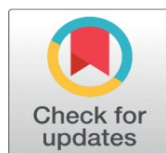


# HARI-HARA: TRADITION OF SYNCRETISM IN SOUTH EAST ASIA SPECIAL REFERENCE TO BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY

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## ABSTRACT

This research article aims at examining the tradition of syncretism in Southeast Asia with a special reference to the region of the Brahmaputra Valley and in connection with the deity Hari-Hara. Eclecticism implies the integration of various information flows, religious, cultural, and philosophical, which has been traditionally significant for the formation of spiritual and social models in the areas with interactions of several traditions. In Southeast Asia particularly the Khmer Empire, the syncretism of Shaivism and Vaishnavism together with Hindu and Buddhists is evident in the worship of Hari-Hara; Vishnu- Shiva. This syncretic practice was not only a sign of religious tolerance but also expressed political power and social integration under kings such as Jayavarman VII embodied in temple architectures including Angkor Wat and Bayon temples. By contrast, the case of the Brahmaputra Valley in India can be singled out as the example of syncretism between tribal and Brahmanical practices when the local indigenous cults were gradually intertwined with the Hindu ones and produced such localized forms of Hari-Hara. The Deopani Hari-Hara sculptures of the Doiyang Dhansiri Valley elucidate the syncretization of classical Brahmanical elements with tribal regional forms. While syncretism in the Khmer Empire was more political, more centrally driven and less successful than the one in the Brahmaputra Valley which was predominantly the result of protracted social contact and the Bhakti movement's stress on individual devotion and tolerance. The research article also shows how Hari-Hara became an important identity for religious and cultural syncretism in both regions, allowing the harmonious interaction of different religions and improving political authority. Analyzing artistic, architectural and socio-political aspects of Hari-Hara worship in this study reveals the values of syncretism as a function of integration in maintaining social cohesion as well as preserving the political authority. Finally, the comparison of the Brahmaputra Valley with mainland Southeast Asia brings further understanding of the processes that produce and sustain syncretic religious cultures, enriching religious diverse topographies of these areas.

**Keywords:** Syncretism, Hari-Hara, Southeast Asia, Brahmaputra Valley, Khmer Empire, Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Cultural Integration

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Syncretism involves the amalgamation of assorted religious, cultural, or philosophical ideologies. Throughout history, the blending of traditions has played a pivotal role in molding numerous spiritual and social paradigms spanning the globe. The term syncretism stems from the Greek phrase "synkretismos," meaning the coalition of divergent tenets. It refers to the merging of an assortment of aspects from distinct origins into a fresh, cohesive structure. Syncretism often happens in societies where a diversity of cultural and religious traditions cohabitates, guiding to the formation of new practices and beliefs that incorporate facets of the initial traditions. The mingling of customs can occur either naturally over time through cultural exchange or through a deliberate process of adaptation and compromise in order to synthesize opposing mythologies or philosophies into a compatible, overarching doctrine. In Southeast Asia, the blending

of beliefs has often been a noteworthy aspect, specifically during the first millennium of the Christian period. One meaningful example is the Khmer Empire, where the amalgamation of Shaivism and Vaishnavism, in addition to Hinduism and Buddhism, was conspicuous. The Khmer Empire observed the merging of these spiritual traditions to address the difficulty of new religious movements for instance Buddhism (Briggs, 1951, pp. 231-232). The syncretism of Shaivism and Vaishnavism in mainland Southeast Asia can be traced back to the Funan time (mid-first to mid-sixth century). It became more pronounced during the decline of Khmer culture in the twelfth century. This syncretism was characterized by the combining of local deities with the Aryan Brahminic traditions, guiding to the formation of new divinities like Harihara, a fusion of Vishnu and Shiva. Harihara represented the unity of these two major divinities and was a substantial symbol of religious harmony in the region (Briggs, 1951, pp. 233-234). Similar to elsewhere in Southeast Asia, syncretism has long been present in India in diverse forms. A prime case is the sculpture of Harihara, combining attributes of Vishnu and Shiva to symbolize the essential oneness of these two principals Brahmanical deities. Especially during periods of heightened sectarianism between worshippers of Vishnu or Shiva, this blended figure served to promote religious conciliation. Early religious texts like the Ramayana and Mahabharata additionally attest to syncretic traditions in India. The Valmiki Ramayan, for example, describes Rama, Vishnu's incarnation, paying homage to Lord Shiva. Similarly, episodes within the Mahabharata demonstrate mutual veneration between these gods, underscoring toleration among divergent perspectives in ancient Brahmanical literature. (Nayar, 2022, p. 146). When rigid divisions escalated, hybrid divine beings significantly eased tensions. Icons joining traits of multiple divinities like Harihara, Surya-Narayana, and Ardhanarishvara countered the disruptions of sectarian conflict by emphasizing underlying connection across diverse beliefs. Blending figureheads served to safeguard religious accord and mitigate conflicts fueled by rigid partitioning. (Nayar, 2022, p. 147). This tradition of harmonious religious blending is evident across India. In numerous regional practices and beliefs, one finds a syncretic approach that brings diverse faiths together as a cohesive whole. Various parts of the vast country have witnessed the emergence of hybrid divine entities and ceremonies, serving as symbols of unity amidst diversity as multiple religious identities intermingle peacefully as one in early Medieval period

## 2. HARI-HARA TRADITION IN SOUTH EAST ASIA

Syncretism, the blending or fusion of different religious, cultural, or philosophical traditions, is a phenomenon that has profoundly shaped human history. This blending is often evident in societies where diverse cultural and religious traditions coexist, occasionally leading to innovative practices and beliefs that amalgamate facets of the original traditions. Among the most remarkable examples of syncretism can be found across Southeast Asia, particularly within the expansive Khmer Empire. This essay explores the syncretic tradition of Harihara in mainland Southeast Asia, with specific attention on the Khmer Empire, examining how this merging of Vishnu and Shiva worship influenced and mirrored the region's spiritual and cultural environment.

The Khmer Empire, also known as the Angkor Empire, was an immensely powerful entity across mainland Southeast Asia from 802 CE until its decline in the 15th century. The empire is renowned for its monumental architecture, most notably the world-famous Angkor Wat, which epitomizes the magnificence and religious devotion of the Khmer civilization. The religious landscape of the Khmer Empire was characterized by a unique amalgamation of Hinduism and Buddhism, with the worship of Vishnu and Shiva being particularly prominent. One of the most striking manifestations of syncretism in the Khmer Empire is the figure of Harihara, a deity that synthesizes qualities of both Vishnu (Hari) and Shiva (Hara). This syncretic symbol signifies the oneness of these two majors Brahmanical divinities, reflecting a harmonious blending of their attributes and worship practices. The tradition of Harihara can be traced back to the early centuries of the Khmer Empire, where it served as a powerful symbol of religious unity and concord. The assimilation of concepts rooted in ancient India's syncretic traditions was commonplace, where blending deities was not aberrant. Within the Khmer Empire, Harihara worship grew particularly pertinent during consolidative religious and political periods. Amalgamating divinities like Harihara helped propagate harmony between diverse sects and decreased religious clashes. Namely, synthesizing Shaivism and Vaishnavism via Harihara veneration was a strategic unification of both traditions' adherents under a singular, concordant religious framework. (Nayar, 2022, p. 145).

The Khmer Empire's syncretic tradition also links to cultural and political influences from India. Southeast Asia's Indianization, which involved adopting Indian cultural, religious, and political practices, fundamentally shaped the Khmer Empire's religious landscape. This Indianization process is evident in architectural styles, religious iconography, and inscriptions within Khmer monuments. Moreover, adopting Sanskrit as a sacred language while incorporating Indian

mythological motifs further highlights profound cultural and spiritual bonds between the Khmer Empire and India. (Briggs, 1951, pp. 231-232). Throughout the Khmer Empire, Harihara sculptures and temples venerated this unified form, showcasing widespread acceptance. Often depicting Harihara with attributes of both deities - Vishnu's conch and discus alongside Shiva's trident and drum - these sculptures reflect a sophisticated comprehension and integration of the two major Brahmanical traditions (Nayar, 2022, p. 147). Angkor Wat, the most iconic marvel of the Khmer Empire, personifies the syncretic practice in its structural design and symbolism. At first consecrated to Vishnu, Angkor Wat later included components of Buddhist worship, mirroring the fluid and inclusive character of Khmer spiritual customs. The temple complex highlights many depictions of both Vishnu and Shiva along with other Brahmanical and Buddhist deities, demonstrating the harmonious co-existence of multiple religious traditions within the empire. (Charles River Editors, 2019, p. 15).

The syncretic tradition of Harihara also played a pivotal role in the political validation of Khmer rulers. By associating themselves with both Vishnu and Shiva, Khmer kings could appeal to a broader base of religious followers and reinforce their divine right to govern. This strategy is evident in the inscriptions and temple dedications that emphasize the king's role as a unifier of different religious traditions. The portrayal of kings as incarnations or devotees of both Vishnu and Shiva further cemented their authority and divine status. (Captivating History, 2021, p. 86). The establishment of the Khmer Empire under Jayavarman II in 802 CE marked the beginning of a new era of political and religious syncretism. Jayavarman II proclaimed himself *devaraja*, or "god-king," a concept deeply influenced by Indian Hinduism. This declaration not only solidified his divine right to rule but also set the precedent for future Khmer kings to adopt and promote syncretic religious practices. The *devaraja* cult, which integrated the worship of both Vishnu and Shiva, became a central aspect of Khmer kingship and statecraft. (Briggs, 1951, pp. 235-237). The *devaraja* cult's emphasis on kings' divine essence played a pivotal role in political stability and religious cohesion across the Khmer Empire. By promoting worship of Harihara, Khmer rulers could transcend sectarian boundaries and unite subjects under a shared spiritual framework. This syncretic paradigm reinforced sovereign authority while integrating diverse faiths within the empire. Indeed, venerating Harihara became a symbol of political and theological oneness, representing Khmer society's inclusive, harmonious essence. The architectural and artistic feats of the Khmer Empire further demonstrate commitment to the Harihara tradition. Temples like Banteay Srei and Bakong, consecrated to Harihara, showcase Khmers' sophisticated craft and piety. Their ornate carvings often portrayed Vishnu and Shiva's unified qualities, symbolizing harmonious fusion of worship. Iconography blending Brahmanical and Buddhist motifs within these structures mirrored Khmers' syncretic religious practices, highlighting coexistence and incorporation of diverse doctrines (Charles River Editors, 2019, p. 25). The temple complex of Angkor Wat, a symbol embodying the syncretic tradition of Harihara, has long awed visitors with its grandeur. Constructed in the early twelfth century under King Suryavarman II, Angkor Wat was originally a shrine to Vishnu yet gradually embraced aspects of Buddhist worship too. Intricately carved bas-reliefs depict tales from both Brahmanical and Buddhist mythologies across its towers and galleries, a testament to how Khmer religious practices organically blended multiple traditions. The central spire, representing Mount Meru from Brahmanical and Buddhist cosmologies, underscores Angkor Wat's fusion of faiths. (Charles River Editors, 2019, pp. 35-37).

This syncretism also profoundly influenced Khmer art and culture during the empire's peak. The harmonizing of Vishnu and Shiva inspired unique styles blending elements of each, seen vibrantly in statues portraying the deity Harihara with traits of both gods. Across the realm, such artworks embodied Cambodia's sophisticated comprehension and respect for Brahmanical traditions in their myriad forms, just as Angkor Wat itself does as one of history's finest monuments to religious pluralism. While the Harihara tradition originated within the Khmer Empire, its sphere of influence extended far beyond the domains of religion and art. The blending of Shiva and Vishnu worship facilitated unity among disparate communities, cultivating social cohesion vital to the stability and prosperity of both kingdom and citizens. The royal conception of the divine ruler embodying the attributes of these deities reinforced legitimacy of the monarchy as well as centralized authority over the expanding lands. This syncretic approach to governance and statecraft played an indispensable role in the flourishing of the Khmer state into a prominent civilization that endured for centuries across mainland Southeast Asia. (Briggs, 1951, pp. 239-241).

Despite the gradual decline of Angkor's imperial reign through the 15th century, the legacy of Harihara lived on. The syncretic deity's impact persisted in shaping regional religious practices and iconography, attesting to syncretism's enduring influence on the spiritual landscape. Artworks and traditions that arose in the aftermath paid homage to Harihara, underscoring how his fusion of gods retained profound significance as a reminder of Khmer culture's deep

roots and connections within Southeast Asia that transcended imperial fortunes. The profound merging of Brahmanical and Buddhist belief through the iconic figure of Harihara illuminates the intricate intertwining of faiths in medieval Cambodia. This hybrid deity, representing the fusion of Vishnu and Shiva, not only symbolized religious concord but also validated the earthly and otherworldly authority of Cambodia's monarchs. Broader patterns of amalgamation have continually moulded the religious and cultural terrain across history, underscoring humanity's adaptive and accommodating nature regarding spiritual persuasions. The enduring echoes of Harihara throughout Southeast Asia emphasize how syncretism fosters concord among divergent traditions even today, just as it did for Cambodia's medieval populace long ago.

### 3. HARI-HARA TRADITION IN BRAHMAPUTRA VALLEY

The Brahmaputra Valley, located in northern Brahmaputra Valley, India, has long been renowned as a veritable melting pot of cultural diversity and religious syncretism. Over centuries, as myriad ethnic and religious groups have interacted and intermingled within this region, a uniquely nuanced socio-cultural landscape has emerged. This study aims to critically examine the phenomenon of syncretism prevalent throughout the Brahmaputra Valley, with particular focus on the complex cultural dynamics of the Doiyang Dhansiri Valley subregion, by analyzing relevant historical evidence, archaeological findings, and the influence of various traditions upon one another over time. The recorded history of the Brahmaputra Valley tells of the settlement and integration of diverse ethnic peoples, including groups of Australoid, Mongoloid, and Alpine descent. Indigenous inhabitants practiced an early animistic faith characterized by animistic and fetishist beliefs that formed the basis of the original socio-religious foundations in early Brahmaputra Valley. However, the systematic introduction and establishment of Brahmin priestly communities within the region played an integral role in significantly transforming the cultural milieu through the gradual processes of Sanskritization and detribalization over several centuries.

The settling of Brahmins within the fertile lands of the Brahmaputra Valley was facilitated by the granting of land deeds from local rulers, a practice that commenced around the 5th century CE. These initial Brahmin settlements emerged as vibrant hubs of Brahmanical learning and tradition, serving to both spread Sanskritic cultural influences while also providing spaces where indigenous practices dynamically interacted and blended with orthodox beliefs. This flux of ideas spawned a richly syncretic cultural synthesis within the region. Syncretism refers to the blending or merging of disparate religious, cultural, or philosophical traditions. In the Brahmaputra Valley, manifestations of syncretism included the incorporation of tribal deities into the Brahmanical pantheon, the fusion of diverse ritual forms, and the mutual influence between orthodox and unorthodox faiths as beliefs adapted and liberalized on both sides. This process of integration was undoubtedly encouraged by the ethnic diversity intrinsic to the region as well as the willingness of traditions to integrate certain compatible elements of "Other" practices.

Syncretism can broadly refer to the blending of different religious, cultural, or philosophical systems. In the Brahmaputra Valley's context, this process involved the assimilation of indigenous tribal traditions with Brahmanical customs, resulting in a unique cultural and spiritual milieu. This syncretism is evident in various aspects of daily life, including elaborate rituals, festive celebrations, and architectural aesthetics. By comparing the religious and linguistic evolution of its distinct but interconnected historical and cultural landscapes - the Brahmaputra Valley and mainland Southeast Asia - our study reveals how these paths diverged from each other. Although Hindu and Buddhist cultures have a syncretism through the devotion of deity Harihara in both geographical areas, their chronological background and intensities are different.

The Harihara tradition thrived in the Brahmaputra Valley during the period of 7th to 10th centuries CE. This period also marked the synthesis of indigenous beliefs and their amalgamation with Brahmanical concepts, thus leaving behind many important artefacts, such as the Deopani Harihara sculptures. This amalgamation blends the attributes of Shiva as well as Vishnu, representing a considerable quantity of syncretism related to a religious custom. But conclusive historical evidence linking the Harihara tradition in the Brahmaputra Valley to South Asia broadly is scant. Here the tradition seems to have evolved independently, perhaps, under the influence of the rich cultural and religious milieus of the region. The Harihara tradition, on the other hand, was a manifestation that arose later in the Khmer Empire of mainland Southeast Asia, generally between 8th and 12th centuries CE. In this epoch, there are powerful kings like Jayavarman VII, who cleverly incorporated Shaivism, Vaishnavism, and Mahayana Buddhism to layer-up their celestial supremacy and political existence. Certainly, the majestic Angkor Wat and its counterpart Bayon rely on this deliberate "synergy" between Buddhist iconography and Hindu forms to represent a cohesive national identity.



The linguistic history of Brahmaputra Valley highlights how the region is a result of complex cultural interactions. The history of language in Brahmaputra Valley is reflective of its varied cultural transactions over time. Munda, once surmised to be a compound of Dravidian and Mon-Khmer dialects, is now recognized as a special formation, with a common substratum, if not a common aesthetic order, to both. Even so, there is no single racial type to which Munda dialect speakers universally belong, and irrespective of speech, Munda-speaking peoples are indistinguishable by caste from Dravidian-speaking peoples and must be descended from a time when racial fusion was complete. They were succeeded by the Dravidian and Munda linguistic groupings; and these two units were followed by the Indo-Chinese linguistic family. This type of mankind relates to a family of Mongolian order and has a flat face, high cheekbones, dark yellow skin. They must have come from Western China and entered India from the Northeast down the Brahmaputra. They spread into Bengal, altering the body build of the so called Mongolo-Dravidian type. In Brahmaputra Valley the physical type in vogue approaches a great deal more near the Mongolian than to the Dravidian, though presumably not the case in the Surma Valley. The Indo-Chinese linguistic family in Brahmaputra Valley is the main three subfamilies-Mon-Khmer, Tibeto-Burman, and Siamese-Chinese. First the Mon-Khmer speakers moved in, and subsequently the Tibeto-Burman-speaking tribes as well. Either these tribes assimilated the previous population or drove them into the mountains and replaced their language. There are three groups of Tibeto-Burman dialects prevailing in Brahmaputra Valley now including the Naga languages.(Gait, 2008,p.5)

The relation between Brahmaputra Valley and the mainland Southeast Asia, is not only observed in the common tradition of Harihara worship but even noticed through the linguistic association. Although the exact historical connections can never be known, the similarities in religious syncretism and cultural assimilation underscore how South and Southeast Asia are inextricably bound together in the shared tapestry of their histories. This study reveals the importance of Hinduism and Buddhism to adjust religious practices and beliefs to create the necessary conditions for the retention or radical adaptation of the power of political power and social integration in a variety of cultural contexts.

#### 4. DOIYANG DHANSIRI VALLEY: AN ILLUSTRATIVE CASE

The Doiyang Dhansiri Valley serves as an insightful region for examining syncretism within the Brahmaputra Valley. Archaeological findings from this area highlight the coexistence and convergence of Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical beliefs. The Nagajari Khanikar gaon stone inscription, dating back to the 5th century CE, stands as testament to the diffusion of Brahmanical culture throughout the valley (Boruah, 2008, p. 176). Archaeological discoveries in the Doiyang Dhansiri Valley, such as composite figurines of Hari-Hara (Vishnu and Shiva), reflect the syncretic nature of religious practices. The Deopani Vishnu image inscription records a proclamation that Vishnu, in association with Shiva, was worshipped by Sudras and Dvijas, indicating a syncretic tradition that included different social classes (Boruah, 2008, p. 176). This evidence points to a widely embraced integration of diverse religious convictions. The syncretic customs in the Doiyang Dhansiri Valley involved incorporating local deities into the Brahmanical pantheon. For instance, tribal mother goddesses were assimilated as manifestations of Brahmanical goddesses. The Kamakhya temple in Guwahati, originally a site of tribal veneration, became a major center of the Shakta cult, illustrating the process of syncretism (Boruah, 2008, p. 170). The cult of Bhakti flourished across India, promoting devotion to personal deities which helped blend religious traditions. Emphasis on Bhakti transcended strict social hierarchies, enabling people from various backgrounds to unite in worship. Nama-samkirtana, the chanting of divine names, grew in popularity at this time. This accessible practice encouraged the merging of orthodox and unconventional spiritual beliefs within a cohesive religious milieu. People from all walks of life participated eagerly in celebrating their shared faith through inclusive acts like kirtana, forging bonds that endured despite divisions in caste or ethnicity. Various reasons to the origin of syncretism in the valley of Brahmaputra, and more specifically in the valley of Doiyang Dhansiri led to syncretism. The multifarious ethnic groups inhabiting the Brahmaputra Valley have played a crucial role in the growth of such syncretism. At the time, the area was inhabited by several ethnic groups with their own cultural and religious customs. This cultural diversity provided a good base for religious and cultural exchange here different traditions have blended together (Boruah, 2008, p. 167)

The setting Brahmanical settlements by local rulers and patronage of Brahmanas were most effective arm of expansion of his culture. The communal syncretism of religious practices, nonetheless, continued given the region's heterogeneity. Heritage interpretation is how Brahmanical culture did not remove the traditional beliefs but absorbed them into an acknowledged faith tradition (Boruah, 2008, p. 168). The Bhakti movement in India started about 7th century AD which focused on individual devotion to a single deity and denounced ritualistic practices for the sake of God.

identity with the god was made essential. It was this movement that had a great impact on the promotion of religious syncretism in the Brahmaputra Valley. Their inclusiveness, for instance, permitted the incorporation of many local deities and practices within the mainstream religious framework, leading to a syncretic religious culture (Boruah 2008, p. 176).

## 5. THE HARI-HARA OF ICONOGRAPHY

Harihara is a significant deity in Hinduism with a unique image that combines half of the features of Vishnu (Hari) and Half of Shiva (Hara) into a single image. Such a reconciled form is a composite figure, demonstrating the unity and the interdependence of the two divine forces: Vaishnavism and Shaivism. Harihara is depicted alone at times wearing a vertical line of demarcation which divides each body into one half for each deity. The right half is more like Shiva with *jaṭāmukuta* (matted hair crown) and *sarpakundala* (serpent earring) and the left half is more like Vishnu with *kirīṭāmukuta* (jewelled crown) and *makarakundala* (croc-shaped earring). This image suggests the duality of male (Shiva) and female (Vishnu as Mohini) traits.

Harihara is one of the most common forms of Indian deity temples. Likewise, the trishula and kapāla of the trilochana is assigned with Shiva half and similarly shankha and chakra are assigned with Vishnu half. An example of this in the Indian Museum, Calcutta is a sculpture, Harihara from Bihar, which depicts the deity with Sun (Surya) and Buddha at his left and right, respectively, testifying to his composite cult image status with an inter-religious appeal.

Worship of Harihara first started in early Medieval period and this reflects a growing reconciliation between Shaivism and Vaishnavism. From this period the number of temples of Harihara that sprang up increased, quite a few in areas like Karnataka where the Eastern Chalukyas ruled. One of the early historical stone reliefs of Harihara in South India is found at Badami cave temples, in Bijapur district of Karnataka. This relief - bearing already the well-known features of both gods - shows the Samabhanga posting Harihara and little, "dwarfish" figures of the ravishing Saiva gana. Several ancient texts and Puranas such as the Vishnudharmottara Purana describe the composite form of Harihara. Such texts elucidate the qualities of the deity and the reasons why the combination is significant. Varada mudra and trisula of Harihara in right side and shankha and chakra of Vishnu in left side symbolism beyond the scriptures implies that he combines in himself the creation, preservation and destruction. It is not merely a theological synthesis but mirrors our socio-religious dynamics as well. This image emphasized and symbolized distinct sects and beliefs, facilitated unity as well as assimilation among the followers of these major Hindu traditions, and it seems clear the Harihara image was a reflection of both an assimilation trend and a compositional resolution of differences. Harihara iconography is well studied by scholars like Gopinatha Rao. This Rao bases on different sources and gives many examples of Harihara images of various art schools in his book "Elements of Hindu Iconography". Harihara is an important iconography in which it also shows how an idol's symbolic representation in this name differs with respect to time and region as represented by his research work. Also, it has been remarked by the scholars that the synthesis of Shiva with Vishnu also has a popular mythical background. One well known Puranic story of Vishnu as a female form, Mohini and Shiva as her admirer, exemplifies the fluidity and inter-definableness of divine roles and forms in this tradition. This is also the story reflected in the iconography of Harihara where the female aspect of Vishnu gets merged with the image. Harihara symbolizes unity, balance and harmony as a composite deity that fuses the great male god Siva and the great female goddess Vishnu. The iconography and textual references surrounding the worship of Harihara on the one hand bear witness to the rich syncretic traditions of worship in Indian society and, on the other, foster and exude inclusiveness and respect for the other diverse sects and communities in India. The study of Harihara helps in understanding Hindu iconography and reinforces the culture and religion of early and early medieval India. (Srivastava, 2021, pp.125-127)

Brahmaputra Valley, more specifically the Doiyang Dhansiri Valley, is a land of rich religious and cultural syncretism. One of the most interesting examples of this syncretism is an image of the composite deity Hari-Hara which represents the union of the Brahmanical gods Vishnu (Hari) and Shiva (Hara). It is a representation of the amalgamation in history and culture of two major sects of Hinduism, Vaishnavism and Shaivism. Through a discussion of the proliferation of Hari-Hara sculptures at Deopani, this paper critically defines the context of religious syncretism in the contemporary Brahmaputra Valley public domain.

Hari-Hara as a syncretism of Vishnu and Shiva is a profound model of syncretism in this sense that it is a resource or pool of core traditions with common values and history which form a unique cultural and religious identity that yet preserves the diversity it has just aggregated. The origin of the tradition is also due to other socio-religious and socio-

political factors, trying to adjust Hindus' norms on diverse doctrines and practices within the Brahmanical concept. The concept of such syncretism is further seen in the assertion of the Rigveda, in the hymn of Dirghatamas, stating that the seers call one principle by many names, such as Indra, Varuna, Agni, and Garutman, providing a premonition of both monotheism and monism (Harivamśa Viṣṇuparva, 125). Although the polytheistic aspects are also found in the idea of composite deities like Hari-Hara with one half of the body representing Shiva and the other half representing Vishnu, is a symbolic unity amid plurality of deities. (Gawde, 2022. p.562)

In the Deopani, one of the most important archaeological discoveries in the region, exhibits the syncretism in local religious practices with two sculptures of Hari-Hara. A well-known sculpture of Hari-Hara (FIGURE I), presently located in the Brahmaputra Valley State Museum at Guwahati, is seated on a lotus pedestal acquired by lotus and it is a combination of Vishnu and Shiva elements. The 35 x 20 cm in size, stiffness, squarish appearance, rounded head, the raised diadem encapsulated on its crown, the thick and platted hair worn crown-shape cannot be overlooked (Dutta, 2021, pp. 116-119). In its left lower, the figure holds an aksamala (rosery) and left upper holds trisula (trident), other side right upper, a padama (lotus) and, right the lower embraces sankha (conch), respectively. Garuda stands to the right of the sculpture; Nandi stands to the left. The intricate iconography supports the syncretism of the deity on the basis that it combines features from both Vaishnavism and Shaivism (Dutta, 2021, pp. 116-119). Several early scholars agreed with the modern theory that the high relief in the Deopani Hari-Hara sculpture point towards a rigid implementation of wood carving practice. Yet, the find of a wooden Vishnu figure with identical stylistic elements signified that the aesthetic aspects inherent in the Deopani Hari-Hara sculpture comprised a form of indigenous abstraction with a flavour of folk tremor rather than a woodwork induced stylistic change (Dutta 2021, pp. 116-119). The Hari-Hara sculptures from Deopani is special in the sense that it has elements of classical Brahmanical iconography as well as local tribal elements in its depiction style. Renderings of these figures often portray them standing in a samapada sthanaka posture (standing with feet together) and are heavily adorned with attributes that indicate their combination. The use of native tribal textures and folk elements is especially seen in how the faces, ornaments and ayudhas (weapons) of the figures have been treated.

Another image sculpture from Deopani region named Sankara Narayana (FIGURE II), is 65 x 31 cm and has a homeland like circle received of same elevation made for the divine force. The round bull, with its stiff profile stands as a high-relief sculpture signifying the syncretic art form that emerged in Valley. With a jatamukuta (matted hair crown) and accessories, the image also portrays some attributes similar to Vishnu and some to Shiva (Dutta, 2021, pp. 116-119). One other important bronze with Hari-Hara iconography, with the deity in a samapada sthanaka pose, from Namti in Sivasagar district, measures 28 x 14 cm. In this image, each stave features a sankha and a cakra on both sides, and aksamala and trisula fitted damaru (drum) in the right hand. These features, along with the folkish Indian native ethnic thread, are integrated and underline the regional traits that evolved in the syncretic art form of the Valley (Dutta 2021, pp. 116-119). The sculptures from Deopani region are not mere works of art and creation, but have various religious and cultural significance. They are an expression of attempts by local communities reconcile and synthesize the conflicting Vaishnavites and Shaiva undercurrents of Hinduism, and use a small fancy narrative. The coexistence and mutual inclusiveness, of many such entities, within a single regional culture betrays the polytheistically fluid conceptions of Brahmanical gods and the numerous ways they harmoniously overlap with a body of distinct prototypical and primordial roots, and in its nuanced interplay appear at all levels, potentially are worshipped in rich interconnected ascension in the advancement and refinement of a complex tradition of divine descendency. The important landmarks fully visible in the depiction of Hari-Hara also has broader socio-religious dynamics, including the imprint of Bhakti movement which stressed the personal devotion and that unity of all the deities. Bhakti Movement was responsible for popularizing the belief of Vishnu and Shiva as two different forms of the same reality (Dutta, 2021, pp. 116-119). Composite deities like Hari-Hara fanart of Shiva and Vishnu could thus be worshipped on their own. The syncretic art forms of Hari-Hara in Deopani, also demonstrates the way of naturalization on the other hand indeed stress on the adjustment of the people to the external cultural influences especially of foreign origin like the Sakas, Pahalavas, the Kushanas and the Hunas, etc.

The figures of Hari-Hara at Deopani are a testimony to the composite culture of the Brahmaputra Valley. Together, these figures represent the synchronistic blend of two great religious traditions - Vaishnavism and Shaivism - indicative of the region's syncretic, synthetic and absorptive religious ethos. The detailed artistic and stylistic analysis reveals that these sculptures comprise of classical Brahmanical iconography blended with the local tribal elements contaminating to a unique genre in the art world. The religious and cultural import of Hari-Hara in Deopani addresses the bigger socio-religious avenues apparent in what was a very broad-based influence approach shaped by socio-religious dynamics in

what was an obviously Bhakti mode forged from amalgamating foreign cultural terrain. An examination of such composite deities conveys an inimitable knowledge of the multilayered, multifaceted socio-cultural milieu of the Brahmaputra Valley, where many religious idioms have entered into a symbiotic relationship, giving rise to a homogenous synthetic cultural identity.

## 6. CONCLUSION

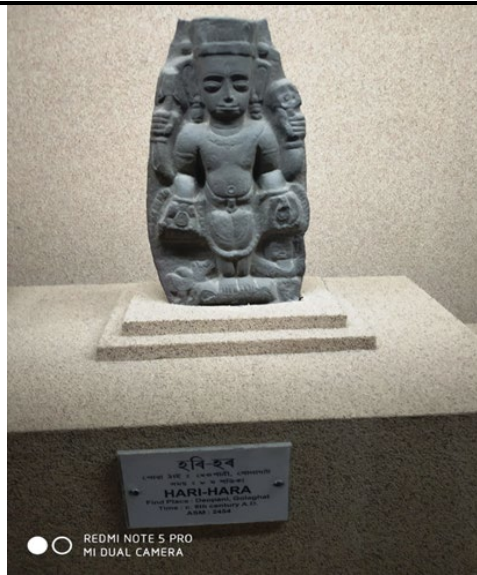
The cultural and religious landscapes of Brahmaputra Valley and mainland Southeast Asia are among the many sites of syncretism and assimilation, mediated by interactions between indigenous traditions and larger religious traditions of Hinduism and later on Buddhism. The presence of a number of religious practices along the Brahmaputra River in Brahmaputra Valley, points to the slow integration of the native faith with Brahmanical Hinduism. Hybrid deities like Harihara, a fusion of Shiva and Vishnu, exemplify this combination, reflecting the innovative adaptation of Hindu and Buddhist ideals in novel ceremonies and iconography. The integration of these elements is excellent, epitomised by extraordinary objects like the Deopani Harihara sculpture, a perfect combination of religious inclusivity and political unity. In the state of Brahmaputra Valley, the local administration also played a pivotal role in supporting and popularizing practices of cultural integration in order to unify their culturally variegated population.

By comparison, the process of religious syncretism in mainland Southeast Asia, in particular within the vast Khmer Empire, was significantly more systematic and centrally directed. It was under leaders like Jayavarman VII when Shaivism, Vaishnavism, and Mahayana Buddhism were purposefully combined in order to bolster their divine authority and iconic influence. In Angkor Wat and Bayon temples, contained within the separate preceding works, these symbols of intentional fusion are articulated in Buddhist and Hindu images that are integrated, representing the unification of the national identity as one. The elaborate process of religious syncretism that was centrally managed in the Khmer Empire allowed for the easy bolstering of political authority and social cohesion - a stark contrast to the prolonged and decentralized nature seen in Brahmaputra Valley.

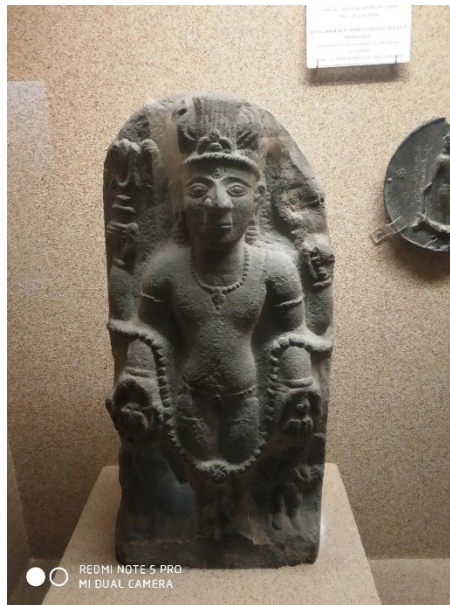
Although the historical and cultural contexts are different among these two regions, they each have both used religious syncretism to maintain and sustain their political hegemony as well as to create social cohesion. The Brahmaputra Valley case may be described as interactive evolution of local Autochthonous cults and Brahmanical tradition over time evolved into impressive monuments and co-operative state-policy for regional cultural syncretism. The combination of Hindu and Buddhist elements in the same temple structure can be a clue to the nature of a political investment undertaking by the Khmer rulers closely tied to God-king concept, where every political move back by majority of people believes are national religious foundation, symbolised in grand temples such as Angkor Wat and Bayon.

Brahmaputra Valley and mainland Southeast Asia provide comparative paradigms of religious syncretism that provide further layers of understanding on how religious assimilation evolved in this region. It correlates the flexibility and reforms in Hinduism and Buddhism and explains how such religious practices and beliefs could be used to enhance individual excesses to godly realms to help integrate and bond social order, which were essential for appropriating and legitimation of state authority. This subtle understanding of the fusions of adjacent peoples and blends of different religious persuasions taps into the complex dance of cultural, theological and political factors which produce syncretic traditions and help make what follows a diverse and spiritually rich regional drapery of belief.





**Figure 1** Hari-Hara Sculpture of Deopani



**Figure 2** Sankar-Narayana Sculpture of Deopani

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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