



Original Article

'Me-Dam Me Phi' A Socio-Religious Festival of the Tai Ahom Community in Assam

Dinamoni Gogoi

Assistant Professor

Department of Sociology, Nakachari College, Jorhat-Assam

Email: dinamoni4@gmail.com

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Abstract

Assam is the land of various ethnic groups situated in the North-Eastern part of India. Tai-Ahom are one of the major ethnic groups in Assam who ruled for approximately 600 years in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. The Tai-Ahom people in Assam observe many festivals in Assam with their own traditional beliefs and practices. "ME-Dam-Me-Phi" is one of the socio-religious festivals of Tai-Ahom community in Assam. This present paper explores the historical origins, ritual structure, socio-religious significance, and contemporary relevance of Me-Dam-Me-Phi among the Tai-Ahom people in Assam. It also examines how this ancient tradition continues to reinforce ethnic identity, cultural continuity, and social cohesion among the Tai Ahoms while adapting to modern realities.

Keywords: Assam, Brahmaputra Valley, Tai-Ahom, Me-Dam-Me-Phi, Socio-religious festivals

Introduction

Assam is one of the states of North East India, surrounded by Nagaland, Manipur in the East, West Bengal in the West, Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh in the North, Mizoram, Tripura, Bangladesh and Meghalaya in the South. Assam is divided into two main valleys based on the two major rivers, the Brahmaputra and the Barak i.e. Brahmaputra Valley and the Suma or Barak Valley. The Brahmaputra Valley is a vast region situated between hill ranges of the eastern and north-eastern Himalayan Mountain Range, with leisure tourism, nature tourism, eco-tourism and rural tourism. On the other hand, the Barak Valley is situated in the southern region of the Indian state of Assam.

Assam has been the meeting ground of various ethnic groups from time immemorial. Tai-Ahom or Ahom are one of the major ethnic groups of Assam. The Ahom were originally a Tai-Yai or Shan group of people (Gogoi, 2007) who entered the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam, crossing the Patkai Hills in 1228 A.D. under the leadership of *Su-Ka-Pha* and ruled for more than 600 years in this valley. The Ahom had their own culture, language, religion and customary laws. In this regard, historian P. Gogoi in his book "Tai Ahom Religion and Custom" (1976), mentions that the Ahom had their own religion and culture. Initially, they followed their own language, religious beliefs, and rituals, but with the expansion of the boundary of the Ahom kingdom and for political expediency, they assimilated with the local people and adopted Assamese language and Hindu religion. In spite of that, the priest clans and some other sections of the Ahom have been maintaining their traditions and customs. Ancestor worship and birth, death, and marriage rituals of the Ahom are still in practice by a section of people in different districts of Assam (Hatibaruah, 2024). Ancestor worship is the main characteristic of Tai-Ahom culture. It is also one of the socio-cultural and religious customs of the Chinese people as well. Ahom practice a variety of rites and rituals pertaining to ancestor worship (Gogoi, 1998). The traditional Tai Ahom religion encompasses a variety of rituals that reflect their deep connection with nature, ancestors, and deities. These rituals are integral to the community's spiritual life and cultural identity.



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Address for correspondence:

Dinamoni Gogoi, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Nakachari College, Jorhat-Assam

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The Me-Dam-Me-Phi is one of the most important ancestor worship rituals of the Tai-Ahom community in Assam, where they perform to honor and appease the spirits of the ancestors. In Assam, every year, January 31 is observed as a state holiday on the occasion of 'Me-Dam-Me-Phi'.

Therefore, the present paper explores the historical origins, ritual structure, socio-religious significance, and contemporary relevance of Me-Dam-Me-Phi among the Tai-Ahom people in Assam. It also examines how this ancient tradition continues to reinforce ethnic identity, cultural continuity, and social cohesion among the Tai Ahoms while adapting to modern realities.

Objectives of The Study

The main objectives of the paper are as follows-

- a. To know about the ritual of Me-Dam-Me-Phi and its historical origins.
- b. To explore its significance in contemporary society to create ethnic identity and unity among the Tai-Ahom community in Assam.

Methodology

The present study used both primary and secondary sources of data. The primary data is collected through observations and interviews of selected persons called *Puruhiits* (Ahom priests) who performed the rituals of Me-Dam-Me-Phi festivals. So, I have been using participatory observation method and unstructured interview methods to collect primary data. The purposive random sampling method is used to select the respondents for the study. Secondary data are collected from *Buranji's* (Chronicles), Ahom history books, History of Assam, research articles, articles (published & unpublished), journals, etc. Both descriptive and analytical methods of research are followed to achieve the objectives of the study.

Rationale Of The Study

The present study mainly focused on the Me-Dam-Me-Phi as a socio-religious festival of Tai-Ahom in Assam. It is observed that Tai-Ahom established their kingdom in a large part of the Brahmaputra Valley within a period of two hundred years by winning against the existing ethnic groups in the Valley. In the last seven centuries, they also passed through a process of social and cultural transformation with the local people. They gradually adopted Hindu religious beliefs and practices. Hinduisation of the Ahom was the logical process towards the sophistication of the rudimentary formation of the Ahom state (Buragohain, R, 2007). Through this process Tai-Ahom community lost their own language, religious beliefs and cultural identity. But, Tai-Ahom priestly classes, mainly Deodhais, Mohons and Bailungs followed the ancestral tribal gods and goddesses and worshipped in Tai-Ahom traditional manner. The festival of Me-Dam-me-phi is deeply associated with Tai-Ahom traditions. It is a symbol of unity, harmony and integration among the Tai-Ahom community in Assam. In contemporary society, the Me-Dam-Me-Phi is one of the powerful instruments to create cultural identity and unity among the Tai-Ahom community in Assam to preserve their heritage, strengthening social bonds and asserting their distinct identity.

Discussion

1. Historical Background of Me-Dam-Me-Phi in Assam

Historically, this festival was observed during times of adversity, such as natural calamities, severe illnesses, or ominous occurrences. It was also celebrated during significant events like before battles to seek blessings for victory, after defeats to find solace, and after victories to express gratitude.

Tai-Ahom religion is based on certain fundamental beliefs in supernatural powers. They had the conception of "omnipotent being" that is Pha-Tu-Ching (Pha-Heaven; Tu-a-being; and Ching- highest) (Gogoi, 2007). The Tai Ahoms believe in an Omnipotent God or God Almighty (Pha Tu Ching Phrong Hum). They also believe in a hierarchy of gods that owe their origin to the Great God. They worship not only the various gods with elaborate ceremony but even their dead ancestors are also worshipped with great devotion. The Tai-Ahoms venerate their ancestors, believing that the spirits of the deceased can protect and guide the living. Rituals and ceremonies are performed to honour and appease the ancestors.

The Tai-Ahom have a distinct culture, religion, and traditions deeply rooted in their respect for nature. After the establishment of the Ahom Kingdom in the 13th century, ancestor worship became part of the state religion and royal ritual practice. The Ahom kings institutionalized 'Me-Dam-Me-Phi' as a formal ceremony performed for the welfare of the kingdom and its people. It is also written in history that *Shu-Ka-Pha*, the first Swargadeo (heavenly king) of the Tai Ahoms observed this sacred ritual of 'Me-Dam-Me-Phi' and sought the blessings of his forefathers in the new place. After the death of Shu-Ka-Pha, he was buried in Charaideo and Me-Dam-Me-Phi was observed by his son *Suteupha* who became the King after him.

According to the belief of the Tai-Ahom, after the death of a person, the soul becomes the "Phi" i.e. deity. This "Phi" should be remembered by the following living beings. To remember the forefathers is the means active relationship among the past, present and future generations. (Duarah, 2004). The Tai Ahoms believe that after death, people attain divine status. So, the Tai-Ahom perform 'Me-Dam-Me-Phi' annually in honour of their ancestors seeking blessings from their forefathers in the 'Me-Dam-Me-Phi' festival.

2.Me-Dam-Me-Phi

The first and foremost ritual of the Tai-Ahom is 'Me-Dam-Me-Phi'. The Me-Dam-Me-Phi is one of the most important ancestor worship rituals, performed to honour and appease the spirits of the ancestors. It involves offering food, drinks, and prayers to the ancestors, seeking their blessings for the well-being of the living (Gogoi, 2023). It is a socio-religious festival among the Ahoms. 'Me-Dam-Me-Phi' is a word of Tai Ahom language. Literally, 'Me' means worship or offering, 'Dam' means the dead person or forefather and 'Phi' means God or deities. So, the meaning of the 'Me-Dam-Me-Phi' is the function of worshipping the forefather and deities.

The Tai-Ahom religious belief that the soul of a living person is the result of the combination of two different spirits. They are 'Pu' and 'Fu' (Duarah, 2004). After the death of a living being or human being, the 'sensible soul' comes out from the body and part 'Fu' mixed with the supreme soul "Fura" and the part 'Pu' stays in this world as 'pulin' 'puthao' etc., who guard their grand sons and great grand sons from different dangers and give blessing for prosperity. For receiving the blessing, the grandsons should hold the religious rituals like 'Me-Dam-Me-Phi'.

Me-dam-me-phi involves offering food, drinks, and prayers to the ancestors, seeking their blessings for the well-being of the living. Community feasts and gatherings are common during this ritual.

3.Rituals And Observances

'Me-Dam-Me-Phi' is performed by the Tai Ahom community in Assam with two types of worship systems i.e. homely and socially. During the Ahom rule, it was performed with kingly manner on behalf of the people of the state. The homely or family, in order to worship the dead, establish a pillar on the opposite side of the *Barghar* (kitchen) which is called '*Damkhuta*' (imagined as the forefather) where they worship the dead with various offerings like- *luk lao* or *Haaz* (Rice bear), *mah-prasad*, rice with various items of meat and fish. In the society worship, mainly four deities are worshipped- 'Lengdong', 'Jasingpha', 'Khaokhum', and 'Jansaihung' 'Me-Dam-Me-Phi' performed in a public place. In earlier days, buffaloes, white oxen and pigs were sacrificed, but nowadays, pigs, cocks and eggs are sacrificed. (Duarah, 2004). For performing the 'Me-Dam-Me-Phi', the Tai Ahom priests called *Mohan*, *Bailung*, *Deodhai* etc. An octagonal-sized eight-pillar house is constructed for this festival, known as *Ho-phi*. A banana seedling is planted in each corner and a *Pang* (altar) is erected there. Each *Pang* (altar) is dedicated by a 'phi'. 'Pang' is made of bamboo. On this *Pang*, many kinds of sacrifices were placed. The *Pang* is placed for the deities namely- *Khao-Kham*, *Aai Laeng-Din*, *Ya-sing-pha*, *Jan-chai-hang*, *Laengdon*, *Chit-lam-cham*, *Mut-Kam Tai-Kum*, *Dam Chau Phi* or *Chau Phi Dam* (grandparents thirteen generations ago), *Ra-Khin*, *Ba-Khin* (these are gods and goddesses of the Ahoms) who are offered prayers (Gogoi, 2011). The things required for this festival are-- agoli kol pat (upper half of fresh banana leaf), flowers, tamul (areca nut), eggs, *luk lao* (rice beer), pig, etc (Chetia, 2019). At the time of offering these things, the priest sings the Tai mantras and throws the flowers. At the end of the rituals, the people gathered there have a feast together. On the day of 'Me-Dam-Me-Phi' festival, the people of the Tai Ahom community wear ethnic dresses to revive their ancient tradition and participate in communal rituals while paying homage to their ancestors.

4.Socio-religious significance

Socially, 'Me-Dam-Me-Phi' is a unifying festival through which Tai-Ahom community participate in collective worship and feasting. It also strengthens kinship ties, reinforces respect for elders, and promotes social harmony among the Tai-Ahom community as well as people of Assam. The festival symbolizes the unification of people and helps transcend differences to foster a cohesive and prosperous society.

Tai Ahoms believe that after death, people attain divine status. In this regard, it is believed that Lengdon, along with eight lakhs of deities, come down to earth and accepts the offerings during Mae-dam Me-phi. The blessings of their forefathers and gods bring individual and social well-being (Chetia, 2019). Therefore, Tai-Ahom people believed that Me-Dam-Me-Phi functions as a ritual of gratitude, remembrance and spiritual continuity. The ancestors are believed to bless the living generation; failure to observe the ritual correctly is believed in some traditions to bring calamity or social disharmony.

5.Significance in the contemporary Society

In the age of modernisation and globalization, Me-Dam-Me-Phi plays a vital role in the cultural revival and identity assertion of the Ahom people in Assam through their ethnic roots and historical legacy. It is a process that offers younger generations a means to reconnect with their ancestry, language, and traditional values. The widespread participation of youth in organizing and performing rituals, songs, and dances reflects the transmission of Tai Ahom cultural knowledge across generations. Honouring ancestors reinforces social cohesion among the Tai Ahom community. 'Me-Dam-me-Phi' creates inter-community harmony and shared cultural consciousness among the people of Assam. Today, 'Me-Dam-me-Phi' is observed in various public places according to Ahom rites and participants from various ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds participate in it. The government of Assam declared 'Me-Dam-Me-Phi' as a state-level event and declared it a public holiday. So, in contemporary society, 'Me-Dam-Me-Phi' strengthens Assamese identity while promoting unity, harmony, and mutual respect. It also attracts various scholars, tourists interested in Assam's heritage, traditional rituals and ethnic diversity and develop cultural tourism in Assam. So, in contemporary Assam, Me-Dam-Me-Phi is not only a ritual of the Tai-Ahom community but also a festival to promote harmony, cohesion and understanding among diverse communities in Assam.



Conclusion:

'Me-Dam-Me-Phi' is a vital platform for preserving and promoting the unique cultural heritage of the Tai-Ahom people. This ancestor worship festival is still performed according to the Tai-Ahom religious rites. 'Me-Dam-Me-Phi' reflects the Tai-Ahom's reverence for ancestral ties, their rich history, and their unique cultural practices. Annually on 31st January, Me-Dam-Me-Phi is celebrated centrally at Charaideo, Assam, as it is the historical burial site of the Ahom kings. It is a vibrant display of cultural identity that strengthens community bonds.

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