



Customary Practices and Religious Faiths Involved in the Bihu Festival of Assam

Kabom Doruk and Dhritiman Sarma

Department of Anthropology

Rajiv Gandhi University, Rono Hills, Doimukh, Arunachal Pradesh, India

Abstracts

The word Bihu doesn't have a literal translation into English. Bihu is not just a word. It's a feeling. Not just happiness, Bihu teaches every Assamese to celebrate sadness too. Primarily, there are three bihus celebrated by the Assamese community: Rongali or Bohag Bihu (Festival of happiness), Kongali or Kati Bihu (festival of Scarcity) and Bhogali or Magh Bihu (festival of feasting). All these festivals marked certain special occasions in the lives of the farmers of Assam and were celebrated during their leisure periods in between farming seasons, and later became the identity of the people of this land and the community as a whole. Although the connection with nature is now shrinking gradually, these festivals steeped in local flavor are still an essential part of Assamese culture.

Key words- Bihu, Rongali, Kati, Magh, Brahmaputra and Akash Banti

Introduction

The Bihu in all its varieties and colours also entails a series of rituals in varying contexts of its observance. The rituals get multiplied as they are observed in varying degrees among diverse ethnic communities in the course of celebrating the Bihu by each of these communities in their respective ways. The Bihu originated from the agricultural cycle practiced by the peasant community across the Brahmaputra Valley since early centuries (Goswami, 2006).

Bell (2008) observes that rituals are communal and involve groups of people. Second, rituals are traditional that have been handed down through the ages. Third, rituals are rooted in beliefs in divine being. These three characteristics are rightly seen in the rituals of the three Bihu festivals.

Rituals and customs in context of the Bihu Festival of Assam

The Bihu festival is often associated with the Visuva Sankranti or Vernal Equinox and in Vedic times certain rituals seem to have been performed at this time of the year for the purpose of influencing the movement of the sun and securing agricultural reproduction (Goswami, 1995). However, in the common parlance it is the natural, environment and fertility which are more in the public consciousness because the religious associations with the Vedic canons or such canonical strictures are not found in application of the rituals. The connection between the sun, seasonality and agricultural reproduction are the foremost points in the public mind. As mentioned above, there are wings of the Bihu festival with distinct rituals associated with each of them.

Bohag or Rongali Bihu-

Rongali Bihu or Bohag Bihu is considered as the most colourful and vibrant of all the three Bihus. This Bihu involves a number of ritualistic activities which are an important means of communication and communion amongst the people. People from all sections irrespective of social hierarchy participate in the rituals. The significance of this Bihu is three fold:

First, It marks the onset of a new cycle consisting of ploughing and plantation. Thereafter, it marks the first day of the Assamese new year according to the Hindu calendar and then, it marks the beginning of the spring festival, amidst nature in resplendous, where one leaves behind the past and beckons the new. The Rongali Bihu makes its beginning with Garu Bihu, followed by Manuh Bihu or the day for men and the third day is called Gosain Bihu or the day for the deity signifying the caring of all in the household and the surrounding social group who are important for the health in an agrarian environment.

The first day is designated for the cattle when livestock are ritually taken for a bath in the nearby rivers or water bodies. Pastes of tamarind and cereal are ceremonially put on the foreheads of all domestic cattle and their bodies rubbed with it before being taken to be bathed. The left over is used by members of the family before bathing. The livestock are adorned with garlands made of gourd, aubergine, turmeric and bitter melon taken on a bamboo tray covered by banana leaves and are carried to the river bodies and thrown to the cattle after washing them. The cattle are stroked with twigs of dighalati and makhiet plants. The day symbolizes community caring of domestic cattle that are also tied with new ropes in the evening. The family members take bath and breakfast only after this ceremony is over. The ritualized activities on this day marks the convergence of sacred behavior and the tradition of giving importance to the care of cattle because cattle form part and parcel of agriculture, family, health and rural economy. Songs are also sung while washing the cattle for their healthy life.

After the bath, the old ropes of the cattle are discarded indicating the casting off all the evil forces. Then the cattle are set free and let loose in the fields. In the evening, when the cattle return, their feet are washed, they are fed with traditional sweet meats made of rice and then tied with a new rope in the cattle shed.

The second day is Manuh Bihu, the first day of the New Year and month of Bohag. On this day people show respect to their elders and offer love and affection to their younger ones by taking and giving blessings and exchanging Bihu gifts mostly Bihuwaan and new clothes. Husori or carol singing starts on this day in the evening. All the elders and younger ones move from one household to other singing husori songs. The celebration is also marked by a community institution of music and dance called husori in the evening.

In the earlier centuries of agrarian life young boys and girls assembled in the paddy fields and celebrated the festival with music and dance in a spirit of gay abandon. The nature, content and style of such performances were mostly erotic upholding the joy and beauty of the spring season. The openness of eroticism reflected above gave way in due course to a more refined and socially acceptable and enjoyable event of cultural performance called husori, where the whole village inclusive of all ages assemble to make it a community and ritual performance.

The third day is the Gosain Bihu assigned to religious function. Congregational prayers are held at the village prayer halls where people from all hues assemble and sing devotional prayers for the well-being of the entire village community (Schwartz, 2001).

Food

Food is another marker of any festival across all communities. The Bihu, is no exception to this. The Bohag Bihu co-inciding with the New Year, spring-time beauty and beginning of agricultural activity, specializes in varieties of sweet meats, milk and curd.

The elements that impart a striking dimension to bohag bihu among the three festivals is the spirit of gaiety exuding from the natural environment in spring-time that find expression through spontaneous outpouring of emotion, evidenced in music and dance that resounds across the Brahmaputra Valley. As mentioned, the music and dance find a structured and institutionalized expression in husori. The session runs for one hour or so in the courtyard of a household in which, in addition to designated dancers, percussionists and other instrumental accompanists, at times other people also jump in as a sign of merrymaking. They use instruments such as dhols (drums), taal(cymbals), taka (split bamboo clappers) and pepa(hornpipes). The session, having a structured format, begins with a ballad like song, sometimes bearing an imprint of Vaishnavite prayers supported by rhythmic feats of drums and the whole band moves in circle which marks a prelude to the performance. With the end of the prelude the actual session of music and dance opens up with the entry of core groups of drummers and female dancers. As the session gradually comes to a close, the households offer clothes, betel nuts and leaves and an amount of money by the way of respect to the husori band. The central aim of husori singing band is to bless the villagers with prosperity, to uplift their spirits, eradicate all epidemic disease and to enhance the overall welfare of the villagers in the name of Lord Vishnu.

Bihu dance

The bihu dance also has ritualistic significance. The dance is related to mother earth and the fertility cult. It has some fixed patterns and seems to have erotic overtones suggesting its association with spring-time fertility. The sounds of the drums played in the dance suggests the union of the male fertilizer and female fruitful earth. The songs sung also contain the language of love and have erotic overtones. As all traditions tangible or intangible, material or emotive are subjected to change with change of social history and environment, the bihu has also undergone remarkable changes. As mentioned above the Bihu, emerging from the agricultural cycle, has risen to be a marker of social merriment and then to social identity. Accordingly, the husori singing has also moved from the domestic household to the wider community space or proscenium stage with the form and structure more or less remaining the same (Barua, 2009).

Magh or Bhogali Bihu

Magh bihu also known as bhogali bihu is an occasion of community feasting. Celebration and enjoyment. It makes the completion of successful harvesting and merriment, thereafter. The celebration held for 2-3 days, begins with uruka which has its special importance. For this day the preparations start early. The male folk of the village assemble and build a dome –like structure, known as meji, in the fields. Adjacent to the meji a make shift kind of cottage is constructed to stay in at night known as bhelaghar. The meji and bhelaghar are made of dried banana leaves, straw and bamboo. The male folk stay the whole night of uruka at the cottage. That night the males as mark of pleasantry, steal vegetables, poultry and even wooden furniture and bamboo gates so that they can stay the night. The wooden furniture, gates etc. are used to make a fire and keep themselves warm in the winter nights. The vegetables and poultry are cooked and eaten during the night stay.

The women folk also start their preparation over a long period of time prior to the day of celebration. They prepare many different kinds of traditional food items like chira (rice flakes), pitha (rice cake), laru (sweets made of coconut), gur (jaggery), doi (curd). These preparations involve the females to assembling in one particular household to powder the rice in order to bake rice cakes. The powder is made in dheki, a traditional wooden pounding instrument to make paste of rice and other cereals. This meeting is a kind of social gathering where they discuss and exchange their news and views with each other. Being a festive time, the women folk also sing and dance in merriment till their turns comes to make rice powder. From there they return and start preparing the traditional food items. The male folk go to nearby river or pond and catch fish through community fishing. Mutton, duck, local chicken, pigeon are consumed in the grand feast of uruka night. After that sumptuous dinner, the males stay up the whole night.

On the Magh bihu day, at the crack of dawn, the family members wake up and tie bands of straws or thatch around the fruit bearing trees hoping they will bear more fruit in the coming days. After that all take a purifying bath and go near the meji or bhelaghar. As a mark of obeisance to Agni, the fire god the makeshift thatched sheds are set ablaze. The traditional food items and a kind of special mixture is prepared and offered to the deity. The flame gives warmth to the people and the bamboo, when fired, bursts and produces sounds like gunfire. It is believed that the sound chases away all evil spirits. After the fire, the ashes and half burnt bamboo lies scattered in the field. It is believed that the ashes and half burnt bamboo increase the fertility of the agricultural land. That day it is traditional not to light the stove of the kitchen. The leftover food items prepared the previous night are generally taken. Guests visit the households and they are also served with the traditional food items. One reason behind not using the kitchen may be not to waste food items, as it falls in winter season and food doesn't get stale. Another reason may be that the womenfolk who generally take the kitchen responsibilities are too exhausted for the uruka night and they are given rest. In short the Magh bihu with all its arrangement and abundance of food and feasting, is a ceremonial celebration as a marker of the completion prayer halls for hymn singing and praying for the eradication of evil forces and betterment of the whole society. Influence of Vaishnavism is clear in this aspect of the Magh bihu.

Kati or Kongali Bihu

Like the others two bihus, kati bihu is also intricately related to the agrarian culture of the community. Kati bihu, held in the autumn season, can be considered as a solicitation to god and hope for better crops from the plants grown in the field after a period of sweating and toil. It is marked more by a sense of serenity than merriment. An earthen light is lit under the tulsi (basil) plant every day for the whole month of Kati. The rituals involved with this bihu such as the lighting of lamps in the crop field by children are for well-being of the paddy in the fields. That day all the households plant a tulsi plant in an altar made of mud and water. The preparations start during daytime. The offerings include some cereals and fruits. In the evening, an earthen lamp is lit at the altar as an offering to the tulsi plant and prayers are sung by children welcoming goddess Lakshmi. The whole campus of households is decorated with earthen lamps so that no space remains dark. In a similar manner a small bamboo is planted in the field and a lamp is lit there. It is known as Akash banti and it is believed that it protects the maturing paddy from the pests in the field.

Conclusion:

The rituals and customs associated with the festival are related to cultivating the land; beginning plantation, nurturing the plants, harvesting paddy crops and raising livestock resulting in agricultural prosperity. Through the passage of history the rituals, initially not directed to any deity or personified gods and goddesses, were absorbed into the web of practicing religious faith, beliefs and customs prevailing among different communities.

References

- Barua, M. (2009). The Ecological basis of the Bihu festival of Assam. *Folklore*, 120:213- 223.
- Bell, E. (2008). *Theories of Performance*. SAGE, USA.
- Goswami, P. (1995). *Festivals of Assam*. ABILAC, Guwahati.
- Goswami, P. (2006). *Bohag Bihu of Assam and Bihu Songs*. Publication Board Assam, Guwahati.
- Kashyap, B. (2017). *The bihu festival of Assam through ages; A study of its evolution from agrarian field to the proscenium stage*. Ph.D. Thesis, Department of Cultural Studies, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Tezpur University, Assam.