



Some Social Customs of the Patani Community of the Srihatta–Cachar Region

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The Patani community of the Srihatta–Cachar region represents one of the lesser-documented social groups of eastern Bengal and northeast India. Despite their long historical presence and distinctive cultural practices, they have often been marginalized in mainstream social hierarchies dominated by caste-Hindu norms. This essay examines some of the key customs, ritual practices, and social institutions of the Patanis, drawing on oral history, ethnographic notes, and traditional community narratives. The Patanis possess a complex system of social organization, notably the Satraj and Moral structure, which functions as a parallel judicial and administrative order. Their ritual practices—such as the reverence of Baghram (the tiger deity), Rakhal Seva, Ai Seva, and agricultural gift-based prestige systems—reveal a syncretic worldview that blends Vaishnavism with older agrarian and animistic beliefs. Additionally, the community maintains distinctive forms of social address and symbolism, such as the use of betel nut as an emblem of respect and the wearing of paita or Tulsi garlands at marriage. In the context of rapid globalization, many of these customs face the threat of extinction. This essay documents and analyzes these practices to foreground their anthropological and cultural significance.

Keywords: Patani community; Srihatta–Cachar; folk rituals; agrarian society; Vaishnavism; Satraj system; cultural marginality; tiger worship.

The Patani community of the Srihatta–Cachar region has long been subjected to marginalization within the dominant Brahminical social order. Branded as “low caste” or “Dom,” they have historically been relegated to the peripheries of mainstream Hindu society. Yet, this peripheral status has also allowed the Patanis to cultivate a distinct cultural identity characterized by highly developed social customs, ritual practices, and community institutions. Despite frequent mention in the Charyapadas and medieval Mangalkavyas, the community’s rituals and everyday customs rarely find adequate representation in historical or literary documentation.

The etymology of the term Patni is contested. In common Bengali usage, it refers to seafaring people or boatmen. However, some scholars argue that the word derives from “Patnayya,” referring to a group originating from Patna who were lost during a riverine journey and eventually settled permanently in the Srihatta–Cachar region. Over generations, this Patnaiya identity evolved into the Patni community. Physically, they are often described as robust, broad-shouldered, and dark-complexioned, features that colonial ethnographers stereotypically associated with manual labouring castes. Today, agriculture constitutes their main occupation, as the earlier river-crossing professions of the community have largely disappeared.

Agriculture is not only an economic activity but a core principle structuring Patani social life. Their prestige system—popularly referred to as “the society of sticks”—revolves around the symbolic gifting of measured quantities of paddy (kathi). A family’s ability to donate seven, nine, or twelve kathis during festivals signifies its social standing. Declarations such as “I am of the twelve-kathi society” reflect both lineage pride and economic capability. This agricultural gift economy acts as a mechanism for asserting respectability within the community.

One of the most distinctive social institutions of the Patanis is the Satraj system. Although it bears no resemblance to monarchical authority in the political sense, it functions as an internal governance structure. Each raj or territorial unit is overseen by a Moral, a hereditary leader whose responsibilities include maintaining social order, resolving disputes, and delivering judgments. Comparable to a chief adjudicator, the Moral’s authority is deeply respected. Issues relating to marriage, elopement, property disputes, and ritual obligations are adjudicated within the Satraj. The effectiveness of this system has historically reduced the community’s dependence on state legal institutions, except in cases of grave offences. Social sanctions such as ostracism remain among the most severe punishments.

The use of betel nut (supari) remains an enduring cultural marker among the Patanis. While declining in many rural societies, betel nut continues to function as an emblem of respect, hospitality, and ritual propriety. Elders are honoured with betel nut at weddings and festivals, and petitions to the Moral are often accompanied by offerings of betel nut. These usages reflect an indigenous semiotic system in which simple, locally available commodities become vehicles of symbolic prestige.

Ritual practices such as the wearing of the paita (sacred thread) also deserve attention. Unlike Brahminical rites of investiture, the Patanis do not adopt the paita through Vedic ceremonies. Instead, the thread is worn on the day of marriage, often accompanied by Tulsi garlands—a practice possibly influenced by Gaudiya Vaishnavism. Although the community identifies broadly with the Vaishnava tradition and consumes meat during festivals, animal sacrifice remains absent from their rituals.

The Patani pantheon includes both mainstream Hindu deities and folk deities with more localized significance. Among these, Baghram or Baghai—the tiger deity—is of particular interest. Although tiger worship is commonly associated with the Sundarbans’ Dakshin Ray tradition, the Patani and Namasudra communities once practiced similar rituals to protect themselves from tiger attacks. This worship was performed during the month of Kartik, involving incense, pan leaves, and rhyming chants meant to appease the tiger spirit. The disappearance of tigers from the region has caused this practice to decline almost entirely.

Another significant ritual cycle includes Rakhhal Seva or Ai Seva, celebrated during Kartik Sankranti. Centred around cowherds and cattle, the festival reflects the agrarian reverence for cows and pastoral labour. Throughout Kartik, children and youths collect ritual items while singing devotional songs recalling Krishna’s childhood exploits. On the day of the festival, cowherds construct a symbolic altar called panchal



using banana leaves. Rituals are performed without the involvement of Brahmin priests, underscoring the community's autonomous ritual economy. The belief that placing a panchal on a cow or even on an unfruitful tree brings vitality or fertility reflects a deep agricultural cosmology.

The Patani system of address also expresses community-specific modes of kinship. Terms such as Dadi, Putti, Maijla, Harubba, and Jestama encode hierarchical and relational nuances that differ significantly from mainstream Bengali kinship terminology. These forms of address, once widespread across Patani, Nath, Namasudra, and Malakar communities, are now rapidly declining.

Globalization and socio-economic transformations have dramatically altered Patani cultural life. While certain customs—such as the Satraj system and the betel-nut etiquette—survive, many others, including tiger worship, traditional kinship forms, and agrarian prestige rituals, have nearly disappeared. As younger generations adapt to urbanization and modern livelihoods, these customs may eventually fade into obscurity. Documenting them is therefore crucial not only for cultural anthropology but also for preserving the intangible heritage of marginalized communities.

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