



Urbanization of folklore and folklife: A case study of assamese festival bihu

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Abstract

Bihu is considered the main festival of the people of Assam. There are three Bihus viz., Bhogali Bihu, Rangali Bihu and Kangali Bihu, out of them first two Bihus are endearing to hearts of the Assamese people. Earlier for observance of Bihu city dwellers went to villages tracing their roots or origin. Due to urbanization and rapid changes in rural economy festival of Bihu changed a lot incorporating many dimensions into it. Bihu is no more remained in the villages; Bihu is now enacted in the cities of the state with all festivities. Bihu songs and Bihu dances are performed on the stage and brought to the digital world. *Ladu-pitha*, *Dai-Chira*, *Gamosas*, etc., are available in the cities and are sold in the markets of the cities. Nowadays many things not available in some villages for observance of Bihu can be bought in the cities. *Bhelaghar* or *meji* even is made in the cities. The Bihu as a whole is transported to the cities though Bihu was mainly related to the village folks associated with agriculture.

Media particularly electronic media has played a great role in making Bihu more festive. For Assamese people Bihu has been transformed into a symbolic act of seeking and displaying one's identity. Observing and performing Bihu the Assamese Diaspora even gets relief from grief arising out of cultural loneliness and alienation in a foreign land. In this paper I will try to highlight how a folk festival called Bihu changed almost in its every aspect recently and imbibed new connotations for folk life due to rapid urbanization and development of mass media.

Keywords: Assam, bihu, urbanization, electronic media, assamese diaspora, new connotations

Introduction

Assam is one of the states of North East India. This state in the plains is situated in the middle part of the region. The river Brahmaputra has been passing through Assam east to west and this resulted in the birth of the Brahmaputra valley civilization. Since time immemorial a varied tribes and communities have been living on the banks of this mighty river. Apart from the Brahmaputra other rivers and marshes also contributed a lot to the development of the cultural tapestry of the state.

The Ahoms, who are the descendents of the Tai-Shan people, brought new cultural and political vigour to Assam when they under the leadership of Seukapha entered the state in early part of the thirteenth century in search of a new abode. They originally came from Yunnan province of China via Brahmesha or present Myanmar. The Ahoms ruled Assam for about six hundred turbulent years. The dynasty of the Ahoms is one of the longest ruling dynasties in the world. They gave the Assamese society a new identity in socio-cultural and economic front. Bihu, the chief festival of the Assamese people, also evolved mainly with the Ahoms. The political system devised by them continued even during the British rule which started after the Yandaboo Treaty (1826) concluded at the end of the first Anglo-Burmese war. The Burmese invaders were responsible to a great extent for the downfall of the Ahoms. Bihu is the main festival of the people of Assam. Assamese people observe three Bihus viz., Magh or Bhogali Bihu, Bohag or Rangali Bihu and Kati or Kangali Bihu, out of them first two Bihus are endearing to their hearts.

Source of data and methodology

For this paper data were mainly collected from observation by the researcher himself and secondary sources available in

this field. I have resorted to interview method also and contacted a few persons of different locations who seem to be informative in this field. These interviews were informally conducted and without questionnaires. This is a qualitative study based mainly on the subjective analysis of secondary data and observation of events for a long time by the researcher.

Urbanization of folklore and folklife

Noted folklorist Richard M. Dorson has divided folklore and folklife studies into four fields: oral literature, material culture, social folk custom and performing folk arts. Bihu encompasses all particularly the last two fields.

Urbanization is one of the important features of modern age. Expansion of urbanization is taking place very rapidly in a developing country like India. Cities and towns are gulping the villages one by one along with their cultures. In this process some of the cultural elements vanished and some of them remained. Whatever remained did not remain the same. Urbanization drastically changed some of the cultural forms. Culture change is inevitable but urbanization made the process of change more rapid. One of the features of urbanization is multiculturalism. So this multiculturalism is reflected in the age-old festivals we celebrate in the cities and small towns even. One example of this is Bihu of the Assamese people.

Bihu earlier

Festivals are ancient and resilient cultural forms which are richly varied in organization and function across the societies of the world. "For all their diversity, however, festivals display certain characteristic features. They occur at calendrically regulated intervals and are public in nature,

participatory in ethos, complex in structure, and multiple in voice, scene, and purpose.” (R. Bauman eds. 1992: 261) ^[19]. Bihu is a calendrical or seasonal festival. With the passage of time along with the observance of age-old customs, it has imbibed lot of elements due to socio-economic changes taking place in the society.

“In Assamese, the word by itself usually refers to Bohag Bihu, the formal part of which starts on the Chaitra (Chot) Samkranti day and extends to the sixth day of Baisakh (Bohag), though the merriment begins earlier and spills over beyond the period prescribed for the festival.” (P. Goswami 2003: 6) ^[15].

European folklorists in the second half of the nineteenth century “ speculated that modern festivals were survivals of ancient community magical ritual whose purpose was to make the days to grow longer, to expel winter, to appease gods of the fields, forests, and skies, and most especially, to promote fertility. Festival activities were thus construed as symbolic representations of situations the participants would like to occur. Thus, feasting was a fertility rite, a prayer for abundance; sexual licence during the festival was a magical ritual to ensure an abundant harvest, and so forth.” (R.M. Dorson eds. 1995: 160).

Bihu was prevalent in the state of Assam even before the advent of the Ahoms. But the Ahoms gave the Bihu a new status and recognition when they brought Bihu from the paddy field to the foreground of Rangghar.

The Assamese society was mostly rural even in the middle of the last century. More than ninety percent of the people were mainly engaged in agricultural work directly and indirectly. So the root of the culture of the state is found in the villages. Earlier Bihu was observed in the villages only. Among the three Bihus, Bahag Bihu or Rangali Bihu and Magh Bihu or Bhogali Bihu were celebrated in April and January respectively with much merriment and enthusiasm. Kati Bihu or Kangali Bihu was celebrated at the time of scarcity in October and so its celebration was without enthusiasm. City dwellers also came to villages for the celebration of Bihu. Then people strictly followed the rituals of the festival. People used to celebrate it for a longer time. During Bihu time it was almost customary for the people to visit the homes of their relatives and friends far and near.

Bihu at present

As per the Indian Census data of 2011, more than eighty five percent people of Assam still live in the villages. But character of the rural life changed to a great extent. There are many villages in Assam where agriculture is not done or done by negligent number of people. Many people inspite of having agricultural land changed their occupation. The way of celebration of this festival also changed. Bihu is actually an agricultural festival, but nowadays people celebrate the festival though majority of them are detached from agriculture. So Bihu is observed by people without having any association with agriculture.

When the debate was going on regarding the obscenity of Bihu dances, in 1912 a new tradition was introduced in the cultural arena of Assam. In that very year Bhogali Bihu was publicly celebrated on the banks of the Kolong River at Nagaon and Bihu dances and songs were performed on the stage for the first time. On the foreground of the Rangghar of Sibsagar Bihu was given the national status by the Ahom king and it is not an exaggeration to say that again on the stage of the Bhogali Bihu celebration at Nagaon, Bihu was

given the status of State culture (S. Barkataki eds. 2009:53) ^[5].

It is a fact that Bihu is now commoditized. *Ladu-pitha* is made bringing rice, *gur*, and other things from the markets of the towns. There may not be a single *dheki* in a village. So ladu-pitha is made in the factories of the towns in bulk proportions. In this process different Self Help Groups are also involved. People of rural and semi-urban places also buy these products. So roots of the culture got removed from its origin.

Connotations of Bihu changed. Bihu dance is now a stage performing art embracing a whole lot of connotations. It now acquired a main cultural symbol of the state after coming to the cities. It symbolizes all the three Bihus.

In a festival the element of celebration rather than the meaning is more important. “A revealing clue to the persistence of the festival is the fact that a great number of festivals continue to flourish, maintaining essentially the same form, long after their original meaning has been forgotten. This clue should suggest to the investigator that the enduring significance of the festival lies less in its avowed purpose or meaning than in the fact of celebration itself.” (R.M. Dorson eds.1995:160)

In case of Assamese Bihu also prime importance of it is found in its celebration. Because of this Magh Bihu or Bhogali Bihu among the three Bihus got prominence due to feast and rejoice involved it. People do not bother the purpose and meaning behind this festival being celebrated since time immemorial.

Results and Discussion

Urbanization of Bihu

Most of the best produce necessary for Magh Bihu celebration goes to the cities mainly to Guwahati. Biggest fishes can be found in the markets of Guwahati on the day of the *uruka*. It is now a status symbol for some people to buy the biggest fish in the market. Bihu is celebrated in the cities without some of the customs involved in it. *Gamochha* is not woven by the women folk of any household. Even in the villages also there are no looms in many households. So, most of the people buy *gamochha* from the market. The market plays a dominant role in the celebration of the Bihu. Nowadays in the *gamochha* there is no love of the beloved attached with it. A big amount of *gamochha* is imported from the textile mills outside the state. At present the Bihu songs are not related to the works of the folks.

Bihu by Assamese Diaspora

Due to globalization and development in information and communication technology Bihu is celebrated globally. Bihu is now observed and of course performed all over India and even overseas. Assamese Diasporas celebrate Bihu with much enthusiasm to assert their identity and to alleviate cultural loneliness and alienation. Their celebration becomes more attractive with the performance of Bihu dance and songs. People of other nationalities as invitees also participate in the celebration. Singers of Assam, original homeland, are sometimes invited to perform at the time of celebration.

Bihu in electronic media

The projection of Bihu got the prime importance among the present generation. This created new consciousness among

the people at this festival. Observance and performance of present Bihu can be watched in all TV channels of the region. These TV channels vie with each other to telecast these programmes. Almost all the Bihu dance and songs are available in the mobile phones also. Bihu became a spectacle now to be watched in the TV channels. We come to know about the arrival of Bihu much ahead of time from TV channels. All the Assamese TV channels exaggeratedly telecast programmes on Bihu for the sake of their business. So, nowadays Assamese folks watch Bihu in the TV instead of performing it or participating in its observation. Bihu is performed in the studios of the TV channels of Guwahati. Rural folks watch the Bihu performances or talk show on Bihu sitting in their homes of interior places of the state. So in a lighter vein this sort of Bihu celebration may be termed as 'camera Bihu' and 'mobile Bihu'.

Bihu is now a kind of business and politics. Few singers and dancers of the state are surviving on Bihu only. Some of them are making money like anything. Businessmen and political leaders sponsor the Bihu functions and so Bihu has been continuing as they like. A new function called 'Bohagi Biday' emerged in the state with new proliferations of cultural, economic and political offshoots. However, COVID 19 pandemic situations changed the whole scenario of Bihu recently.

Electronic media made Bihu more festive. It seems to be responsible for giving wide publicity to this festival in the national level. It is also perhaps responsible for infusing corrupt practices into the age-old traditions of the festival. However, without doubt we can say that electronic media brought Bihu from villages to the cities with new dimensions added.

Conclusion

It is now questionable that real development is brought by urbanization. Urbanization cannot bring sustainable or inclusive development. Urbanization is not environment friendly most of the time. In developing countries urbanization is gulping arable land and villages with ecological balance. 'Back to villages' should be the motto for real development in a country like India. Rural India is the real India and so rural development is the real development in India particularly in Assam. Gandhiji has shown the path of real development long time back.

We have a historical truth to cherish with. First urbanization in India took place during the Harappan Civilization around five thousand years ago. It was one of the remarkable civilizations of ancient world. After the end of this civilization around 1500 B.C. Vedic Civilization, another great civilization of India sprang up. It is noteworthy that this civilization was a rural civilization which contributed to the mankind great wisdom in the form of Vedas and Upanishadas. So urbanization is not solely synonymous with development. Again economic development is only one dimension of development. Revert from urbanization to ruralisation is not perhaps down gradation or against development. So, rural Assam is the real strength of Assam. Urbanization along with globalization and booming electronic media is playing a destructive role as far as the culture and folklore of the state are concerned. Strengthening of the rural economy and society of the state can only bring all round development and boost up the rich cultural heritage. Importance and significance of Bihu will remain unaffected as long as it is not detached from the

villages. Then only Bihu will survive as a great festival of the people of Assam in its all age-old meanings and glory.

Notes

Dheki: An utensil used for pounding of rice mainly.

Gamochha: A kind of Assamese towel. It is now a cultural symbol of the Assamese people.

Uruga: The day before Bihu or Bihu eve.

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