



## **ORAL TRADITION AND THE INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM: A STUDY OF THE MYTHS AND LEGENDS OF ASSAM**

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### **ABSTRACT :**

*The Indian Knowledge system is deeply rooted in the oral tradition, which refers to the practice of preserving and transmitting knowledge, beliefs, stories and history through word of mouth. Oral tradition plays a vital role in safeguarding its rich cultural heritage and moral values across generations. An essential component of oral tradition is folklore which encompasses customs, beliefs and traditions passed down through generations. Assam, the land of blue hills and red rivers, is a rich repository of myths and legends that form an integral part of folklore, oral tradition and the Indian Knowledge System. These oral narratives serve as invaluable sources of knowledge and wisdom. This paper explores the myths and legends of Assam highlighting the significance within the oral tradition\_\_ the bedrock of Indian Knowledge System.*

**Keywords:** *Oral tradition, Indian Knowledge System, Myths, Legends, Assam*

### **I.Introduction:**

Oral tradition is a part and parcel of Indian Knowledge system(IKS) and incorporates cultural practices, spiritual beliefs and collective memory, that is, the experiences and beliefs passed across generations orally. Assam is a treasure trove of legends and myths which are deeply rooted in our Indian Knowledge system. Oral tradition plays a significant role in preserving indigenous knowledge through centuries which are handed down from one generation to another. Carlos Nogueira (2003) mentions that "Oral tradition' congregates knowledge, memories, values and symbols generally configured in linguistic objects of a non-literary or aesthetic-literary nature, objects with or without consignment in written testimonies, accomplished vocally and recognizable collectively and during consecutive generations in an anatomy built by laws of traditionality."



## **II. Objectives of the Study:** The main objectives in this paper are to-

1. To examine the role of oral tradition in the preservation and dissemination of indigenous knowledge in Assam.
2. To analyze selected myths and legends of Assam within the framework of Indian Knowledge System.

## **III . Methodology:**

The research adopts a qualitative approach. The data has been collected from primary sources in the form of interviews and visits to the areas under study. Interviews have been conducted with the elderly people of the area and the priests of the temple. The data has also been collected through secondary sources in the form of books, magazines, journals, websites etc.

## **V. Analysis and Discussion:**

Basistha is the name of a revenue village under Dispur revenue circle of Kamrup metro district of Assam. it is located in the south periphery of the city of Guwahati. It is under Beltola mouza of Kamrup metro district of Assam.

The place derives its name from the ashram of Basistha *muni* located here. Basistha was one of the saptarishis or seven great sages of Hindu mythology. In the Ramayana, he is said to have tutored Lord Rama and his brothers. The place was originally an ashram established by Basistha Muni. Later it was rebuilt by King Rajeswar Singha. According to folk belief, Basistha Muni came here from Ayodhya for meditation. Hiskalaguru was King Dasaratha. Basistha Muni was the *manah-putra* (accepted son) of Lord Brahma. According to legend, when Basistha Muni arrived here, the whole area was surrounded by jungle and there was no water. So, Basistha Muni meditated on Lord Shiva and made three rivers, namely, Sandhya, Lalita and Kanta to flow from the hair of Lord Shiva. In the cave of Sandhyachal hill located here, Basistha Muni is said to have meditated on Tara Shakti, Golokeswar Shiva and Tarakeswar Shiva. The informant narrated that wishes are fulfilled here when the people take bath in the rivers, namely, Sandhya, Lalita and Kantahere and offer their prayers to Lord Shiva inside the temple and chant *Basistha Sada Sivaye Namah*(Informant: Amulya Deba Sharma, 61, Basistha Ashram). During my field visit to



the place, it was observed that there is a statue of Lord Ganesh and Goddess Saraswati inside the temple. However, inside the main cave of the temple there is a rectangular stone which the informant narrated that it was actually the body of Basistha Muni which turned into stone after he became one with Lord Shiva.

Kamakhya is the name of an important locality in the Guwahati city of Kamrup (metro) district of Assam. The place derives its name from the famous Kamakhya temple located here. Kamakhya is described in the Kalika Purana as the most important goddess of Tantric worship. She is identified as the most important goddess of Tantric worship. She is identified with Kali in the *Kalika Purana*, *Yoginitantra* and *Kamakhya Tantra*. The name Kamakhya is connected with the ancient myth of Lord Shiva and his wife. The legend states that Sati's father Daksha had organized a Yagya. He invited all the Gods and Goddesses except Lord Shiva and his wife. Sati sought permission from her husband Lord Shiva who, at first, did not allow her to go uninvited. Then Goddess Sati showed her power by performing her ten different forms in front of her husband Shiva. She took the form of Goddess Kali, Tara, Chindamasta, Bagala, Dhumabati, Bhairabi, Matonga, Kamala, Chaurasi and Bhubaneswari. Lord Shiva understood her power and allowed her to go. As she reached her father's place, King Daksha passed insinuating remarks about her husband. Sati could not tolerate the disrespect shown to her husband by her father. Hence, she ended her life at the spot of sacrifice. Lord Shiva was so enraged and grief-stricken that he wandered the whole world carrying Sati's corpse on his head. Shiva's 'dance of death' alarmed the Gods. So, in order to stop Shiva, the powerful Lord Vishnu cut the dead body of Sati into fifty-one pieces with his great weapon, the 'Shudarshan Chakra' (Informant: Kabindra Prasad Sarma, 55, Kamakhya). The places where Sati's body fell are said to have become 'pithas', i.e., sacred places of worship of the goddess in different forms. The Kalika Purana refers to the traditional list of catus pitha (Barua: 1988:23). In the words of Dr. Banikanta Kakati, the word 'Kama' in Kamakhya is of extra Aryan origin. There is a strong suggestion of its correspondence to Austric formations like the following- *kamoi*, *kemoit*, *kamin*, *kamet*, and *kauru*. The formation in the *kamoi* category suggests its varied association with the grave and the spirit. The *kama* goddess might have originally been the goddess of the graveyard. The Kalika Purana mentions that the genital organ of Sati fell in



*Nilachal* when her dead body was being carried by her husband Lord Shiva. The mountain represented the body of Shiva himself and when Sati's organ fell on it, the mountain turned blue. So, the mountain where the Kamakhya temple is located came to be known as *Nilachal*. The Goddess herself is Kamakhya because she came secretly to satisfy her amour (*kama*) with Lord Shiva. So, in Kalika Purana, the *Nilachal* represents both the graveyard and the love tryst of Lord Shiva and the Goddess (Kakati: 2004:34-38). According to Kalika Purana, the shrine is said to have existed even during the time of the mythical King Naraka and according to the *Devi Purana*, the goddess Kamakhya is said to have been specially worshipped by the rulers of Naraka family (Barpujari: 2014:454).

## **V. Conclusion:**

The myths and legends of Assam such as the stories of Basistha Ashram and the Kamakhya temple reveal a complex web of knowledge systems. The myths associated with the Kamakhya temple and Basistha Ashram encapsulate ideas about sacred and metaphysical beliefs. Thus, the oral tradition of Assam is a living system of knowledge which helps us to preserve the identity and culture of the people from one generation to the next.

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