



**An Almost Extinct Folk Ritual of the Barak Valley: The Service of Trinath or Tinnath Thakur**

**Dr. Mithilesh Chakraborty**

**Assistant Professor**

**Maibang Degree College**

**Abstract**

This paper examines the nearly extinct folk ritual known as the service of Trinath or Tinnath Thakur, once widely practiced in the Barak Valley. Drawing on oral narratives, ritual descriptions, and cultural memory, it traces the historical significance of this ceremony, traditionally performed upon the birth of a calf to ensure the welfare of the cow and the prosperity of the household. The study situates the ritual within the broader decline of Indigenous religious practices in the region, brought about by globalization, changing social structures, and the erosion of agrarian communal life. Through an analysis of ritual elements—materials, songs, kirtan structures, mythic narratives, and communal participation—the paper highlights the syncretic and non-Brahmanical nature of the worship. It also reflects on the place of Trinath Thakur within local cosmology, especially the centrality of Shiva as a personalized household deity. By documenting the ritual's narrative and performative dimensions, the paper argues for its cultural value and underscores the urgency of preserving such endangered folk traditions.

**Keywords: Barak Valley, folk ritual, Trinath Thakur, Kirtan, oral narrative, folk religion, Shiva worship.**

The Barak Valley has long been regarded as a rich repository of folk rituals and Indigenous religious practices. Once known as a land where “thirteen festivals were celebrated in twelve months,” the region nurtured a vibrant calendar of observances rooted in agrarian life, local cosmologies, and communal memory. Today, however, many of these folk traditions stand on the verge of disappearance. The forces of globalization, shifting social aspirations, and the increasing dominance of pan-Indian cultural forms have accelerated their decline. Rituals once central to the cultural landscape—such as adhibash during marriages, local forms of Kalki-Narayan worship, or the observances of Ai, Jhatpat, and Sidlanatai—have largely

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faded. Among the traditions nearing extinction is the distinctive folk ritual known as the service of Trinath or Tinnath Thakur.

The service of Trinath Thakur was historically performed when a cow in a household gave birth. The ritual invoked the well-being of the mother cow, the newborn calf, and the prosperity of the household. Unlike Brahmanical rites, this folk worship did not require the presence of a priest. Its materials were modest: betel nut, nakul batasa, cloves, and most distinctively, ganja, which had to be offered in multiples of three. What one could afford beyond these essentials was considered sufficient. Invitations were extended door to door in the morning, and by evening villagers gathered on mats or shataranji, accompanied by flute, cymbals, and dholak. The musical performances—largely kirtans—were mainly led by members of the lower castes, reflecting the ritual's non-hierarchical character and its distance from orthodox religious structures.

The ritual opened with offerings of three chilims of ganja before the deity, followed by the resonant soundscape of uludhan, chan, and kirtan. The seat of worship consisted of a simple picture of Shiva—significant, as the name “Trinath” denotes Brahma, Vishnu, and Maheshwar, yet the songs overwhelmingly centered on Maheshwar alone. The opening segment of the kirtan enacted the cosmic invitation, assigned to Narada Muni, who travels through heaven, earth, and the underworld inviting deities to the ceremony. This mythic frame connected the humble household ritual to a vast cosmic order, situating village life within an intimate relationship with divine forces.

The performance then unfolded through prescribed narrative sequences. The ritual emphasized Shiva's ecstatic dance, triggered by the offering of ginja leaves and ganja. This segment, rich in imagery, symbolized divine presence manifesting in the material world. The ashes of the burnt ganja, collected carefully on a plate or banana leaf, served as prasad imbued with special potency.

Central to the ritual was the oral narrative or kichcha, always recited by one of the kirtaniyas. The story of Trinath Thakur conveyed a moral universe anchored in faith, humility, and divine reciprocity. The tale of the Brahmin, who receives mysterious instructions to purchase oil, betel nut, and ganja for Trinath's service, dramatized the transformative power of devotion. Through encounters with the supernatural—his sudden blindness, the miraculous restoration of the shopkeeper's oil, and the recovery of his long-lost cow—the narrative affirmed Trinath Thakur as a benevolent yet exacting divine force. Even the motif of death and revival through the ashes of ganja underscored the ritual's belief in divine justice and mercy.

Following the narrative, the kirtan resumed with songs articulating cosmological reflections and the philosophy of life and enjoyment. Offerings of khichuri, payes, and nakul batasa extended communal hospitality, culminating in the application of ganja ashes on the forehead of each participant. In this moment, Mahadev emerged not as a distant cosmic deity but as a familial presence—one who entered the household through affection, ritual, and shared cultural memory.

Today, however, the service of Trinath Thakur has nearly vanished. Although fragments of its songs may still be heard in remote villages, the broader ritual structure is fading from collective practice. Social transformations, the decline of agrarian rhythms, and the loss of intergenerational transmission have all contributed to its disappearance. As a result, a cultural world that once linked household events to mythic cosmology, community song, and folk religiosity has receded into memory. The service of Trinath Thakur thus stands as a rare, endangered remnant of the Barak Valley's folk heritage—an expressive tradition whose survival now depends on documentation, preservation, and renewed cultural attention.

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