

Festivity, Food, and Bihu: a short introduction to the national festival of Assam

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Amongst the many festivals celebrated in Assam, the festival of Bihu is perhaps the best known and synonymous with its culture and people. Assam celebrates three Bihus, amongst which the Bohag Bihu or Rongali Bihu (celebrated in mid-April) can be termed the marker of the community's nationality. All three Bihus are associated with the agricultural cycle of the region. The Rongali (Assamese for gaiety and celebration) Bihu marks the Assamese New Year and the advent of the agricultural cycle. The Kati (the period from mid-October to early November) Bihu celebrated



A man blowing *pepa* in a performance of *bihu* dance

in the Assamese month of Kati marks the completion of sowing and the transplantation of paddy. Marked by austere celebration, it is characterized by the lighting of earthen lamps in the paddy fields and courtyards of homes as obeisance to the almighty for good harvest and the protection of crops. The Magh Bihu or the Bhogali (the Assamese equivalent of feasting) Bihu marks the end of the successful harvesting of crops and the ensuing celebration. The Bihu festivals are secular and, by and large, non-religious in nature. People belonging to different castes and creeds participate in the celebrations.

On analysis of Bihu festivals, we can perhaps come to a conclusion that Bihu is an ancient folk festival of Assam and its inhabitants. The Rongali Bihu is essentially a spring festival that sets the tune for the advent of a new agricultural cycle. It starts with the washing and worshipping of agricultural implements, the bullocks and the cows and proceeds to the dances and songs of the festivities. The Bihu dance is supposed to be related to the fecundity principle of nature, and was originally performed in the fields to symbolize the fertile and productive nature of the earth. With the passage of time, the Bihu assumed the role of romantic interplay between young men and women and the accompanying songs reflected different facets of life in Assam. Thus the Bihu songs could include facts like the building of new bridges, visits of politicians, changing fashion and the rural-urban divide.

Till the fourth and fifth decades of the twentieth century, Bihu songs and dances survived in the rural hinterland of Assam. It may be mentioned that during turbulent historical times in the last part of the 18th and the first part of the 19th century, both revolutionaries and rulers used Bihu songs as socio-cultural tools to rally the people. During this period, some elite of the state, under the influence of colonial and western paradigms, disparaged the Bihu festivities as lurid, immoral and having sexual overtones. However, the Bihu had already moved away from the fields

to the royal amphitheater, thanks to the patronage of the Ahom kings. Later, in the mid-twentieth century, because of the efforts of some scholars like Lakshminath Bezborua, Gyanadhiram Barua, Radha Gobinda Baruah amongst others, the Rongali Bihu came to the stages of urban and semi-urban locales in the state.

The Rongali and Bhogali Bihus are marked by their distinctive food items, where food becomes a metaphor for success, happiness and prosperity. It is customary to eat rare varieties of pot herbs (*xak* in Assamese) during the celebration of Rongali Bihu. In the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra, many people eat 101

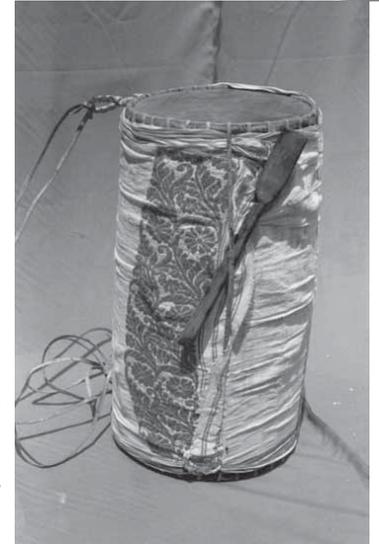


varieties of pot herbs on the first or seventh day of the celebration of Rongali Bihu, whereas in the lower reaches of the Brahmaputra, people eat seven varieties of pot herbs on the 7th day of Rongali Bihu. Different varieties of pancakes and confectionaries made out of coconut, sesame seeds, jaggery, rice powder, sticky rice, and milk products are prepared in a traditional way. Amongst some ethnic communities, brewing of rice beer and preparation of pork and chicken is a must.

The Bhogali Bihu is the Bihu given entirely to feasting. It is a time for eating and merrymaking after a successful harvest. Community feasts are organized across the entire state. Fish and meat are inseparable items of such feasting. It is obligatory for people to visit each other's households as invitations are not sent out.

Bihu has spawned a distinctive material culture in Assam. The mekhala chadar (two-piece apparel worn by women in Assam) woven out of the muga silk is a distinctive identity marker; so are the colourful japis (originally protective headgear woven out of bamboo and palm leaves worn by farmers as protection against

sun and rain) and the intricately woven gamochas (traditional cotton towels for wiping the body; ga means body and mocha means to wipe). Musical instruments include the dhol (traditional drums), the tal (traditional cymbals), the pepa (traditional wind pipe made out of buffalo horn) and the gagana (a delicate but simple instrument made out of bamboo and played by simultaneously blowing wind from the mouth and vibrating the instrument by hand). In spite of local variations, Bihu remains a cohesive cultural force amongst the different communities of Assam even in the present divisive times. ❁



Assamese dhol, a traditional drum

Women in Assamese Folktales

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The Assamese equivalent for folktale is Sadhu or Sadhukatha. The word Sadhu means "the righteous"; hence Sadhukatha means a moral tale. Another meaning is derived from Saud or Saudagar, a merchant. According to P. Goswami

The Assamese for an oral tale is sadhukatha, usually derived from the Sanskrit sadhu, a merchant, and katha, a tale, meaning thereby that the sadhukatha is a tale told by a wandering merchant (Goswami 1970: 80).

The present discussion focuses on some of the Assamese folktale collections by Lakshminath Bezborua which fall under Magical or Wonder or Romantic or Supernatural tales. The Burhi Air Sadhu and the Kakadeuta aru Natilora are two famous collections by Lakshminath Bezborua.

By analyzing the gender roles played out in these tales, an idea of the status of women in Assamese society can be made. Outlines of the selected tales follow:

The Kite's Daughter:

A baby girl was abandoned by her mother because she was warned by her husband that he will sell her if she gives birth to a girl child again. A Kite brought up the girl, and married her off to a merchant with seven other wives. The co-wives created difficulties for her and the Kite mother would help her in difficulties. Once, the girl was set to weave a cloth and cook rice. When she called her Kite mother, the latter appeared and performed everything magically. The co-wives of the girl later killed the Kite mother and sold the daughter to a tradesman. She was found wailing on the riverbank by her husband. The merchant commanded his senior wives to walk on a thread stretched across a pit full of spikes. Six of them fell in, while one escaped because she was not in the plot to sell the Kite's daughter (Bezborua 2005: 41-47).

Tula and Teja:

A man had two wives; the younger one was his favourite. The elder wife had a daughter named Teja and a son named Kanai. The younger wife had a daughter named Tula. Once, the co-wives went fishing. The younger one pushed the elder into the water, muttering: "As a big tortoise may you stay."

Later, the tortoise revealed herself to her children and gave them food every day. They became healthy and strong. Their step mother observed this and came to

