

## FOLK CULTURE OF THE HAJONG COMMUNITY OF ASSAM

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### **Abstract**

This research paper provides a comprehensive exploration of the folk culture of the Hajong community of Assam, an agrarian group known for its rich cultural traditions, festivals, oral literature, and crafts. The study aims to understand the intricate relationship between their social organization, belief systems, and cultural practices, while also addressing the modern challenges that threaten cultural continuity. The paper is divided into key sections: introduction, objectives, scope, methodology, significance of the study, and detailed analysis of their social, material, and intangible heritage. The study concludes by emphasizing the importance of preservation and cultural documentation through community participation and institutional support.

**Keywords:** Hajong, folk culture, Assam, festivals, oral traditions, agrarian rituals, weaving, cultural preservation

### **1. Introduction**

The Hajong are of Indo-Tibetan ethnic group. Different scholars have different opinions on the origin of the Hajongs, their names and migration to India. They entered northeastern India from the Tibetan Plateau along the Brahmaputra and Teesta rivers and settled in the Sonkosh Valley. The Hajongs consider the ancient Hajo region, now in Nalbari district, as their original residence. The name Hajong comes from the word "inhabitants of Hajo". The Hajongs are believed to be Suryavanshi Kshatriyas and descendants of Surya or Bila.

Folk culture is an essential component of any community's identity, reflecting its worldview, traditions, and social relationships. The Hajong community of Assam represents a fascinating case of cultural continuity and adaptation in the northeastern region of India. Despite their small population, the Hajongs possess a deeply rooted folk tradition encompassing religious beliefs, music, dance, storytelling, and craft practices. Their traditions are tied closely to nature and agricultural life, reflecting their long-standing association with paddy cultivation and riverine ecosystems.

The Hajongs, primarily settled in the western parts of Assam bordering Meghalaya and Bangladesh, are linguistically and culturally distinct. Their folk culture presents an amalgamation of indigenous beliefs and Hindu influences. Over time, socio-political changes, migration, and modernization have introduced new challenges to their cultural survival. However, their folk expressions—such as Chorkhila, Pusnâ festival, and weaving traditions—continue to preserve their ethnic identity.

This study seeks to examine the multidimensional aspects of Hajong folk culture, tracing its historical roots, social organization, material life, rituals, and expressive traditions. It also discusses the contemporary relevance of their folk heritage and explores measures for its preservation.

### **2. Objectives of the Study**

The main objectives of the present research are:

- To examine the historical origin and ethnogenesis of the Hajong community of Assam.
- To study the various aspects of Hajong folk culture, including festivals, rituals, dance, music, and oral literature.
- To analyze the material culture of the community—dress, architecture, and crafts—as reflections of cultural identity.
- To assess the social and religious systems of the Hajongs and their relationship with their folk traditions.
- To identify the changes brought by modernization, migration, and Hindu influence on Hajong folk culture.
- To discuss measures for safeguarding and revitalizing Hajong cultural heritage.

### **3. Scope of the Study**

This study focuses on the Hajong community living in Assam, especially in the districts adjoining Meghalaya such as Goalpara and Kamrup. However, references to Hajong populations in Meghalaya and northern Bangladesh are included for comparative understanding. The paper covers both tangible and intangible cultural aspects—festivals, rituals, oral traditions, and crafts. The study also includes an analysis of sociocultural transformation due to education, media, and economic change.

The scope extends to understanding the folk practices not merely as isolated traditions but as living cultural systems intertwined with ecology, livelihood, and social identity. By exploring historical and contemporary dimensions, the paper seeks to provide a holistic portrayal of Hajong folk culture.

### **4. Methodology**

The study is qualitative and descriptive in nature, based primarily on secondary sources. It employs an ethnographic approach to document and interpret the cultural practices of the Hajong community. The data has been collected from published books, government reports, journal articles, and online databases that contain ethnographic and sociocultural descriptions of the Hajongs.

The methodology includes:

**Literature Review:** Examination of available literature on the Hajong people, including ethnographic works, historical records, and government reports.

**Comparative Analysis:** Comparison of Hajong cultural practices with neighboring communities like Garos, Rabhas, and Assamese Hindus to identify similarities and distinct features.

**Interpretive Approach:** Cultural symbols, rituals, and performances are analyzed within their social and ecological contexts.

**Thematic Organization:** The data has been organized thematically—covering material culture, belief systems, oral traditions, and festivals.

Although the research is primarily secondary in nature, it maintains analytical rigor by synthesizing information across sources and ensuring cultural accuracy.

### **5. Significance of the Study**

The study holds significant academic and cultural importance. The Hajong community, despite their rich cultural heritage, has received limited scholarly attention compared to other

tribes of Northeast India. Documenting their folk culture contributes to ethnographic and anthropological literature, filling a gap in the understanding of Assam's multi-ethnic composition.

From a cultural preservation perspective, the study emphasizes the urgency of documenting oral traditions and crafts that are endangered due to modernization and cultural assimilation. It provides a foundation for policymakers and cultural organizations to design heritage conservation programs that include local participation.

Furthermore, the study offers insights into how folk culture serves as a medium of identity preservation among minority communities. By focusing on the Hajongs, it illustrates how smaller ethnic groups maintain cultural resilience in a changing socio-economic landscape.

## **6. Historical Background and Ethnogenesis**

The Hajongs are believed to have migrated from the Hajo area of western Assam or regions adjoining the Garo Hills. Oral narratives trace their movement through the foothills before settling in the plains of present-day Assam and Meghalaya. Their history reveals both tribal and Indo-Aryan influences, resulting in a syncretic cultural pattern.

Historically, the Hajongs practiced animistic beliefs and nature worship, later adopting Hindu customs through Sanskritisation. They identify themselves as followers of the Vaishnav tradition while preserving their indigenous rituals. Their language, a dialect of the Indo-Aryan group with Tibeto-Burman influences, serves as an important cultural marker.

The community today is classified as a Scheduled Tribe in Meghalaya and as an Other Backward Class (OBC) in Assam. This dual status reflects regional variations in their socio-political integration.

## **7. Social Organization and Kinship**

The Hajong social structure is organized around clans known as *nikni*, which regulate marriage and kinship relations. Traditionally, marriage within the same *nikni* was prohibited to maintain exogamy. Village life is marked by cooperation in agriculture, communal rituals, and collective celebrations.

Ritual specialists known as *Dyushi* or *Nungtang* perform religious ceremonies, while elders hold moral authority in decision-making. The community's social hierarchy is egalitarian, emphasizing collective welfare over individual status.

## **8. Material Culture**

### **8.1 Dress and Weaving**

Men of the Hajong tribe usually wear *gamocha* and *genji* as their dress. Women, on the other hand, wear hand-woven *gariyali methani* (*patani* in Hajong language), *tangali* (waistband) on their waist, *chadar* (*pasra/agrun*), nose ring (*nakaputi*), earrings, *katabaju* on their arms and rings on their fingers. Men wear a knee-length *churia* (*niwas*) with a *gomocha* and a flowery necklace (*kampes*) around their necks. It is noteworthy that men are less dressed than women and most of the time they are naked except for the dress. The Hajongs have a distinctive and pompous characteristic in terms of marriage. Like other ethnic groups, banana seedlings are planted in the wedding *mandap*. There is also a custom of giving *joron* among the Hajongs. Known as '*panchini*' or '*guakhawa*', the custom of giving clothes, ornaments, oil, sandalwood, coconut and *pan* is usually given. The Hajong community performs routine rituals such as bathing the bride and fetching water at weddings. The Hajongs call the groom '*Damad*' or '*Naya*' *Jangm*' and the passengers accompanying the bride or groom on the wedding day are

called 'Bharali' The groom is seen carrying a sword according to Kshatriya custom. Similarly, the groom gives the bride money. It is called 'Khalti' The house where the night of the flower bed is spent is known as 'Jaraghar' or 'Khoparaghar' The Hajongs usually hold weddings for two days. The first day is a mass wedding and the next day is a bahi wedding. Bahi is fed to the guests on the day of the wedding. In addition to the beautiful songs, geetlu gahan is sung at weddings. In addition to customary marriages, secret or absconding marriages are also practiced in the Hajang society.

Hajong women are skilled weavers, and weaving is considered an essential cultural duty. The traditional attire for women is the pathin, a red-striped wrap-around cloth worn with a blouse. Men wear the bhija kapur or a white dhoti. Weaving motifs often carry symbolic meanings related to fertility and prosperity.

## 8.2 Architecture

Hajong houses are typically constructed with bamboo, thatch, and mud. The houses have an earthen floor and slanted roofs, designed to withstand monsoon rains. The household layout reflects communal living, with a central courtyard surrounded by kitchen, granary, and sleeping quarters.

## 8.3 Tools and Crafts

Bamboo craft, basket-making, and tool fabrication for agriculture and fishing are integral to Hajong material culture. These crafts reflect the community's deep ecological knowledge and sustainable practices.

## 9. Religion, Belief Systems, and Rituals

Hajong religion is characterized by a combination of indigenous and Hindu elements. Deities like Durga, Vishnu, and Shiva are worshipped alongside local spirits. Rituals such as Bastu Puja, Kani Puja, and Katka Puja mark seasonal transitions and agricultural cycles. Animistic beliefs persist in practices intended to appease natural spirits to ensure fertility and good harvests. The Hajongs' cosmology reflects respect for nature, illustrating how religion and environment are intertwined in their folk worldview.

## 10. Festivals and Seasonal Celebrations

The Hajong calendar is rich with festivals that blend joy, ritual, and communal participation:

**Pusnâ:** The most important festival marking the end of winter, celebrated with feasts, dances, and community gatherings.

**Biswâ:** Celebrated before the monsoon, it is a thanksgiving festival for agricultural abundance.

**Chorkhila:** A folk drama and dance performed by young men, involving music, jest, and storytelling.

**Katka Puja and Kani Puja:** Religious rituals linked to agricultural fertility.

These festivals not only serve religious purposes but also reinforce social cohesion and cultural continuity.

## 11. Music, Dance, and Performance Traditions

Music and dance play vital roles in expressing communal emotions and transmitting oral traditions. The Hajongs have distinct folk songs like Lewatana, Jhakhamara, and Pabni. Dances are performed during festivals and harvest seasons, often accompanied by drums, bamboo flutes, and cymbals.

Chorkhila, a traditional street play, is an example of performative art combining humor, satire, and moral storytelling. These performances strengthen community bonds and ensure cultural knowledge transfer across generations.

## **12. Oral Literature and Storytelling**

Hajong folklore includes myths, legends, folktales, and proverbs. Myths explain the origin of the community and natural phenomena, while folktales communicate moral lessons and social values. Oral storytelling is an important educational tool, keeping alive the collective memory and ethical foundations of Hajong society.

Popular themes in their folklore include migration stories, the triumph of good over evil, and reverence for nature. Songs associated with agricultural work often double as repositories of collective wisdom.

## **13. Gender Roles and Cultural Transmission**

Women play a central role in maintaining and transmitting cultural traditions. Weaving, food preparation, and participation in domestic rituals are key aspects of women's cultural labor. Men, on the other hand, dominate agricultural work and performance arts like Chorkhila. Cultural transmission occurs through participation in household rituals, storytelling sessions, and festivals. Elders play an educational role, ensuring that younger generations internalize moral and cultural values.

## **14. Cultural Change and Modern Challenges**

Modernization, education, migration, and exposure to mass media have introduced significant changes in Hajong life. The younger generation's preference for modern attire and lifestyles has reduced traditional dress usage. The influence of mainstream Assamese and Bengali culture has also modified ritual practices.

However, the Hajongs continue to preserve key aspects of their folk heritage through local festivals, community gatherings, and informal education. Cultural erosion remains a challenge, necessitating state and academic interventions for documentation and promotion.

## **15. Cultural Preservation and Revitalization Efforts**

Recent years have seen increasing awareness among the Hajong youth about the need to protect their culture. Cultural associations organize traditional dance and song competitions during Pusanâ. Weaving cooperatives have been formed to promote traditional textiles.

Government initiatives under the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and NGOs working on cultural heritage are supporting documentation projects. Digital archiving of oral literature and recording of traditional songs can further strengthen these efforts.

## **16. Discussion**

The Hajong folk culture exemplifies the adaptive resilience of small ethnic groups in multi-ethnic settings. Their traditions demonstrate how religion, ecology, and social values are interlinked. Despite pressures of modernization, their folk expressions continue to symbolize community solidarity and identity.

A holistic preservation approach must integrate education, economy, and policy to ensure sustainability. Encouraging intergenerational learning, cultural tourism, and local museums can promote both awareness and pride among the Hajongs.

## **17. Conclusion Findings**

The folk culture of the Hajong community of Assam is a living testimony to human creativity, resilience, and adaptation. Rooted in agriculture and animistic traditions, enriched

by Hindu influences, and challenged by modernity, it continues to evolve while maintaining its distinctive essence. Through weaving, festivals, music, and oral traditions, the Hajongs celebrate their connection to land, nature, and community.

Preservation of this heritage requires both institutional support and community engagement. The future of Hajong folk culture depends on documentation, education, and sustainable cultural revival programs that respect indigenous knowledge and practices.

### **Findings**

1. **Historical Origin:** The Hajongs trace their origin to migrations from Hajo and adjoining hill regions. Their culture shows a fusion of tribal and Indo-Aryan traditions.
2. **Language:** The Hajong language belongs to the Indo-Aryan family but incorporates Tibeto-Burman influences, reflecting intercultural contact.
3. **Social Organization:** Hajong society is organized into exogamous clans called *nikni*, maintaining social harmony through kinship networks.
4. **Religion and Beliefs:** The Hajongs practice a syncretic faith blending Hinduism with indigenous animistic traditions. Rituals like *Bastu Puja*, *Kani Puja*, and *Katka Puja* are central to agricultural cycles.
5. **Festivals:** Major festivals such as *Pusnâ*, *Biswâ*, and *Chorkhila* reflect agrarian life, marking transitions between seasons and reinforcing community unity.
6. **Material Culture:** Traditional attire like *pathin* and *bhija kapur* and bamboo-based crafts signify cultural identity and self-reliance.
7. **Weaving Tradition:** Weaving is a crucial cultural skill among women, symbolizing creativity, economic independence, and social value.
8. **Music and Dance:** Folk songs like *Lewatana* and *Jhakhamara* and dances like *Bastu Dance* and *Chorkhila* are vital expressions of cultural aesthetics and storytelling.
9. **Oral Literature:** Myths, folktales, and proverbs communicate moral lessons, historical memory, and reverence for nature.
10. **Gender Roles:** Women dominate weaving, food culture, and domestic rituals, while men engage in agriculture and folk performances.
11. **Agrarian Economy:** Agriculture is the backbone of cultural and social life, influencing rituals, food habits, and seasonal festivals.
12. **Cultural Change:** Modernization, education, and migration have led to gradual cultural dilution, but awareness of identity preservation is increasing.
13. **Cultural Preservation:** Local youth groups and NGOs have initiated cultural revival programs, weaving cooperatives, and festival promotion to sustain traditions.
14. **Challenges:** Loss of oral transmission, language shift, and limited documentation threaten the continuity of Hajong folk culture.
15. **Resilience:** Despite external pressures, the community continues to adapt its traditions, demonstrating cultural resilience and identity pride.

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