

## HINDU FAMILY LIFE OF UPPER ASSAM, INDIA

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The total life, economic, social, political, and personal is governed by "religious" customs and culture in India. The term "religious" is used figuratively as many historians, both Indian and foreign, claim that the Hindu "religion" is a mixture of so many diverse individual beliefs and cults, that it has become more a general culture that is modified by the different races in different parts of India. It is amazing to the casual visitor just how far religion reaches into the lives of the Indians. The Sikh must never cut his hair or beard, and wears his turban in a certain manner as ordered in the Granth, or Sikh bible. Nor does he beg either professionally, or as an ascetic, as no form of begging is recognised or accepted by the Granth. On the other extreme the "ultimate" of Hindu worship is to give up home, family, friends, all worldly possessions--and in some sects that includes clothes as in the Naga Sadhus--to wander about the world depending on alms for food. Theoretically these "holy men" do not beg. They just accept the money or food offered them. It is unfortunate for India that she has over five million of these religious parasites! Yet the Sikh religion is an offshoot of Hinduism, as are most of the great and less great religions of India, and all invading religions such as Mohammedanism, and Christianity have been modified and influenced by Hinduism.

It is therefore not surprising to find that the family life of the Hindu farmer in Upper Assam is strictly bound by superstitions, and by the worship of many gods to procure the protection of his crops, his food, his livestock, and his family. Although he is a Hindu there are wide differences in his family and religious customs and practices from those of the same type group in other parts of India. In spite of the farmer's importance in the economic scheme of things, he is of the poorest and lowest caste in India, called the "coolie" in English by the upper castes.

To a certain extent the Hindu farmer of Upper Assam has become nomadic in living habits, as he cannot afford to pay the land tax that comes due every three years. Therefore he builds his bamboo "basha" and settles in an area growing his rice crop, and occasionally a few poor vegetables, and after a year or two moves on to another spot to avoid the taxes! Although some of the farmers do grow a few vegetables such as tomatoes, cucumbers, and a very poor grade of corn, they cannot afford such a diet for themselves and their families, and produce it only for sale at the village bazaars. The farm families of Assam live on rice and fish which they catch in their many streams. Each family apportions a section of a stream for his family's needs, and there only he and his family fish. This meager and inadequate diet is frequently supplemented by wild fruits such as bananas and papua.

Due to the extreme poverty and lack of formal education, the Assamese coolies live in a very primitive state. They have little or no contact with white men, as their life makes them nearly self-sufficient. One finds them in small farming communities living in family groups, known as the "joint" family. Sometimes two or three families are living together consisting of grandparents, and one or two sons and their families. Most of these families live together under one roof--a frail basha about ten by fifteen feet! Some of the "wealthier" coolies build two or three of the bashas for the family groups! And contrary to popular opinion based on the continual political-religious differences we read of, Hindu and Muslim families live side by side amicably in the same rural communities.