

THE RONGALI BIHU FESTIVAL OF ASSAM THROUGH THE PRISM OF ETHNICITY

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ABSTRACT

Assam, situated in the northeastern part of India is a storehouse of several ethnic communities. Ethnicity describes a collective identity and is based on the assumption that it collectively has its roots in common ancestry, heritage, religion, culture, nationality, language and a territory. All the ethnic communities of Assam have their special customs and traditions in observing the festivals. Bihu is the most popular spring time festival of Assam and is celebrated with youthful energy and gaiety. The festival is termed by many as the lifeline of the Assamese community. All the ethnic communities celebrate Bihu with the same vigour and vitality and in the process much cultural exchange has taken place. Amalgamating all the traits from various ethnic communities Bihu has emerged as the most popular festival and dance form of Assam and is recognized globally today. This global acceptance of Bihu dance and music is a fruitful result of ethnic togetherness and representation of the greater Assamese community in the world stage.

Keywords: Rongali Bihu, Ethnicity, Mising, Tiwa, Cultural Exchange, Bihu Dance

INTRODUCTION

Assam is situated in the north-eastern part of India. The state is surrounded by Arunachal Pradesh in the East, West Bengal, Meghalaya and Bangladesh in the West, Bhutan in the North, and Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Tripura in the South. Except a narrow corridor running through the foothills of the Himalayas that connects with the state of West Bengal, this region has chicken neck connection with the rest of India.

The total land area of Assam is 78, 438 sq. km (assam.gov.in). Geographically, Assam has 34 districts (assam.gov.in) and can be divided into three categories i.e. Brahmaputra Valley, Barak valley and the two hill districts. The population of the state is 31169272 (assam.gov.in) and is heterogeneous in nature. It has been the home of several ethnic groups- Austro-Asiatic, Dravidians, Mongoloids and Aryans belonging to different religions like Hindu, Islam, Christian, Buddhism, Sikhism and many other minor Gods and Goddesses. As a matter of fact, different branches of races, language and religion come up into the region since time immemorial as a result of which a racial fusion with their predecessors flourished in the region.

Assam with its composite culture, developed as a result of incorporation of different ethno-cultural elements from various social groups has led to make it a melting pot of different ethnic, religious and linguistic communities through a process of constant interaction over the ages in history. This composite and comprehensive culture known as 'Assamese Culture' embodies in its structure elements of different cultures, of which exact roots are difficult to trace. Anthropologists based on physiognomy and material culture tend to believe that this state has seen the intermixing of three racial elements, the Australoids, the Mongoloids and the Caucasoids represented through, apart from physical features the language, food, agriculture and such other traditional belief, practices and performances pertaining to various communities.

Amidst this process of cross cultural communication emerged the Bihu, being a major festival cycle in the Assamese calendar within which the Rongali Bihu finds a special place because of its celebrative mood as well as joy and social gaiety. Within the cycle of the Bihu festival spread over the agricultural cycle around the year, the Rongali Bihu constitutes another cycle spread over the month of Bohag (Sanskrit Vaisak/ April-May) observed in Assam.

OBJECTIVE

The paper will emphasize on two important objectives:

- a. To understand how Bihu is celebrated by two other ethnic communities of Assam.
- b. To study how and why Bihu became the most popular festival of Assam and the role of ethnicity in that.

Ethnicity describes a collective identity and is based on the assumption that it collectively has its roots in common ancestry, heritage, religion, culture, nationality, language and a territory. In the contemporary world ethnicity has taken a larger proportion of debate and analysis with particular reference to identity and representation and also to the idea of ethnically homogeneous nation states. Ethnicity is a social construct specific to a social and historical context. However notwithstanding the contested definition of ethnicity, ethnic identities have a material foundation and exist in contemporary society as social forces.

"Ethnicity is a cultural concept centered on the sharing of norms, values, beliefs, cultural symbols and practices" (Barker, 2008)

"Ethnicity has always been experienced as a kinship phenomenon, continuity within the self and within those who share an intergenerational links to common ancestors. Ethnicity is partly experienced as being 'bone of their bone flesh of their flesh and blood of their blood'...we recognize ethnicity as a tangible living reality that makes every human a link in an eternal bond

from generation to generation-from past ancestors to those in the future. Ethnicity is experienced as a guarantor of eternity” (Fishman, 1996).

Ethnicity is a social group, as commentators agree as a cultural legacy refers to “social elaboration of collective identities whereby individuals see themselves as one among like themselves. Collectively, people whose boundaries may be loosely or tightly defined – distinguish themselves from the other people. Thus ethnicity is about social classifications emerging within relationships” (Fenton, 1999). Along with issues of culture, language and other features ancestry also plays a role in mobilizing social transactions in a community characterized as ethnicity.

Assam being a habitat of diverse ethnic communities has a mélange of traditions relating to religion, language, oral literature, folklore, art- both visual and performing rituals and festivals coming from the ethnic communities like Bodos, Mising, Kachari’s, Tiwa’s, Dimasa’s, Moran etc. These ethnic groups often called politically as the ‘sons of the soil’ have however myths of migration belonging to respective communities. There has always been the process of mutual dialogue and inert cultural communication at work leading often to evolution of emergence of what Assamese culture is today which at the same time integrated substantially to its elements drawn from the Aryan religion, language and other aspects of culture migrating from the other parts of India.

Rongali Bihu is associated with the Assamese New Year and ritually lasts for seven days is celebrated to welcome the Spring Season with the inspiration drawn from the bounty of Nature efflorescing all around that inspires the common people. The Bihu finds its celebration in parallel among almost all the communities of Assam tribal and non tribal- in which the nuances of the life and culture of the respective communities find expression through the series of these celebrations. The nomenclature of the celebration as well as the dates of ritual commencement however varies from community to community. Notwithstanding the variations there prevails an intrinsic bond of commonness among them. The Bihu festival across the communities is also closely connected with propitiation of Mother Nature and is rooted to the agriculture and fertility. Fertility being related to art of creation, the Rongali Bihu was originally celebrated in the crop fields to bring fertility and a good harvest. The festival also celebrates youthful vigour, love, union, separation and eroticism. A spirit of joy and cherishment of community well being lie embedded in the celebrations. Therefore, the youth across the communities sing and dance in gay abandon with spontaneity in all their expressions and it is unrestrained by any written rule without however harboring on frivolity, permissiveness and breach of social norm. Thus, the Bihu like any other folk tradition brings to fore the representation inherent in customs and such other practices and above all the creative mind of the communities.

During the period under review a series of fieldworks were taken up in Dhemaji and North Lakhimpur district of northern Assam among Mising and Non-Mising communities and in Jagiroad and Morigaon district among Tiwa's, to take a view of the prevailing customs, rituals and performative nature of the dance and music associated with the Rongali Bihu as practiced by both tribal and non tribal communities inhabiting in the area.

In a semi structured interview of conducted by the researcher one of the informant said that "In Assam the word festival has become synonymous with Bihu, Bihu is not the festival but festival is Bihu." The statement implies two meaning, first the growing popularity of Bihu and second the diminishing status of existing folk festivals other than the Bihu of different ethnic communities of Assam. The informant also commented on the origin of Bihu and its connecting linkage with South East Asian countries culture.

So, the researcher has tried to study the various rituals and dances performed during the spring time by two ethnic communities of Assam Mising and Tiwa and position of the Bihu festival in their celebrations. The reason behind studying the rituals and performances of these Mising and Tiwa community is their continual linkage with Bihu, their ways of celebrating the spring time festival and also the cultural exchanges between Mishing, Tiwa and Rongali Bihu celebrations.

CELEBRATION OF THE BIHU FESTIVAL BY THE FOLLOWING ETHNIC GROUPS

MISING

Mising, the second largest ethnic community of Assam inherits a rich cultural heritage. One of the offshoots of Mongoloid stock Mising's now are concentrated in the Upper Assam districts of Dhemaji, North Lakhimpur, Jorhat, Sibsagar, Golaghat, Tinsukia and Sonitpur. The Mising's celebrate *Āli-Ā:ye Lī:gāng* during the spring time. The festival is rooted in agricultural basis. It is celebrated in the first Wednesday of *Phālgun* (February-March) in the spring season. *Āli-Ā:ye Lī:gāng* stands for 'sowing of seeds'. The ritual of the festival is that in the morning of the first Wednesday of *Phagun* an altar is made of Cotton (*xiupak/kopah*) and Mendala paat (*pi:roh*) where the seed is sown and offered to God for a good harvest. The researcher in the field work found that Mising people before 1964-65, used to celebrate *Āli-Ā:ye Lī:gāng* within their own families, but later on they started doing it in more elaborate way. The whole village gathers together and from then it took the shape of a festival. During the festival, at night only girls used to dance inside the house near the *meram* (fire place) moving in circular rounds. They usually used to take five rounds near the *meram*. While dancing the girls sing a song

*Lo lole da:boi lole
Sisuk chukbo chukbo bodiya,
regam gambo gambo bodiya...*

Boys were not allowed to enter the kitchen of the *Sang ghar* to witness the dance. Only the boys who play the instruments are allowed to be present there. The instruments used to play the music are *dhol* (drum), *lupi* (cymbals), *lailong* (big cymbals). The *dhol* use to produce a sound called “*gumraag gumraag*” for which the dance is also called *Gumraag* dance. The girls and their accompanist use to perform the whole night in different families of the village for which they get money and traditional foods and drink *apong* (rice beer).

From that Wednesday to Friday they don't do any agricultural related work. So, from the next Saturday they get back to their regular activities. The main purpose of celebrating this festival is to seek the blessings of *Do:nyi-Po:lo*, *Sedi-Melo*, *Gumín Soyin* and their forefathers for a successful harvesting season. However various changes have occurred from the traditional celebration of this festival. Now-a-days every village as a whole celebrates it in one single place and a *Mírong Ukum* is built for the purpose. Instead of going to their respective field for *Líggod* (first sowing) the villagers as a whole practice it in the corner of the place where celebration is taking place. A small area is symbolically tilled for the purpose and above practices is observed. Than the day is followed by public meeting, cultural competition like *Gum:rāg So:mān* (traditional group dance), *Kābān Kāpnām* (tragic songs), *Lí:gāng So:mān* (playful dance) etc.

Since 1964-65 there came a radical change in the Mising festival. It is because of a public meeting (*kabeng*) at Kolajaan (Silapathar) where it was proposed that *Āli-Ā:ye Lí:gāng* be announced a state holiday. Though it was not announced as a holiday or so but many changes came into the festival. For instance, the *Gumraag* dance from the *Sang ghar* came down to courtyards of village families of *Sang ghar*. Boys and Girls started performing together. The dance become audience oriented.

Āli-Ā:ye Lí:gāng is not same as Rongali Bihu. There is restriction in use of instruments. Mising Bihu can't use *Pepa* (Horn Pipe), *Bahi* (Flute) and *Gogona*. Mising's also organize Rongali Bihu. They also have *husori* but it is different and called *Lí:gāng*. In that the Mising's follow the Bihu dance and *husori* singing tradition. *Āli-Ā:ye Lí:gāng* is touched by commercialization too as all other folk festivals. But it is believed that Mising Bihu has not changed its essence and exuberance.

TIWA

The Tiwa's, another prominent ethnic tribes in Assam is a culturally rich tribal community inhabiting in the states of Assam and Meghalaya of North East India. The Tiwa's originally resided in the Khasi and Jaintia hills of Meghalaya and migrated to plains of Assam. After that Tiwa's are divided into two sub groups Hill Tiwa's and Plain Tiwa's displaying contrasting cultural features. Tiwa is an agricultural based community. So 90% of their festivals are related to agrarian work.

Bihu is one of the main festivals of plain Tiwa's. The three Bihu's i.e. Rongali Bihu, Bhogali Bihu and Kongali Bihu are observed by the plain Tiwa's also (known as *lalungs*) with great mirth and merriment. The *lalungs* call Bihu as *Bisu*. They observe the Baisak Bihu as a major spring dance festival. Unlike the Assamese all the Tiwa's do not observe the Baisak Bisu on the sangkranti day, but they observe it on the first Wednesday after the sangkranti. Wednesday is considered a holy day for them. During spring in tune with nature Tiwa's make necessary arrangement to welcome nature. The arrangements start from the first week of *Sot* month. The deities worshipped during the occasion are *Mahadeo*, *Mahamai*, *Jamkong*, *Bhagawati*, *Kalika*, *Kesaikhaiti*, *Ranchali*, *Burha Ramsa*, etc. On the eve of Boisak Bihu all the fruit bearing trees are wrapped with ropes of paddy stalks. After that raw turmeric, rice powder and cobweb from kitchen are mixed together and inserted in a *ba-sunga* and marks are imprinted in the cattle's body. After that the cow is being taken to nearby pond for bathing and adorned with aubergine, gourd and prayers are being sung for its luxurious growth.

The 'Baishak Bisu' occasion is used for *Joratola* ceremony. The *Jora* is a packet of rice, tulsi leaf and 'dubori' grass wrapped in *Kau* leaves which is kept in *Barghar*. This ceremony symbolically signifies welcoming of the new agricultural year. During the day time of that particular Wednesday certain rituals are observed. Homage is being paid to the ancestors and gods and goddesses. Animal sacrifice is also prevalent in their customs.

In the evening the cattle are fed with rice cakes and adorned with new ropes. The agricultural implements along with two hens are placed in the east corner of the courtyard and worshipped. This ritual is being carried out for good harvest. Along with that Goddess Lakshmi (*maisisa*) is also worshipped. In the evening, the young boys carrying agricultural tools and implements go for *Husori* singing. They visit all the households in the village singing ballads in Tiwa language.

Sogra Mishwa is one of most important dance performance of the Tiwa's during the spring time. The dance is related to spring season. *Sogra* means *Basanta* and *Mishawa* means dance. The *samad* (bachelor's dormitory) form the nucleus for this dance. This dance is performed mainly by the boys. They wear some special traditional attire and headgears called *Khumkhati*, *pura* and *moss*. These headgears symbolize flower, *pura* and buffalo respectively.

It is quite evident that though the nomenclature or the procedure of celebration is different but the essence is same and quite strong. Bihu is being celebrated by both the communities following ethnic traditions and customs. Upliftment of agriculture activities and production is the root of its celebrations. The Mising community celebrates *Āli-Ā:ye Lí:gāng* in the first Wednesday of *Phagun* but yet again they organize Bihu Mela separately. For the plain Tiwa's they celebrate Bihu directly inspite of having their own traditional spring time festivals. Tiwas's celebrate Bihu in a similar manner as Rongali Bihu is celebrated. Societal influence is evident here as the hills Tiwa's celebrate *Sogra Mishawa* in a quite different manner than the plain Tiwa's.

So, the discussion about the spring time festival observed by the Mising and Tiwa community reveals that ethnicity is drawn from kinship as well as is a social-psychological process which gives an individual a sense of belonging and identity through performance of their festivals. It is, of course, one of a number of social phenomena which produce a sense of identity. Though the Mising's and Tiwa's have their own ways and traditions of celebrating the spring time festival but it is seen that their dance gestures, songs, tunes are extracted and performed in the popular Bihu performances. It has intermingled so much so that now it's difficult to differentiate and separate it from the Bihu dance. The *Āli-Ā:ye Lí:gāng* or *Sogra Mishwa* festival organized during the spring time has brought in a sense of belongingness and unity among the respective communities. Ethnic identity can be defined as a manner in which persons, on account of their ethnic origin or primordial relation, and practice that they follow locate themselves psychologically in relation to one or more social systems, and in which they perceive others as locating them in relation to those systems. By ethnic origin is meant either that a person has been socialized in an ethnic group or that his or her ancestors, real or symbolic, have been members of the group. The social systems may be one's ethnic community or society at large, or other ethnic communities and other societies or groups, or a combination of all these.

GAINING POPULARITY OF THE BIHU DANCE

The Bihu dance today is globally accepted and attained a high stratum. With its innovative and creative performances, the Bihu dance has been going out on international tour and won several international awards to prove the "world-class" artistry of the Assamese to the outside world. The dance forms success in an international sphere subsequently brings national pride back to Assam, from which a sense of Assamese identity is drawn. When the researcher tried to find the reasons behind the escalating popularity of Bihu dance, the following responses are recorded:

Several well known practitioners of Bihu dance and music and scholarly thinkers were approached by the researcher to know about the gaining popularity of Bihu today. One informant stated that Bihu trace its origin from the various ethnic communities of Assam and said that "There is no other festival in the world as popular as Bihu". The reasons as stated are:

- No religion is celebrated in the Bihu festival. Everybody can participate equally.
- It appeals to the greater brotherhood and universal humanity.
- Love is celebrated in the Bihu songs and dances in such a descent way like never before.
- All other community, state, region can imitate the Bihu dance and song. There is not much complexity in the dance postures. It is full of life and vigour. *Eman Pran Prasureya thoka nritya aan kotu nai* (There is no other dance with so much of life and artistry). If we look at the instrument then it is never distuned. Every instrument is lively. It pleases everyone irrespective of class, caste, creed, sex etc
- It merges the old and new traditions and new and old generation into one. It has crossed all the boundaries so today Bihu is popular even in Europe and America.

According to another informant:

Even if the other communities have their own ethnic dances but they didn't get the proper platform to showcase it. They were often neglected. Earlier for ethnic performances during Republic Day and Independence Day only the Bihu teams were invited. And the Bihu teams use to perform all other ethnic dances of Assam. But when the capital of Assam was shifted to Dispur then they started thinking about the tribal communities. Otherwise they were always neglected as 'tribal'. There is a strong politics behind this. It is only from the last 15 years that tribal communities are given a scope to flourish and grow culturally. The then ruling party in Assam (AGP government) has lot of contribution to this. They introduced socio-cultural aspect in Assamese society. Otherwise it was only cultural. Sankardeva Kalashetra at Guwahati was established to provide a platform to all cultures and communities. Before that the tribal section of people also considered Bihu as the national culture. Bihu was termed as the national festival of Assam during the reign of Ahom King Rudra Singha, and when it became the national festival and it attracted the attention of all and gained more prominence.

When Shillong was the capital of Assam, the common people could not go and meet their elected representatives. After the capital was shifted to Dispur everyone from nook and corner of Assam came to see the capital city and could ask and claim for their own rights. Those political pressures suppressed the tribal communities for long. The informant also mentioned about Bhabendranath Saikia who has a lot of contribution in bringing the culture of the tribal communities to the fore. During the tenure of AGP govt. in 1985 at Kalashetra during the spring season under the guidance of Ananda Mohan Bhagawati Bihu competition was held. In 1984 at Rabindra Bhawan in Guwahati, Assam under the leadership of Nani Gopal Mahanta, a choreographer named Narendra Sarma from Delhi

was invited to choreograph Bihu. From then choreography was introduced to Bihu dance and Bihu dance flourished more and more.

According to another informant:

Assamese girls are more attractive and smarter than girls of other communities. Therefore audience loved to watch the performance of various ethnic dances being performed by Assamese girls.

According to one informant

Assamese is a bigger community and followed by many. Whereas ethnic communities like Mising is followed only by the Misings. Deori, Tiwa, Moran communities are not followed by Mising or vice versa. Therefore the ethnic dances are less popular than the Bihu dance.

From the comments of the informants it is clear that a number of factors are involved behind the gaining popularity of Bihu Dance in the global platform. First the fine distinction of Bihu dance form and its practice are so contemporary and global that it can fascinate everyone. It has an appeal to the larger society and its development. Second there is politics of culture involved in it. The other tribal ethnic dances were neglected earlier and were not provided a proper platform for which Bihu dance emerged as an indomitable and globally accepted dance forms.

CONCLUSION

“Ethnicity is constituted through power relations between groups. It signals relations of marginality of the centre and the periphery” (Barker, 2008). When Bihu is assessed through the prism of ethnicity it is evident that the Bihu has an overtly visible image among the spring time festivals of the two ethnic communities. It has become a part and parcel of both communities and most of their festivals are identified with Bihu festival. The concepts of majority and minority ethnicity can be referred to here. Majority and minority ethnicity refer not to numbers but to power. Simply stated, the distinction is between those groups which have or have not power in society. Often the concept of ethnicity is confused with that of minority and all ethnic groups are seen as minorities. By this, the majority groups become ethnicityless and it becomes difficult to understand what culture of the "general" society is all about, or if it is there at all, and consequently the meaning of interethnic relations becomes confusing. Majority ethnic groups are those who determine the character of the society's basic institutions, especially the main political, economic, and cultural institutions. The culture of majority becomes the culture of the total society into which the minority ethnic groups assimilate. That is evidently seen in assimilation of

the Bihu festival in different ethnic communities of Assam. The minority groups may preserve their institutions and culture like the *Āli-Ā:ye Li:gāng* and *Sogra Mishwa* in larger or smaller degree or they may influence the character of the dominant institutions in larger or smaller degrees, but usually, the framework for intergroup processes is provided by the institutions deriving from the culture of the majority groups. The majority groups, because of their position of power, usually are at the top of the ethnic stratification system, and the status of other ethnic groups is assessed in relation to them. This has become like folk and national community as drawn by Ihor Zielyk (1975). National community are culturally highly self aware. Members of nationality community are differentiated in social status from the folk community. Bihu festival is a powerful force of the national community over the folk communities and so the presence and influence is immensely felt in the celebrations of both the communities.

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