

Celebrating Our Plural Ethos:

# Manikut Utsav of Hajo



Shofiul Alom Pathan

Booklet Series : 103

Publisher :

**Institute *for* Social Democracy**

Flat No. 110, Numberdar House,

62-A, Laxmi Market, Munirka, New Delhi-110067

Telephone : 011-26177904 / Telefax : 011-26177904

Email : prakashan.isd@gmail.com, notowar.isd@gmail.com

Website : [www.isd.net.in](http://www.isd.net.in)

© Institute *for* Social Democracy

Publication Year : 2023

All Rights Reserved

## Introduction:

The South-Asian subcontinent has a distinct political and social history where many ethnic, linguistic and religious social groups have been coexisting historically. In the context of Indian society, there is an interesting way of understanding the plural ethos- where people from diverse backgrounds come and form a syncretic tradition of coexistence; often referred to as *Unity in Diversity*.

Jawaharlal Nehru, a great anti-colonial activist and the first prime minister of India, in one of his essays – ‘The Unity of India,’ says that many western thinkers get impressed by diversity and differences which exist in the Indian society. But the same thinkers miss out on many unifying factors which have been holding Indian society together throughout the ages.

Starting from thousands of years old Indus Valley civilization -that flourished all over Northern India- uncountable number of people, conquerors and settlers, pilgrims and students have entered the Indian plains from the highlands of Asia. They have significantly influenced life, culture and politics. They all have been absorbed and accommodated to make the Indian society diverse and cosmopolitan. Even after all the changes, India still has maintained its own unique self.

Nehru uses the metaphor of thousands of rivers forming an ocean to describe India (Nehru, 1938, p. 231-234). Here, Nehru compares every river with different culture and tradition and the ocean symbolizes the vast, diverse yet unified India. After the independence, Constitutional equality is granted to every citizen, promoting multiculturalism, where

everyone has the right to practice their own language, religion, culture and other traditional values.

In Assam, an interesting cultural procession, highlighting syncretic tradition about different religious, ethnic and linguistic groups, takes place. Every year, there is an interfaith religion-cultural procession carried out at Hajo, a place about 24 kilometers away from Guwahati. It is also called *Communal Harmony March* and it completed its 25th year in 2018. The rally starts from Powa Mecca Mosque (a sacred shrine of a Sufi saint) and goes till Hayagriv Madhav Mandir (a famous temple in Assam) culminating in a celebration.

Both sites are 6 kilometers away from each other and the rally starts after an embrace between the Khadim<sup>1</sup> of Powa Mecca and the Doloi<sup>2</sup> of Hayagriv Madhav Mandir. The celebration is called *Manikut Utsav*. It is attended by people from all walks of life. Performances of *Jikirs*, *Nam-Prasangas*, *Bihu-geets*<sup>3</sup> etc. underlines communal harmony.

The composite and syncretic culture as part of our cultural heritage has occupied our imagination and influenced our way of living. The narratives and facts about them is taught in schools, colleges, universities and other institutions. However, small celebrations like the one at Hajo constitute perfect examples of our cultural heritage.

Documenting these celebratory events make people realize the importance of peaceful co-existence between different communities. The narratives from Hajo remain an inspiration to preserve secular ethos and diversity in India.

The Manikut Utsav is celebrated every year under the banner of All Hajo Student's Union -a local unit of All Assam Students Union (AASU), with a massive participation from people across Assam. Every year, the local AASU leaders take a leading role in organizing the event. In 1992, during the time when Babri Mosque was demolished, an organization called Manikut Sahitya Samaj initiated the rally for the first time.

Some parts of Assam also witnessed violent clashes when communal riots spread like a wildfire in the entire country. This situation threatened communal harmony between the Hindus and Muslims. In such a situation, some locals along with organizations like AASU took

the initiate to uphold the message of communal harmony by organizing Manikut Utsav. It is not really known exactly why and how the All Hajo Student's Union took charge from Manikut Sahitya Samaj; but they have been consistently organizing it since 1993.

Hajo always had a secular legacy with its holy Muslim shrine, a temple and a Vaishnavite *Satra*.<sup>4</sup> It is considered a holy pilgrimage for Muslims, Hindus and even Buddhists. Hajo is famously known as *Tribeni Sangam* (confluence of three streams). It also features in some old scriptures like *Kalikapurana* of the 11th century CE and is home to five famous Hindu temples; also known as the *Panchatirtha*. Among them, Hayagriva Madhav, situated on top of Manikut Hill, is the most famous and celebrated one. Again, Powa Mecca on Garurachal Hill is one of the most prominent Islamic shrines, where the tomb of Ghiyasuddin Awliya, a Sufi saint of 1300 CE is located. On the other side, in fact many Buddhists of Bhutan, Tibet, Nepal and Arunachal Pradesh believe that Gautam Buddha attained *Mahaparinirvana* under a *saal* tree at Hajo.

## A Composite Cultural History of Assam:

Assam is a state where diversity of ethnic groups, religious identity, caste, tribes, language is immense. Assamese as an identity is not rigid, but one which emerged through cultural exchanges of many different ethnic, religious and linguistic identities. From ancient times till the 19<sup>th</sup> century CE, several groups migrated to Assam including Ahoms, who ruled Assam for almost six hundred years (1226-1826 CE).

Different migrant groups brought their own unique culture, food, rituals, festivals etc. and Assamese as an identity was shaped as a synthesis of many different practices and identities. The rich and composite cultural history of Assam could be understood by the contribution and influence of Saint Sankardeva (1449-1569) and Azan Pir, a Sufi saint of 17<sup>th</sup> century (also known as Shah Milan).

In terms of cultural history, Assam is also referred to as the land of "Sankar-Azan" (which includes both of the respective saints' names). The very idea of the term 'Sankar-Azan' refers to the cordial and composite Hindu-Muslim relationship that flourished in the Assamese society. In fact, many Muslim soldiers and generals were part of the Ahom army. This example includes the name of famous Muslim deputy

army general Bagh Hazarika, who under the command of his general Lachit Borphukan, defeated the Mughal army in the famous battle of Saraighat in 1671 CE.

Saint Sankardeva remains the most influential religious and cultural icon of Assam who preached the idea of neo-Vaishnavism by giving a call to remove the barrier of caste, creed and other hierarchies. The neo-Vaishnavite movement is still the most popular form of religious and cultural practices. Neo-Vaishnavism brought together different sections of Assamese people across caste, tribe, religion etc. Most importantly, Neo-Vaishnavism brought communities across caste hierarchy together which marks a step towards ending caste hierarchy and discrimination.

Sankardeva criticized the rigid caste order of Hindu society in Assam. Though, caste is still prominent in Hindu Assamese social order, Sankardeva through his preaching of *Eka-Sarana-Naam-Dharma* (believing in one God) was successful in influencing several million people of Assam by preaching liberal, tolerant and caste-less idea of religion. Sankardeva's idea of religion was influenced by Bhakti movement in which the devotees submit their will to one God, i.e., Lord Vishnu, by chanting his name like *Hari*, *Rama* through *Kirtanas*.

Born in 1449 AD, Sankardeva not only had Hindu followers, but follower from other religions too. Sankardeva's socio-cultural revolution through neo-Vaishnavism, transformed society and culture of entire Brahmaputra valley. Many people consider him as the greatest spiritual leader of Assam, who simplified religious practices for a commoner and translated several religious texts in local languages for everyone to understand. Sankardeva's preaching of humanistic approach towards religion and foundations of several religious-cultural institutions brought a new era of renaissance in Assam.

Not only a secular religious practice, but neo-Vaishnavism by Sankardeva also formed a new kind of philosophy of cultural life which included art and music in the form of *Borgeet*, *Ankiya Nats* or *Bhaonas* (it is a form of theatre, introduced for the first time by Sankardeva, which later became popular with the masses. These forms of theatrical performances are centered on themes from the *Bhagavata-Purana* and the *Ramayana*). The cultural revolution also funded the idea of *Satriya*

*Dance*- which can be interpreted as a mode of conveying the principles of *Ek-Sarana-Nama-Dharma*, which are based on the devotion to one single God 'Lord Krishna' or 'Vishnu'. This remains as devotional dance practice in Assam based on the spirit of equality and humanism which found concrete manifestation in the institution of the *Namghar*. *Namghar*, in simple terms, refers to prayer houses of neo-Vaishnavite followers of Sankardeva; usually made in the shape of an open house prayer hall.

In a conversation about Composite history of Assam, Islamic Sufism deserves a significant mention. Azan Pir or Azan fakir is considered to be one of the most prominent religious icons of Assam after Sankardeva. However, it deserves a mention here that even though Assam came in contact with Muslims as early as in 1203 CE, the propagation of Islam on a wider level in the state of Assam started only in the early part of the 17th century.

Shah Milan, also popularly known as 'Azan Fakir,' who migrated to Assam in 1603 CE, had a significant role in spreading the idea of Islam through Sufism. Azan Fakir remains one of the most significant spiritual and religious figures in Assam till today, with his many contributions to unite the society. He composed devotional songs known as *Zikirs* and *Zaris*, embodying the basic tenets of Islam in very simple Assamese language. His unique way of propagating Islam was the major reason of the spread Islam into the masses during the time.

Shah Milan and his disciples were liberally patronized by the Ahom kings and some of them were even paid expenses to go to Mecca and perform *Haj* (an annual pilgrimage of Muslims) to pray for the prosperity of the kingdom and the ruler.

Not only Azan Fair, there were several other Sufi saints who migrated to Assam in different course of history. Powa Mecca Shrine in Hajo is also one of them. Hajo is an ideal representation of composite history in which Hindu-Muslim communal harmony continues to exist. It deserves a mention that communal tension is present in Assam too; both in subtle and manifested forms. However, a long and composite history of the region has not yet allowed communalism to grow in an organized form, like many other places of Indian subcontinent.

## History of Hajo through Written and Oral traditions:

Hajo is located at the northern bank of Brahmaputra in Assam. It is also the name of a revenue circle which includes 137 villages and two developments blocks namely Hajo and Sualkuchi. Hajo village has a population of 17,630 people. In present times, Hajo, as a center, is flourishing in terms of development and establishment of several business entities. Since ancient times, Hajo is known by different names which were mentioned earlier. The most prominent ancient names are *Apunarbhav* and *Manikuta* which are found in a religious text called *Kalikapurana* (Saikia, 2009).

In 14<sup>th</sup> century *Yoginitantra*, it is written as *Vishnupushkar*, in the *Darrang Rajbongkhawali* it is referred to as *Manikutgram*. Hajo has been formally used since Vaishnavism, and the writing of *Buranji*<sup>5</sup>. However, there are many folk traditions where people have different narratives of how the name Hajo came into being.

Some say during the intermediate time of *Kali* and *Dwapar* (Vedic notion of time) many monks used to meditate here. However, due to the disturbances of many demons, the monks broke their meditation and shouted like – ‘*hat- yog*’, ‘*hat-yog*’ etc. Gradually from that word, Hajo as a name came into existence.

Another popular oral tradition says that Buddha got his *Mahaparinirvana* here. His disciples mourned it by shouting – ‘*ha- aa-ju*’ (means the sunset). Interestingly, there is also a Muslim connection to the name of Hajo. The Powa Mecca Dargah is in Hajo and people believe that if someone goes to visit Hajo, then he or she gets blessing equal to that of *Hajj* (Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia). So, from the word *Hajj*, Hajo is thought to have come. There are other different narratives like there was a king called Haj who used to rule the place and that is how Hajo came into existence.

Hajo was a prominent place during the times of Koch kingdom, Ahom kingdom and Mughal kingdom. During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, under the rule of Koch king Raghudev Narayana, Hajo was given the status of a full fledged state. The name of the state was Koch Hajo then. Koch Hajo was a large area spread across Bornodi in the east to Konkokh river in the west. The Koch Hajo of Raghudev Narayana included parts of undivided



Goaplara district and parts of Darrang district in Assam. Even during the rule of Ahoms, Hajo was considered to be a crucial place.

## Religious Institutions and their Significance in Hajo:

Hajo is also famously known as *Panchatirtha*, which means an amalgamation of 5 sacred religious places. They are— Hayagrib Madhav Mandir, Kedarehswar Mandir, Kamaleshwar Mandir, Kameshwar Mandir and Ganesh Mandir. The main place of worship of this Panchatantra is Hayagrib Madhav Mandir and it is situated on a hill top called Manikut in Hajo. Here *Vishnu* is located in the avatar of Hayagrib. In the place of worship inside the temple, there is an idol of Hayagrib Madhav. On the right side of it is Govinda Madhav and Basudev; and on the left side there is second *Madhav* and *Garur*. In the downhill of the temple, there is a historical pond. This is called *Bishnupushkar*.

People say that the temple is built around 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century CE. Many people from Bhutan came here to worship at the Hayagrib Madhav. They believed that once it was a Buddhist temple. The Madhavmandir in Hajo is like Jagannath Temple of north-east India; as written in a local Assamese book.

A bit away from Madhav Mandir, there is Kedarehswar Mandir, which is very old and located on the Madanachal hills. Here, lord shiva is worshipped. On the bank of Kedar pond, Kamleshwar Mandir is located. *Shiva Linga* is also worshipped here. On the western downhill of Madanachal hills, on the top of Gokarna hills, Kameshwar Mandir is situated. At the feet of Kameshwar temple, the Ganesh Mandir is located. The idol of Ganesh is sculpted on a huge rock. Ahom king Pramatta Singha made this temple during 1744 CE.

Going beyond Panchatantra, Powa Mecca is one of the most significant and sacred religious places for Muslims located in Hajo. The Powa Mecca is located on the top of Garurachal Hills. A *dargah* (tomb) of a Sufi saint Giyasuddin Aauliya, is located here. He belonged to Shah family of Iran and was in an administrative position.

However, later, like Buddha, he left everything and came out along with seventy other saints to preach Islam in different places. Then he gradually reached Garurachal hills and settled here. There is a saying

that he went to Mecca in Arab and brought a *powa* (250 grams) of soil from there and mixed it in the soil of the present-day shrine area and this is why the place is called Powa Mecca.

At the burial of the saint, a shrine was constructed by the mughal king Shahjahan's son Shujauddin in 1657. For many Muslims in Assam, Powa Mecca is the holiest place after Mecca and Medina. In fact, many poor Muslims who cannot afford Hajj pilgrimage believe that if they come to Powa Mecca, the blessings they receive are equivalent to the blessings of Hajj.

## The Culture of Religious Tolerance in Hajo:

Much has been discussed in the recent time, related to religious freedom, personal law, religious tolerance, secularism etc. There have been debates around these issues in print media, television and other digital platforms. Many argue that India's secular ethos are under an attack when there is violence related to religion, caste, food, ethnicity etc.

Hajo has an interesting history of communal harmony and religious tolerance even though it has several other popular religious places. Even though the shrine was made by Shahjahan's son, different other non-Muslim kings in their life and time have contributed to Powa Mecca. The Ahom and Koch kings have also donated important things to the Dargah. Darrangi king donated lands to the Dargah. In fact, Ahom kings like Rudra Singha, Lakhi Singha, Rajeshwar Singha and Kamaleshwar Singha contributed lands and other properties and also assured a smooth functioning of the Dargah.

Prakash Das, in one of his writings, says that during their school days, they used to call Powa Mecca as 'Mukam'. They used to feel the name as some kind cloth or silk. He mentions that before any school examination, all the students, Hindus and Muslims alike, used to go first to Kedar Mandir, then to Mukam to pray for good results. He remembers that he can still remember the taste of *sinni* (a kind of a sweet dish distributed at the Sufi shrine). He mentions that the idea of living together in harmony wasn't taught to them, it was weaved into the fabric of society.

I had the opportunity to meet many locals and listen to some oral

narratives when I visited Hajo. During one of the interviews, Prakash Das talks about the history of the place-

During the Koch kingdom of medieval times, Hajo was developed as an urban center. Five dewalayas existed here. All these five Dewalayas were governed by a person who also took care of surrounding areas and other properties. That person was referred to as Doloi. Doloi was the key person who also used to control the socio-cultural aspects of life. He was like a king. Now those things do not exist anymore. Even in Kamakhya temple, the chief person is known as Doloi. Koch king Raghudev Narayan made Hajo the capital of Koch Kingdom. Madhav Mandir was destroyed a little during the time of Kalapahar. Raghudev Narayan rebuilt the city and the temples.<sup>6</sup>

Alongside Madhav Mandir, there is a historical pond called Madhav Pukhuri. However, in oral tradition, the name of the pond is also referred to as Vishnu Pushkaram. The name possibly symbolizes some Hindu mythological connection with God Vishnu. However, no significant information could be found on the topic.

Though Hajo is full of religious places, the harmony is well maintained through participation and interaction among religious institutions. In a peculiar yet pleasant way, there is inter-religious participation among different religious institutions of Hajo. Highlighting the hybrid nature of religious practice in Hajo, Hiren Saikia<sup>7</sup> a local academician narrated:

Hajo already has been a rich tradition of communal harmony. The culture is also very composite here in this sense. As you might know, it already has a composite tradition of Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism historically. The five temples here are very famous including the Powa Mecca Dargah. People who come to visit here, also go to visit Mowa Mecca or vice versa. Hajo's Madhav Mandir is already a very big religious institution. A procession happens here. In the procession, the idol of Lord Madhav is taken to the ghat<sup>8</sup> of Sualkuchi (a nearby place of Hajo). In that procession, some people carry stick in their hand and they lead the procession by cleaning and clearing the road for the procession. They are called Xaukadhora. Muslims are residents of nearby areas of Hajo. Just in the

opposite direction of Madhav Mandir, there is Puthimari river. On the Northern side of Puthomari, there are two neighborhoods; Thakuria para and Saikia para. Muslims staying in these two villages do the act during the procession. They can vote in the selection process of Doloi of Hajo's Madhav temple. When the procession returns to the temple with the idol, they can lead the way back holding sticks in their hands. This tradition has been going on since the age of the kings<sup>9</sup>

Another local resident, Achyut Das- an elderly person, told me that during Shivratri in Kedar Mandir; which is adjacent and below to Powa Mecca, people exchange food between the shrine and the temple. Powa Mecca's representatives carry some food to Kedar Mandir during Shivratri. Kedar Mandir's devotees bring food for the devotees in the Powa Mecca during the day of *Urus*.<sup>10</sup> The food exchanged during this time is called *cidha* locally.

## Manikut Utsav: Undersetting the Unique

### Composite Heritage of Assam

Manikut Sahitya Samaj is a cultural organization. The office bearers of the Manikut Sahitya Samaj got inspired by a cultural event from South India.<sup>11</sup> The members deemed it fit to celebrate Hajo's syncretic culture. So, a festival was planned out in Hajo where Sri Hayagrīb Madhav Mandir remained at the core of the idea. The idea was to celebrate the festival keeping it Hayagrīb Madhav Mandir centric. Since, Hajo has always been referred to as a place where there is a presence of different religious traditions, it was thought that it will perfectly reflect old cultural heritages. The hill, where the Hayagrīb Madhav Mandir is situated is called Manikut. Taking reference from the word Manikut, the organization was also named as Manikut Sahitya Sabha. It was planned as a festival of the locals. With this idea from 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> January of 1992, for the first time Manikut Utsav was organized to send a message of communal harmony from Hajo.

In the Assamese vernacular, the communal harmony is often referred through a word called *Sambandhay*. It starts from the first day of *Magh* month of the Assamese calendar. The day is also called *Bor Bihu*. The

first day of Bihu is the *Sankranti* and it falls on the last day of previous month. The second day of Bihu is on the first day of Magh and a huge fare is organized on this day.

Several communities and tribes from and outside of Hajo join in the procession. There are two flags of Powa Mecca and Madhav Mandir which signify prominent symbols of the festival. When the procession starts from Powa Mecca, the flags of both the institutions are placed together diagonally. The Khaldim of Powa Mecca and Doloi of Madhav Mandir stand in front of the rally to start the procession. The organizing committee consistently keeps it devoid of any political affiliation.



*This picture of the shrine. The Manikut Utsav starts from this place.*

## **Manikut Utsav and Communal Harmony of Hajo as a Composite Heritage:**

We, as a collective society, tend to see our differences rather than appreciating the factors which unify us. It has led to wars, genocides, ethnic cleansing, communal riots and violence. These expressions of violent acts not only weaken the fabric of society but also result in making the world a hostile place to live in. Composite Heritage becomes a very crucial component in human society which acts as a binding

force in society to keep basic human values and ethics intact.

There have only been very few studies which use the term Composite Heritage. However, cultural heritage is more frequently used. Within its domain, Composite Heritage includes events, festivals, celebrations, personalities, cultures, customs, tradition, habits, language, art, architect, etc. The acts, events or history related to Composite Heritage brings acceptance, love, harmony, mutual co-existence among many other positive outcomes.

For example, many grand musical events bring artists and audiences of two different countries together, even when they may have been involved in wars with each other at some point in history. In the context of Manikut Utsav, religious amalgamation appears to be the key factor in unifying society. Key places of procession and celebration of the festival are religious spots; but with an all-inclusive participation. Historical communal harmony of Hajo as a Composite Heritage essentially shows how religious institutions can play a secular role in society and can resist conflicts and differences. In many parts of South Asia, our everyday life is enmeshed with several religious and cultural practices, along with spiritual activities. Hence, celebrations like Manikut Utsav, which blends all religious people together essentially qualify to be called as rich Composite Heritage. It exemplifies a learning lesson for people who practice violence in the name of religion.

Religious fundamentalism has risen significantly in the post-colonial India. Even during India's struggle for Independence, the British colonizers tried to divide Indian society by seeding hatred between Hindus and Muslims in the name of religion. India got independence in 1947 and became the largest democracy in the world with the Constitution which grants equality in all aspects to all citizens of the country.

Regardless of Constitutional equality, there have been several incidents of large scale religious and communal violence in India. This includes the infamous Hindu-Muslim communal riots in 1992-93 which spread like a wildfire across the country after the demolition of Babri Mosque. The Manikut Utsav reflecting the communal harmony of Hajo, defied those communal sentiments and celebrated the festival in a grand manner. Manikut Utsav can be considered an epitome of Composite Heritage.

In fact, in the context of Manikut Utsav, religious places and their leaders come out to play a 'secular' role as part of this celebration of Composite Heritage. The local residents of Hajo in one of the group conversations<sup>12</sup> told me that it is written in school text books that Powa Mecca is a sacred place for Muslims and Hayagrib Madhav Mandir is sacred for Hindus. However, one of the persons in the group felt a bit puzzled by this. He said that he never, as a Hindu, felt that Powa Mecca is only for Muslims. One book titled *Hajur Xubakh* which includes a great deal of information about Hajo mentions that since ancient times the local Hindus consider Powa Mecca as a sacred place for them. Especially in *Jeth*, during the full moon, hundreds of Hindu pilgrims visit Powa Mecca to light candles and to pray for fulfillment of their wishes. There is a traditional belief in the area that during the night of the full moon, one's wishes get fulfilled if they visit Powa Mecca. The oral tradition behind this belief says that – Lord Krishna travelled all the way from distant Dwarka sitting on the back of *Goruda* bird to abduct Vishmak king's daughter Rukmini. While going back on this particular night, Lord Krishna halted in this sacred hill when the bird carrying him was tired. Since the bird was Garuda, many people believe that the name of the hill became 'Garurahcal'. With this oral tradition the Hindus on that sacred night go to the top of the hill where Powa Mecca is located.

Similarly, Buddhists have connected both Garurachal hills and Kedar hills with the *Mahaparinirvana* of Lord Buddha. Hence, even though we talk about contemporary society of Hajo and Manikut Utsav, rich history of mythology of the area connects the past with the present. Very importantly, the *Urus* in Powa Mecca and *Magh Mela* on the foothills of Madhav Temple starts at the same time. In Powa Mecca, *Urus* begins on the first day of the month of *Magh* and on the full moon day the *Urus* becomes full. In the same way, on the first day of *Magh*, the *Magh mela* begins which entails an exchange of different religious people going to different religious places. In that way Manikut Utsav and Hajo becomes a place for unity and peace amid continuous religious and cultural exchanges among communities.

## Community Participation and Manikut Utsav:

Manikut Utsav indeed results in a very vibrant, colorful and dynamic celebration with a huge participation of the locals. Unfortunately, due to Covid-19 pandemic, there was no celebration this year and I could



*The Photo here shows the entrance of the Hayagrib Madhav Mandir from the top of the temple. The pond in front of the gate is Vishnupushkaram near which the celebration of Manikut Utsav happens. The procession comes from the Powa Mecca Dargah Sharif.*

not attend the live programs of the event.

Colorful idols are made and the locals participate in the rally to highlight the rich cultural heritage of the state. Young boys and girls from schools and colleges participate in the rally in their traditional outfits; as several tribes and ethnic groups with their own dress and culture participate in the event. It is important to give a visual insight of the festival and celebration of Manikut Utsav. Hence, in this part, I shall try to visually portray the scenes from Manikut Utsav which will give a vivid glimpse of colorful, bright and diverse celebration. All the photos attached and narrated here are part of Manikut Utsav celebration of 2020. The photos are clicked by Ashif M Saikia, who belongs to Hajo, during his participation in the event of 2020. Ashif consistently helped me during my fieldwork and shared his own experience of participating in the festival.

While talking to a local member of All Hajo Student's Union, I was informed that- this is an integral part of the procession. It highlights and educates people about the diversity and composite nature of Assam's culture and people.





*The photo above shows the entrance of the Powa Mecca Dargah and beginning of the celebration of Manikut Utsav with a yellow banner under the mentions of the procession under All Hajo Student's Union.*



*In the photo above young girls could be seen participating in the procession. Young girls and boys in different ethnic dresses represent their own community and ethnic identity like this in Manikut Utsav.*



*Here, in this photo young girls belonging to Bodo tribe could be seen dancing as a part of the procession.*



*Going by the narration of the member of the All Hajo Student Union, this photo reflects participation of elderly women in the festival. Elderly women dressed up in*

*traditional Assamese attires of Sador Mekhela holds placard which mentions their native place as Fakirtola. Apart from mentioning their place or village name, the placard also reads that the festival starts from Powa Mecca and ends in Madhav Mandir. Besides them, young women dressed in traditional Assamese Sador Mekhela could be seen along with some students of a madrassa. This photo reflects diversity in participation, in terms of gender, age, religion etc.*



*Imitating, making statues and dressing up like famous cultural icon of the state is one of the major attractions of Manikut Utsav. Here, one person could be seen*

*imitating late singer Dr. Bhupen Hazarika as a cultural symbol to highlight regional cultural icons during the celebration. There are several cultural symbols portrayed like this in different editions of Manikut Utsav.*



*This photo shows the entrance of the Powa Mecca Dargah and its gradual movement towards the Hayagrib Madhav Mandir. Several white flags belonging to the All-Assam Student's Union could be seen in the photos. The yellow flag has the name of All Hajo Student's Union on it. Young girls in their ethnic outfits, young Muslim boys in their traditional religious attire and several common men and members of student's organization could be seen starting the procession here.*

# How Manikut Utsav as a Composite Heritage

## Countered Communalism:

There is often a question raised about the beginning of Manikut Utsav. It was first organized in January 1992 and this period saw intense political turmoil. Babri Mosque, which was established in 16<sup>th</sup> century during the Mughal period, was claimed to be the birthplace of Lord Rama by Hindu outfits, which later got converted to an organized and violent agitation. On the 6th December 1992, a group of Hindu extremist groups demolished Babri mosque. It led to a widespread Hind-Muslim communal violence leading to deaths of about a thousand people. The tension of Hindu-Muslim riot during that time spread to almost every state of the country.

However, during that period, Hajo, which has a significant Muslim population did not report any communal violence or tension. However, one pertinent question arises about the role and timing of the beginning of Manikut Utsav. Since the event started at the backdrop of the Ram temple movement and Hind-Muslim communal polarization, is it possible that Manikut Utsav was started as a preventive measure to prevent any future communal developments in Hajo? However, Saikia did draw a parallel between Ram Janmabhoomi Movement and the beginning of the Utsav. He argues that

Hajo has a significant number of both Hindu and Muslim population. It is not true that all people are conscious and educated about the history of communal harmony. When there was a communal polarization in the country during the late 1980s, a festival like Manikut Utsav got popular. But that does not mean it opposed the rathayatra which was initiated under many Hindu extremist groups. Maybe people got conscious that communal harmony must be defended and protected and probably that's why they came up with this idea.<sup>13</sup>

He kept on emphasizing the fact that it was an additional effort to keep composite culture of Hajo's society. Locals were perhaps afraid that something unwanted might happen which will polarize the society on religious terms. Identifying its emergence at the backdrop of a violent event, he further argued that it was normalized gradually and everyone



began celebrating it as an annual event.

## The Buddhist Connection:

It is very difficult to talk about Manikut Utsav and society of Hajo without a reflection on the Buddhist connection to them. Since Manikut Utsav as a Composite Heritage includes various religions and its followers; the historical and contemporary Buddhism must be highlighted here. Hajo is considered to be a synthesis of Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic religious cultures. Interestingly, there is a vibrant history of Buddhists coming from several parts of the Eastern Himalayan region to participate in it. Prakash Das, in his narrative, said that in ancient times many people believe that Madhav Mandir was a Buddhist temple. The Buddhists claim the temple to be their own and how they used to frequent the place. Even though a few Buddhists visit the temple now, their number, however, has dropped down significantly. According to Das, who also wrote a book on Hajo's history and culture, the number of Buddhist pilgrims visiting the temple was substantial in number and they mostly came from Bhutan. He further argues that

Hundreds of Buddhists came down all the way from Bhutan to Hajo. We have seen it through our own eyes during our childhood. They used to come every day of the

month. Young children, adults, all came together. They used to spend the entire month of Magh.

As mentioned earlier, the Buddhists connected the Garurachal and Kedar hills to the *Mahaparinirvana* of Lord Buddha. Before about 6<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhism flourished in Hajo but then along with a gradual rise of Hinduism, the Hayagrib Madhav Mandir became a center of Hindu pilgrimage. However, it is not known whether a significant Buddhist population existed during this time or not. During my fieldwork and interaction with the locals, I could not find any significant information on Buddhist pilgrimage or their possible conversion or exile from Hajo.

However, historically, apart from the connection with Garurachal hills and Kedar hills, one pillar symbolizes one of the strongest connections of Buddhism with Assam. A broken pillar of Hajo is also connected with *Mahaparinirvana* of Lord Buddha. The pillar is made of stone and is believed to be erected about 2400 years ago for commemorating the second Buddhist synod. Some call it Ashoka Pillar even though there is no historical evidence that Ashoka came anywhere near present day Hajo during his time as a ruler. Like many other parts of India, in Assam too, the records and structures related to Buddhism are surprisingly very few and are gradually fading away from the public memory. During the ancient times, scholars from across the world visited India to collect Buddhist literature and they translated that literature to spread Buddhist thought and philosophy worldwide. Contrastingly, in contemporary India, such rich Buddhist heritages are not very prominent in popular opinions and writings. The dominant narrative of Hinduism seems to have marginalized Buddhist roots in India or rather has projected Buddhism as a subsidiary of Hinduism. Even Ashoka built thousands of stupas or pillars and only a few survived. The stupas have disappeared like the way ancient Buddhism has disappeared from India. A huge earthquake in an undocumented ancient times changed the course of river Brahmaputra from north of Hajo to the south. Assam suffered a lot in this earthquake, bringing misery to its old architectures and temples. Although, the base of the pillar is still in same place, the second, third and fourth pieces are lying in different places.

The pillar is thought to be of 150 years prior to king Ashoka's time. Though the pillar bears affinity with Mauryan Pillar,<sup>14</sup> it could be said that it might belong to Mallas, as being their own Malla Pillar (Talukdar, 1959, p. 475). Interestingly, during my fieldwork, many people were passive while talking about a Buddhist presence in ancient Hajo. The hesitation could also be because the conversation was about a rise of Hinduism at the cost of Buddhism.

Not very far from Hajo, in Guwahati, a stone statue of Lord Buddha can be seen in Sukreshwar temple. The joint of the four hands of the *Chaturbhuj* image of Hindu tradition is placed immediately below the shoulder and not the elbow. As there was no place in the stone on top of it, two separate smaller hands were made with *gada* and *padma*, which are known as Janardan Buddha (Talukdar, 1959, p. 474). This particular statue and other Shaivite temples near it remind us that Buddhism and Shaivism were probably the most dominant religious forces here during that time.

In the present times, however, unlike before, Buddhist pilgrimage to Manikut Utsav gradually declined. Once, when Prakash Das was organizing an event in 2002, the Buddhist community was invited to participate. There is an interesting category of people called *Dubakhi*, who acts as a link between the organizers and the people who follow Buddhism in Bhutan.

One student leader shared an incident which may have caused a decline in Buddhists attending the Manikut Utsav. In an area called Amingaon, around twenty kilometers from Guwahati, one Buddhist convoy was attacked. One Buddhist lady was killed in the attack. It affected their participation as it rose a sense of insecurity.

Saikia also mentioned, during the conversation, highlighted the reason as to why pilgrimage from Bhutan declined. He mentioned that during his childhood, many communities from Bhutan visited the place, they brought goods and sold them here. However, they did not receive recognition from the locals and more often than not, were humiliated. Buddhist narrative declined with the rise of Hinduism. It made Buddhists feel excluded and may have discouraged them from visiting Hajo.

## Fact Checking of a Popular Misconception:

In most of the public memory and popular writings or conversation, people say that the Manikut Utsav as a Composite Heritage was started only after the demolition of Babri Mosque in December, 1992. However, this is not entirely true as the event was started almost one year before the demolition. As a matter of fact, it is after the demolition of Babri Mosque in 1992, in Hajo, the event in the second year was taken over by Hajo unite of All Assam Students Union (AASU), from the initial organizer Manikut Sahitya Sabha. As mentioned earlier, I could not find any concrete information about why and how All Hajo Student's Union took charge of the festival. But in the due course, after multiple conversations with the locals I found out that the festival done on a small scale initially. Since AASU has a lot of members and influence in society, they took over to conduct it in an organized way which was not possible by few individuals of Manikut Sahitya Samaj.

Since there was a widespread communal violence across the country after the demolition of Babri Mosque, the Hajo unit of AASU wanted to celebrate Composite Heritage of Hajo. The procession and celebration were also a symbolic gesture to appeal to all the people of the country not to indulge in communal violence and celebrate diversity of India. Prakash Das clarified about the emergence of the celebration:

Babri Mosque was demolished in 1992 in 6<sup>th</sup> December. That was a big incident. But the first time we organized it was on January, 1992. So naturally the event happened before the demolition of the Bari Mosque. This is a common mistake done by people when they talk about the Manikut Utsav. People try it to write history in their own way. When Babri Mosque was demolished, there was no effect on the people and society of Hajo. Then in January 1993, the AASU unit of Hajo took the responsibility of Manikut Utsav. Manikut Sahitya Samaj did not maintain the continuity in organizing it. Initially it was a cultural rally, but later it became Samvanday (procession of unity) <sup>15</sup>



Even though Manikut Utsav remains an extraordinary example against communal riots, it needs to be noted that it was first organized before the demolition, not after. Also, the shifting of charge of the festival to AASU denotes that previously, in the first year, it was just meant to be a small cultural rally highlighting the essence of Hajo. However, since there was rising communal atmosphere in the country after the demolition, All Hajo Students Union took over to celebrate it in an organized manner – setting an example of communal harmony.

## **In Conclusion: Effects of Politics and**

### **Social Change in this Composite Heritage:**

Manikut Utsav, over the years, seems to maintain its autonomy by not allowing political forces to influence the event. This was evident when I talked to the locals in and around Hajo. It is often said that in recent years India has witnessed a greater number of communal incidents and the majority-minority religious divide is often used politically to mobilize people on both the sides.

In my conversation with the respondents, it was observed, that religious polarization showed a significant growth in Hajo; like many other parts of India. However, Manikut Utsav is still said to have maintained its autonomy and integrity by not allowing the fringe elements to influence the event. In reaction to it, the Muslims or other religious minority people have occasionally talked about growing insecurities in that area. The reaction has been criticized by the majoritarian forces and this has led to a new public sphere with occasional debates regarding issues of religious polarization.

The influence of religious polarization is thought to have reached various social and cultural institutions in recent times. In fact, there have been violent incidents over eating practices, religious conversion and much of it has occupied the discussion in the public domain. There is also a constructed discourse by the fringe elements about Muslims and their political aggression and how it is affecting the demographic and religious composition of Assam. In fact, the issue of demography and culture has occupied a major aspect of politics in

Assam for the last few decades. These developments have led to a rise of contentious politics which seems to affect everyday life of many Indians, including those in Hajo, Assam. Highlighting the apolitical and secular nature of the event, one of the local residents (who did not want to reveal his name) told us:

We have a rule that we do not invite any political leader to inaugurate or celebrate our festival. I was affiliated to congress. In this way a lot of people support some political party or the other. But the exclusive political leaders are not allowed to lead the unity festival of Manikut Utsav. We only call people who are related to art and culture or literature. Some leaders may come voluntarily and we do not stop them. They too participate like a common person. If they come and join us, they are welcome.<sup>16</sup>

During my fieldwork, one of the office bearers of AASU told me that the festival is beyond politics and any recent change in politics does not affect it. In fact, they are expanding the volume of celebration of the festival by inviting a greater number of ethnic groups to participate in the event. Many tribes like Garo, Rabha etc. are invited and they are trying to include at least seven indigenous ethnic groups in the festival. Many Muslim students who are studying in Islamic religious institutions also participate in the celebration. College students perform Bihu, other traditional dance forms etc. The Doloi and Khadim, who are the most distinguished personalities of the celebration keep the flag of AASU in their hands. The diversity in cultural procession is expanding gradually. Even a unit of the NCC used to help and volunteer for the event.

In my interaction with a local shopkeeper, I brought up a conversation about recent issues of communal polarization, he responded that in the recent assembly election of 2021, there were some communal polarizations on religious grounds. He said that some people living in Hajo are getting influenced by the recent communal politics in the state. He specifically blamed the communal development as a result of mobilization by the ruling Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allied political forces which talk about the politics of Hindutva. But still, by and large, people of Hajo have not witnessed any communal events or incidents in an outright manner. The communal gap between the

Hindus and Muslims is only reflected during the election. He emphasized that even many Muslim people; especially Muslim women voted for BJP as the party promised to waive off the loans related to microfinance, for around twenty-six lakh women.

To conclude, a unique event like Manikut Utsav is still bears a symbolic presence of a much-needed secular tradition and communal harmony in our society. It becomes an exceptional event to counter religious communalism which is present in the Indian society- both at subtle and manifested forms- in varied manner and intensity. To preserve our secular ethos- which is deeply rooted in multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-linguistic essence of our society, Manikut Utsav still gives a glimpse of hope, by negotiating occasional, sometimes persistent communal attempts to divide the society. It will be interesting to see how the event carries forward its legacy in more difficult times.

## Footnotes:

1. Khadim refers to the person who remains as an in charge to take care of the management of the Powa Mecca Shrine.
2. Doloi is local term which refers to person who rules and governs the place; like a kingly figure. According to one of respondents when Hajo was a separate state during the Koch kingdom, it was nicely built area with five Dewalayas. All the Dewalayas controls the land, people and other belongings and the Doloi used to be in charge of all the affairs.
3. Jikirs are Sufi Islamic religious songs written in Assamese; mostly by a famous Sufi Saint in Assam, popularly known as Azan Pir. Nam-Prasangas refers to Assamese Vaishnavite religious songs. Bihugeet are the songs which is connected celebration of Bihu festival in Assam. Bihugeets has its own unique beats and rhythms.
4. Satra are institutional centers which are related to tradition of Vaishnavism in Assam.
5. *Bujranjis* are the historical texts which can be found in Assam – traditionally written during the time of Ahom kingdom (1226-1826).
6. Personal Interview with Prakash Das on 12 Marc, 2021.
7. Name changed to maintain anonymity
8. Ghat is the local name of riverbank. It is a common name used in many parts of Indian subcontinent.
9. Interview with Hiren Saikia on 15 April, 2021.
10. Urus refers to the death anniversary of a Sufi saint which is organized near or at the shrine of the saint.
11. When asked about the unique cultural event of South India, there was not a concrete answer from any of the persons whom I had a conversation with. So here I am unable to mention which exact cultural festival of Sothern India had an influence on Manikut Utsav. The idea seems to have more of an oral one than written.
12. A discussion with local residents of Hajo on 13 March, 2021.
13. Interview with Hiren Saikia on 15 April, 2021.
14. The Mauryan Empire was one of the prominent empires of South Asia, founded by Chandragupta Maurya centered on the present day Patna city. It was formed around 321 BCE and ended in 185 BCE. King Ashoka was the most famous ruler of Mauryan Empire.
15. Interview with Prakash Das on 12 March, 2021.
16. Interview with a senior resident of Hajo on 14 March, 2021.

## Acknowledgment:

I am deeply grateful to Ashif M. Saikia for helping me throughout my fieldwork in Hajo and introducing me to many of the local residents. I also express my gratitude to ISD team who helped me to write this essay by providing insights and comments.

## References:

1. Borah, Rinku. (2016). The Neo-Vaishnavism of Srimanta Sankaradeva: a Great Socio-Cultural Revolution in Assam. *MSSV Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 1(1), 1-11.
2. Das, Achyut Chandra. (2016). *SmritirKhofura*. Bitupan Jyoti Prakashan.
3. Das, Prakash. (2017) *HajurKhubakh*. Prafulla Pakakh.
4. Nehru, Jawaharlal. (1937). The Unity of India. *Foreign Affairs*, 16,231-243.
5. Saikia, Salim Mahammad. (2009). *Impact of Religious Institutions on the Society of Hajo in Post-Colonial Period* (unpublished M.Phil. thesis). Assam University, Silchar, India.
6. Talukder, Y. C. (1959). The Buddhist Pillar of Hajo. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 22, 473-476.

*isd*

Institute *for* Social Democracy

Flat No. 110, Numberdar House,

62-A, Laxmi Market, Munirka, New Delhi-110067

Telephone : 011-26177904 / Telefax : 011-26177904

Email : [prakashan.isd@gmail.com](mailto:prakashan.isd@gmail.com), [notowar.isd@gmail.com](mailto:notowar.isd@gmail.com)

Website : [www.isd.net.in](http://www.isd.net.in)

Printing : Sapna Photostat & Ammonia Prints, Munirka, New Delhi-110067.