

Carnivalesque Approach to the Festive Rituals in Assamese Culture

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Abstract: In this paper basically I am going to discuss about our very own festival BIHU. And for Assamese people the element work as our identity and it reflects our community and boding (To be portent of a particular outcome).

Keywords: Bihu, Bamboo, Bhuj- vat, Bhela Ghar, Dhemali, Dhul, Gamusa, Kapouphul, Pepa, Pitha, Saki.

1. Introduction

Assam is one of the seven North-eastern states of India. Assam is a land of blue hills, green valleys and a red river. Situated just below the eastern Himalayan foothills, it is surrounded by the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura and Meghalaya, which together with Assam are known collectively as the seven sisters. Assam is place where you will find various types of tribes and culture. But there is no particular group of people whom we called Assamese. All the people who lived in Assam is Assamese. It's the place, where people believed in versatility and accept any culture and rituals. We Assamese people celebrate all kinds of festivals. It's not like that we only celebrate only our culture and festival. From Bihu to Holi, Durga Puja all comes under our celebration. But it's also true that, there are some special elements that makes our festival and rituals very attractive and gives us a unique identity in worldwide.

A. BIHU

“Bihuti Aadoror Bihuti Hadoror
Bihuti Axomor Dhan
Anuwa Bihuti Eribo Lagile
Nathake Axomor Maan”

The stanza that I have given is called Jujona. Which is also a one kind of Bihu Song. And the stanza simple means, ‘Bihu is our favorite, Bihu is the treasure of Assam, and if we leave Bihu then there is no identity for us.’ So, without bihu we are nothing, because bihu is the real identity for Assamese people. When we introduce ourselves as an Axomiya, bihu comes along with us. Bihu is the main festival for us. It comes three times in a year. And our new year starts in Bohag month, which is 14th of April in English Calendar. So, there are three types of Bihu in our Assamese culture. First, Rangali Bihu or Bohag Bihu, Kongali Bihu or Kati Bihu and Bhugali Bihu or Magh Bihu. One learns, for instance, that there are three main Bihu in Assam's social

and cultural life: Rangali (literally 'colourful') Bihu—a joyous New Year celebration at springtime, Kongali (literally 'impoverished') Bihu—Commemo rated with prayers for a good harvest and held at a lean time of the year when the fields are bare, and Bhogali (literally 'sensual' earthly pleasures'), Bihu essentially a thanksgiving festival at harvest-time. Each Bihu is a response to the relevant season on the part of a community of farmers and fisher folk. Songs and dances are a prominent expression of that response. Every bihu has their own identity and significance. And three of them are celebrated in Assam with great enthusiasm. So, now I am going give brief description of all the Bihu's and how they play important role in building our identity and keep us unite through all the rituals and cultural activity.

2. Rangali Bihu or Bohag Bihu

In the month of Bohag (mid-April), flaming leaves of trees and creepers add a refulgent lustre to nature. Leaves quivering in creepers add a refulgent lustre to nature. Leaves quivering in the spring-breeze announce the advent of spring. From a distance the music of Dhul (drums), Pepa (buffalo-horns) and takas (made of split bamboos) wafts across open fields, rivers, rivulets and streams. Men's hearts and minds get overpowered with music. The soft lustre of wild orchids called kapouphul (foxtail orchid) adds to the beauty of girls' locks ready for the dance. Millions of stars shine in the mekhela (skirts) borders. The ink-black clouds gather in the sky and announce the oncoming monsoons. The sky becomes radiant with lightning flashes. The urge to pro create rages in nature, the impulse to create and be fruitful. Around this fact of nature, the primitive man weaves cycles of festivals. The Bohag Bihu is a fertility-festival. With its seven days of celebration, Rangali Bihu is also the only festival that most non-Assamese identify as being 'Bihu'. I confess this was certainly the case with me. Each of the seven days of Rangali Bihu has its own distinctive name. Thus, the first day which falls on the last day of the month of Chaitra is called Goru Bihu ('Cow Bihu") and cows enjoy a fuss being made of them. In the early morning cattle are taken to a river or pond for bathing. They are sprinkled with water, offered particular vegetables and a song is sung:

Eat bottle gourd, eat brinjal,
Each year, do grow.

Father is small, mother is small,
You'll be a big cow

On Goru Bihu evenings, during the evening, cattle are fed specially made rice items called pitha. And their horns are decorated with oil and tamarind. Bihu songs are sung in a simple, rustic language. But if Dr Bhattacharya had given her readers only a translation of sample Bihu songs with no commentary, many of these songs would have remained obscure. Thus, the quatrain

I went to field to harvest paddy
A sudden storm came up,
I left the scythe and entered forest,
Lips were bitten by wasp!

Belongs, we learn, to the genre of Jeng Bihu—songs composed by women to express their feelings. The lips "bitten by wasp" convey a delicate hint of a physical relationship! Women dance to these Jeng Bihu songs in a secluded 'Jeng' ('bamboo' in Assamese) grove. Traditional women's activities such as weaving, fishing with Jakoi (a kind of bamboo scoop used for catching fish) and gathering edible greens, are mentioned in the Jeng Bihu songs. So, basically Bohag Bihu is full of happiness, dance and music along with lots of homemade food referred as Pitha-Pona. During this time there are lots of young group of men and women who go to each and every house of the village to dance and sing and to have some good times and bless the family members called Husori and the house people offered them Gamusa, betel, betel leaves, pitha-pona and some money so that they can have food together at the end of Bohag Bihu and that is called Bhuj- vat.

3. Kongali Bihu or Kati Bihu

Kongali Bihu (mid-October, also called Kati-Bihu) has a different significance and importance as there is less merriment and the atmosphere has a sense of constrain and solemnity. It is closely related with agriculture. Kati Bihu is also called Konagli, because Kongal means 'poor'. During this time of the year, the paddy in the fields are in the growing stage and the granaries of the farmers are almost empty. So, this Bihu is basically a humble prayer to God, so that God can bless them with lots of hopes and good harvest in upcoming days. The Assamese people basically the women worship, pray and welcome Goddess Lakshmi home. On this day, every one lights earthen lamps (saki) at the foot of the household tulsi plant, the granary, the garden (bari) and the paddy fields. To protect the maturing paddy, cultivators whirl a piece of bamboo and recite rowa-khowa chants and spells to ward off pests and the evil eye. The Bodo people light lamps at the foot of the siju (*Euphorbia neriifolia*) tree. This Bihu is also associated with the lighting of akaxi gonga or akaxbonti, lamps at the tip of a tall bamboo pole, to show the souls of the dead the way to heaven, a practice that is common to many communities in India, as well as Asia and Europe. So, basically the cultivators pray to God for the good health of their crops. Scientifically, these lamps used to attract insects of the paddy fields and they fall prey into the fire of these lamps. This helps the crops to be healthy and free from the insects.

4. Bhugali Bihu or Magh Bihu

The second most favorite Bihu for Assam is Bhugali Bihu or Magh Bihu. Generally, it takes place in the mid- January. This bihu is full of fun, food and enjoyment. This bihu has so many funny elements. So, during this every family feels happy and blessed because their food stock is almost full after lots of hard work and harvesting. The festival is marked by feasts and bonfires. That's why all the village people decide to have a get together and to have food in a one place. And to celebrate their happiness they make a temporary house from bamboo, leaves and thatch, which is called Bhela Ghar in native language. Where they eat food prepared for the feast which is also called Bhuj- vat, and then burn the huts and Meji/Mezi in the next morning. One thing very interesting about this bihu is people seriously steals ducks, goat, and other eating stuffs along with bamboo and all. So, that they can prepare meat from that duck and goat and burn the bamboos. Along with food and dance, they play some friendly games also, like Tekeli Vanga (pot-breaking), Buffalo Fighting etc. On the day of Magh Bihu, it is customary to eat a slice of a particular tuber called Moa Alu, Mowa-aloo (*Dioscorea spinose* and *Dioscorea esculenta*), and it is believed that one will become a pig in the next life if this custom is not followed. This tradition empirically refers to the rooting habit of a pig or boar, and several types of tubers are eaten on this day.

5. General Discussion on Bihu

The Bihu dances, people in order to trees and plants from external production of several Plants or shrubs kachu (*Colocasia conducive* to the capacity to spread direct link between the former upon Furthermore, there month of Āhār believe that it is stalks of the rice period when the earth is taboo, religious ceremony. almost as if it were the crops and Ecological Basis of the Bihu Festival of Assam 219 agricultural prudence in a region where a certain amount of exploitative activity needs to be exercised. Included among the practices of the dominant Sakta cult and chickens and the sprinkling of their blood in the fields in order fertility of the soil (Gogoi 1994, 179). Hence the agricultural landscape space that draws in religious activity, and links religious practice concerns. With gradual change and less demand for fertility rites, these form of "cultural practice": beliefs that cease to perform their original are held on to as a result of continuance of tradition. Although Bihu are based on ecological requirements, they are now context and have become a reified form of cultural practice deeper relationship with their environment.

Reference to Daily Life: People's daily lives and activities are repeatedly mentioned songs. Although the content of the songs stresses aspects community, the songs set these into a context, or space, that by everyday life and people's experience of the environment to the natural landscape and geography, thus actually describing setting of the cultural paradigm. The regular naming of local plants, vegetables and fruit expression is another striking example of the link between the daily life. Many of these plants are not necessarily cultivated, the consumption of such plants shows that although the society

settled agriculture, dietary variety is endorsed by the region's activities that people engaged in, including fishing and hunting, daily life that find expression in the Bihu songs. There is also wild boar and even rhinoceros in the flood plain: "Parbatat bhoiyāmōt tñāriilo Garh" ("In the hills I hunted the stocky wild I hunted rhino"). Such references to daily life in the Bihu folk songs may seem the entire culture and identity of a people is linked to them. A society, at any given stage of development, creates certain related to the way it is organised, and such forms in turn that society is oriented and organised. These cultural practices with the ecological context in which they are performed develops. Performance of the Cultural Tradition it is by now apparent how closely linked the Bihu festivals are to the regional ecology of Assam. However, it is worth asking whether, and how, the festivals are affected by alterations in the ecological setting where both the context and performance space of the tradition are changing. At a time when Assamese society is undergoing rapid change, not least in terms of globalisation, various voices have emerged that want to preserve the tradition, partly as nostalgia, and partly as a bid to retain or assert identity and gain political power. But ecological issues are never discussed in this economic factor are linked to ecological an anthropological seems to be a Context and Space. In earlier times performed under the mango (*Mangifera* is very small, but choice of site for such spaces are villages until twenty most villages today is the ecological stressed. The traditional stressed. The traditional broader environmental broader environmental base of economically is uttered expressing this tradition is tradition behind phrase with a wish tree, and then the gradual disappearance setting in which had extensive urbanised spaces references to the realistic as the almost non-existent in others. Ritual several rituals and customs that are followed at the time of Bihu are linked to the landscape and ecology of the region. In the Paora Tola Utsav held during Sātbihu, a local variant of the Bohāg Bihu in the Kamrup region of Lower Assam, there is a tradition of women going out to collect various plants (sak) at this time. It is said that these green plants give strength to people and that eating the plants collected during Sātbihu can make existing illnesses disappear and also ward off new ones. Although this belief may be easily dismissed as superstition, it is necessary to realise the role it plays in creating a mental notion of good health, as it can be regarded as a means by which the society deals with illness. Ecological Basis of the Bihu Festival of Assam. Community fishing was an integral part of society and it was in rural Assam during the month of Sot or on the eve of Māgh activities of this kind also have a role in establishing and maintaining structure. Here, the stress is not so much on the product of fishing activity itself. Modern relationships to nature, on the other hand, stress upon the activity of fishing, but rather isolate the product thus an emphasis on the commodity rather than on relationships community.

A. Contemporary Space

As we have seen above, the notion of seasonality is strongly ingrained in Bihu, both in terms of rituals and other cultural

forms, thus bridging the divide between the regional environment and cultural tradition. In earlier times it is quite possible that Bihu was celebrated in other parts of India, and the manner in which it is celebrated in society today establishes the fact that it is a festival lacking strong religious fervour. In fact, the two most obvious aspects of Bihu have broad ecological connotations: the change of seasons or the function of seasons; and practices relating to agriculture and cattle worship. On the day of Garu-Bihu, cattle are beaten with a sticks filled with Brinjal, Bottle gourd, Bitter gourd, Turmeric and *Garcinia pedunculata* (Thekera) also with two plants namely dighlati and makhhati, both found in the local woodlands. Nowadays, in several urbanised regions where this is no longer practiced, due to either a lack of plants within easy access for the local communities or a lack of knowledge to identify them, these plant names have become nostalgic symbols associated with Bihu. Thus, they have become both semantically and functionally dislodged from their ecological context. The plants constantly mentioned in the Bihu songs not only refer to the characteristics of the setting in which Bihu takes place, but they also linguistically recreate that environment. When there is a shift in the nature of the setting, these features of the environment begin to assume an imaginary, symbolic meaning as "frozen" objects signifying the festival, rather than a part of the lived experience of the environment that shaped the festival's texts and performance.

6. Carnavalesque Elements in Bihu Culture

As we have already get to know that Bihu is festive of happiness, colour and enjoyment. So, there is definitely some carnival elements that we witnessed during these periods. While dancing and singing all the young men and women teases each other by singing Jura Naam (teasing song) and have fun. Which is referred as Dhemali. And everyone goes to each other house to have Pitha and Tamul pan (betel and betel leaves). And also, we have got to know that during the Magh Bihu people steals each other's ducks, goats and bamboos, so that they can prepare meat and burn the bamboos. This is one kind of a sin in general. But during this Magh Bihu no one cares about that. Because all these happens only for fun and togetherness and no one blames nobody. So, during the process there is no social barrier or rich and poor. They eat together, laughs together, spent the whole bihu celebration together. Because it is symbol of our Assamese Culture and Unity. And without bihu Assam and Assamese people are just incomplete.

7. Conclusion

This paper presented an overview on carnivalesque approach to the festive rituals in Assamese culture.

References

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