

Glorious Intangible Heritages of Bihu-festivals

*Dr Pradip Neog

Overview of Bihu-festivals

The Assamese people celebrate mainly three agrarian traditional festivals in three stages of cultivation of *Kharif*-paddy which is the main crop of the state. They are - *Bohag-bihu*, *Kaati-bihu* and *Magh-bihu*.

Among the three Bihu-festivals, *Bohag-bihu* is the most extensive in terms of rituals, dancing, singing and days of celebration. It was basically celebrated before starting activities of *Kharif*-paddy cultivation, and as a spring festival. At present the festival begins on 13th or 14th April, and also recognised as Assamese New-year festival.

Magh-bihu, is celebrated after harvesting of *Kharif*-paddy. Thus it is harvesting festival, and thanksgiving Almighty, community feast and rejoicing delicacies of varieties of traditional cuisines and sweets are at the core. It begins on 13th or 14th January, and is celebrated for 2 to 5 days.

Kati-bihu is celebrated primarily with the purpose of protecting of *Sali-paddy* from pests at its panicle initiation stage. It is celebrated in mid of October for a day.

As postulated by majority of the researchers, Bihu-festivals are about 5000 years old, and were initiated by Austroasiatic people who were the earliest inhabitant of Assam. They lived in the land of Assam during 3000 BC to 1000 BC. Of course a few researchers opined that Bihu-festivals were initiated by Tibeto-Burman people who came to Assam during 1000 BC, and as a consequence of their immigration Austroasiatic people migrated to Meghalaya and Bangladesh.

At present, people of Assam are multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and multi-religious. The ethnic groups include Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan, Tai-Ahom, Kuki-chin, Dravidian, Tea garden labourers, Muslim and Bengali. Majority of them celebrate these festivals. Thus, the Bihu-festivals are by and large influenced by the cultures of all the ethnic groups. Of course, a few ethnic groups of Assam also celebrate similar festivals in names of own ethnic languages and by following specific activities and rituals.

The intangible heritages of the *Bihu-festivals* including rituals, music, dance, games, traditional cuisines, typical sweets, and festivities is superbly extensive and wide-ranging. Many of these heritages are prototypical. The most alluring and attractive intangible heritage of *Bohag-bihu* are its distinctive dance form, songs and music. The dance form is called as *bihunach*, the typical songs are called as *bihunam* or *bihugeet*, and the typical musical instruments are called as *bihubadhya*. At present programmes of

bihunach and *bihunam* are also showcased in national and international cultural events, and gaining great applaud.

Bihu as identity of Assamese People

Bihunach and *bihunam* are breathtakingly dear to the Assamese people. Majority of Assamese people can sing *bihunam* and dance *bihunach*. Moreover, every Assamese is highly proud of these awesome prototypical cultural heritages. Furthermore, Bihu-festivals, *bihunach* and *bihunam* are recognized as cultural identity of Assamese people. In fact, the very word *Bihu* is considered as the cultural identity of Assamese race.

Overview of rituals

Traditionally, more than 40 kinds of rituals are performed systematically in the three *Bihu*-festivals. These rituals not only reflect the religious faiths and actions of Assamese people, but also their rich culture, indigenous technical knowledge (ITKs), philosophies and occupational acumens. Majority of the rituals are adoptable and productive in modern era too. A few of the rituals are as hereunder:

- ❖ Washing and caring cows and bullocks.
- ❖ Feasting explicit traditional cuisines of medicinal value.
- ❖ Eating selected bitter nourishments at empty stomach.
- ❖ Taking bath by applying traditionally prepared paste of medicinal value.
- ❖ Offering special reverence to mother and obtaining blessing
- ❖ Cleaning agricultural implements.
- ❖ Cleaning weaving implements
- ❖ Keeping auspicious items at roofs of house and cattle-shed
- ❖ Visiting parents by married daughter.
- ❖ Putting lamps in field of Sali-paddy at panicle initiation stage to protect crops from pests.
- ❖ Thanksgiving Almighty for harvest and community feasting.



Washing cow & bullocks



Auspicious Chaat



Cuisine of 101 herbs

Salient Features of Bihu-dance

Bihu-dance called as *bihunach* is superbly alluring and attractive folk dance with typical rhythms, typical movements, typical twisting of body particularly waist, typical poses and typical expressions. It is performed by both womenfolk and menfolk in traditional dance programmes of *Bohag-bihu*. Key features of this prototypical dance form are as hereunder.

1. **Typical rhythm** : Bihu-dance is basically performed in a typical rhythm (*Tal*) of 3.5 *Matras*' which is composed of closed *bols* (mnemonic syllables) such as " I khit khit I khit khit I" . It resembles to *Khemta Tal* of Hindustani music which is of 4 *Matras*. As because all the four *bols* of the *tal* are closed *bols* it becomes of 3.5 *Matras*. Of-course there are 4 other rhythms in which also *bihunam* are sung.
2. **Typical movements**: Bihu-dance is performed in typical small steps along with rolling toes on floor in typical ways, and by maintaining the typical rhythm. Movements are also made at intervals by spinning body.
3. **Typical twisting of waist**: In Bihu-dance performers twist waist smoothly and almost intermittently by maintaining the typical rhythm. Generally they twist waist twice in the typical rhythm of 3.5 *matras*' *Tal*.
4. **Typical poses of women's Bihu-dance**: Originally, there were no definite poses of girls' bihu-dance. Because, the programmes of girls' bihu-dance were held in midst of nature and girls danced spontaneously. In modern era, bihu-dance is performed the cultural functions as traditional performing art. In this context, researchers identified the typical poses of girls' Bihu-dance so that they are performed by maintaining its typical features. The 'Bihu Surakshya Samiti, Assam', the organization working for protecting, preserving and spreading of Bihu culture in its original forms and features has recognized the following 8 poses or *bhangimas* photographs of which are presented below



Different poses of girls' *Bihu-dance*

5. **Typical expressions in Bihu-dance**: Bihu-dance expresses both outer and inner

beauty of performer. Poses of Bihu-dance do not symbolize anything specifically. In Bihu-dance performer expresses joy, love, delight, exhilaration, thrill and the like. Moreover, performer keeps smile throughout.

6. Additional forms of Men's Bihu-dance: Menfolk perform Bihu-dance in a programme called as Hunchari. The typical features of bihu-dance mentioned above are applicable to men's bihu-dance too. Of-course they do not dance in a couple of poses out of the above stated 8 poses. Moreover, there are several sets of well-structured dances in which menfolk perform Bihu-dance in *Hunchari*. These are of 4 different rhythms. These sets of dance are meticulously constructed as like Indian Classical dances.

Salient Features of Bihu-songs

Bihu-songs are called as *bihunam* or *bihugeet*. They are superbly fabulous and distinctively prototypical traditional songs of Assamese culture. They are archetypical and of high standard not only in respect of lyrical attributes but also in term of rhythms, tunes and ways of singing. Moreover, the quantity of *bihunam* is incomparably enormous. Several thousands of *bihunam* have so far been composed across many centuries out of which more than 5000 have been documented in printed form in modern era

- ❖ *Bihunam* are of high lyrical qualities in terms of use of words, metaphors, songlike attribute, emotions and personal feelings.
- ❖ The subject-matters of *bihunam* are also exceedingly diverse. There are *bihunam* on all aspects related to Assamese agrarian life.
- ❖ Love is at the core of majority of the *bihunam*.
- ❖ Majority of *bihunam* are enriched with superb metaphors.

Musical instruments of Bihu-festival

Total seven numbers of musical instruments are accompanied with *bihunach* and *bihunam*, and are called as *bihubadya*. They are - *Bihu-dhol*, *Mohor Xinor Penpa*, *Toka*, *Gogona* and *Hutuli*, *Pati-tal* and *Baanhi*. Out of these, the first five are prototypical and made of locally available materials.



Glorious Rati-bihu and Gabharu-bihu

Rati-bihu and Gabharu-bihu were two fabulous programmes held in midst of nature as part of celebration of *Bohag-bihu*. It is postulated that that these programmes were held since pre-historic period. However, due to changed socio-cultural scenario at present these programme are not held in midst of nature. Of course, at present both are showcased in cultural functions organised at the occasion of *Bohag-bihu*.

Rati-bihu was held in night in forest. A group of grown-up girls and a group of grown-up boys participated by maintaining decent distance. The group of girls performed *bihunach*, sang *bihunam* and played three typical traditional musical instruments - *Toka, Gogona and Hutuli* . The group of boys sang *bihunam* and played three other kinds of typical traditional musical instruments. *Bihu-dhol, Mohor Xinor Penpa, and Pati-tal*.

Gabharu-bihu was also held in midst of nature but at daytime, and a group of grown up girls performed *bihunach*, sang *bihunam* and played typical musical instruments - *Toka, Gogona and Hutuli* . There was no participation of menfolk.

Rati-bihu and Gabharu-bihu can very well be regarded as a glorious tradition of Assamese culture, and they reveal the independence and high status of women in agrarian Assamese society. They also depict simplicity, and high moral character of Assamese people, and also the strength of social norms in the agrarian society. Both the programmes were organised by girls in forest. Although *Rati-bihu* was held in dense forest in night, the group of boys always kept decent distance from girls group. Nothing happened which can be considered as detrimental to girls' prestige and status. Of

course, *Rati-bihu* facilitated lovers to start married life. Some pairs started married life instantly after participating in *Rati-bihu*.



Rati Bihu (mock form)



Gabharu Bihu (mock form)

Overview of *Hunchari*

Hunchari is the most illustrative and reverential among three traditional programmes in which *bihunach* and *bihunam* are performed by playing *bihubadya*. The group which perform *Hunchari* is called as *Hunchari-dal*. Generally one *Hunchari-dal* is organised per village, and it performs *Hunchari* in courtyards of the families of the village by following several definite traditional norms.

There are broadly four part of *Hunchari* : *Mangaldhani* , *Hunchari-diha*, *Bihu* and *Ashirbad*. In *Mangaldhani* and *Ashirbad* parts the *Hunchari-dal* blesses the family. In *Hunchari-diha*, and *Bihu* parts the *Hunchari-dal* sings *bihunam* and performs *bihunach* by playing *bihubadhya*. Originally only menfolk participated in *Hunchari*. At present, in quite a few villages *Hunchari* is held in courtyard of families. Till the end of 20th century it was held in many villages. Nonetheless, it is showcased in most of the cultural functions organised in present era at the occasion of *Bohag-bihu*.



Hunchari

Need of Safeguarding and Preservation

As a consequence of modernisation in present era, the traditional festivals and their constituents including rituals, folklores and folk dance have been losing true nature and facing tremendous threat of existence all over the world. It is also occurring in case of the glorious intangible heritages of bihu-festivals rather more intensely and extensively.

Majority of cultural functions organised in hundred places in the state of Assam as part of celebrating *Bohag-bihu* are primarily promoting modern music and songs with western musical instruments instead of the programmes on *bihunach*, *bihunam* and

bihubadya. These functions have become rewarding only for the artists of modern music who perform modern songs and modern *bihugeet* with western musical instruments. At present majority of the said functions are organised with budget of more than Rs. 10 lakh but in most cases roughly less than 20 percent of the budget is spent on programmes to showcase and promote traditional *bihunach*, *bihunam* and *bihubadya*. The functions are least rewarding to folk-artists. On the other hand, several worth adopting rituals of the Bihu-festivals are in the process of becoming obsolete.

Seems, in the modern era many of the young Assamese people possess insufficient knowledge and experience in order to practice, appreciate and promote the traditional resources of the Bihu-festivals including the rituals, games and traditional forms of *bihunam*, *bihunach* and the *bihubadhya*.

Social activists, researchers, authors and social organisations have been putting concerted effort towards safeguarding, preservation, education and spread of the intangible heritages of Bihu-festivals. However, support of local government and national and international organisations in this field is well felt to boost up such efforts. In this context, Nicholas Kotsiras, a political leader of Turkey said, “protecting ones culture does not happen by osmosis or by accident, as it requires the will of the individual as well as the support of the government and civil society to do so within an evolving multicultural society, focusing particularly on governmental support.¹” He asserted it in his key note address delivered in international forum on ‘Preserving Culture and Heritage through generation’ held at Turkey during may, 11-14, 2014.

[*This lecture was delivered in the webinar on Bihu : An Agrarian Festival of Assam, organised by ICOMOS India (North East Zone) in association with National Scientific Committee on Intangible Cultural Heritage, ICOMOS India and International Committee for Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICICH), ICOMOS on 20th September, 2020*]

* Dr Pradip Neog is an Author and researcher of Assamese folk culture. He is presently Director of Extension Education Institute, Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, Govt. of India.