of obscure nature. These practices grew independently and indigenously among different sections of people. Their faiths and beliefs were very deeply rooted among the aboriginal people of diverse racial groups. Although they came under the pale of Śaṅkaradeva movement, those traditional and customary traits were not totally abandoned by them. As such, some new traits emerged into the Vaiṣṇava religion for obvious reasons. Thus, a cryptic cult developed under the shadow of Vaiṣṇavism at a later date. The followers of these cults observe some ceremonies with utmost secrecy. Curiously enough, both

the male and the female play equal parts while solemnising such practices like debauchery. At some places, the female sex play even a very vital role. These are generally held at night ; and perhaps for this reason, it is termed as 'Rāti-khowā' (rāti = night ; khowā = to eat, hence eater at night) or 'Rāti-sewā' (adoration held at night). The followers are called 'Rāti-khowā bhakata' or 'pakā-bhakata' (pakā = ripe or matured ; i.e. matured devotee). The number of adherents of such practices are not negligible. They constitute a section of Vaiṣṇava followers of Assam. Thus a gross of crude religious ideas and practices of indigenous origin got mixed up with some crypto-Buddhistic practices on the one hand and with the Vaiṣṇava faith on the other, and thereby attained a composite form of obscure religious practices. This has been a very interesting subject for studying the origin and evolution of these sects.

Modes of celebrations of these functions also vary from place to place. These have been classified into different sects. It cannot, however, be claimed that a full and thorough investigation has been made in the present book.

The author had the opportunity to witnessing a few functions of the cult more particularly of the Gopīdharā sect. That created more curiosity to know it in detail. But much obstacles were there, because the adherents always maintain strict secrecy in celebrating these functions. Even some followers hesitate to recite the songs and padas of their practices. Thus, collection of materials took a long period which have been done with great difficulty. Even then, an exhaustive study of the subject remained undone for various reasons. Since the votaries always maintain utmost secrecy, it was really difficult to gather informations as well as to collect source materials of these, which was primarily based on field study.

The writer expresses his gratitude to Sri Khageswar Goswami, Barkaliyā Ratanapura Sattra of Da-gā on. Jorhat, a stern devotee and Sādhu of the Gopīdharā sect, who enlightened him in this regard. The names of Puspa Goswami, an Abbot of the Śilpatīyā Sattra, Jorhat, Kehoram Dutta of Dha'li Kumāragāon, Jorhat, Upen Gogoi of Ghilāmarā, Lakhimpur, Manik Ch. Dutta of Kāhāragāon, Dhekīyājulī, Jorhat, Piyaruddin Ahmed alias Gām-phakira of Ka'lāhābi, Nāharani are also worth mentioning. The author acknowledges his gratitude for

valuable suggestions and help received from some other persons too in collecting materials. Dr M. Neog, Mohan Chandra Mahanta of Telpānī Sattra, Gauricharan Barkataki, Bāligāon, Jorhat, and such others encouraged him in many ways. Encouragement and all possible helps in every step have been received by the author from his wife Sri Monorama Dutta whose urge and importunate this could be come into light.

The author expresses his inability to collect all the songs and padas of the Rāti-khowā cult which consists of about twenty sects. Due to conservative attitude of the followers, these are not handed over either to the next generations or to persons not belonging to their fraternity. Most of the followers even do not like to recite these to others. That stood as a stumbling block in certain cases.

In fine, the author is highly indebted to Dr K. D. Goswami M.A., Ph.D., now Professor and Head of the Department in Assamese, Dibrugarh University, under whose able guidance and proper care, this thesis could be completed.

Thanks to Mr. S. K. Bhattacharyya, proprietor of Punthi Pustak who willingly shouldering the responsibility to print and publish the book for whom enthusiasm it has come to light.

April, 1990
Jorhat, Assam

Narendra Nath Dutta

ABBREVIATIONS

A.C.H.A.	A Cultural History of Assam
Bhāg. -p	Bhāgavata Purāṇa
E.H.K.	Early History of Kāmarūpa
Gait	A History of Assam
I.M.G.	Indian Mother Goddess
K.G.C.	Kathā Guru Carita
K.S.	Kāmarūpa Śāsanāwali
K.P.	Kālīka Purāṇa
M.G.K.	Mother Goddess Kāmākhya
O.R.C.	Obscure Religious Cults
P. Asam.	Pavitra Asam
Y.T.	Yoginī Tantra.

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