



Research Paper

## Bihu: The Intangible Cultural Heritage of Assam (Special Emphasis on Rangali Bihu)

<sup>1</sup>Dr Geeta Rani Sarmah

<sup>2</sup>Juri Goswami

<sup>1</sup>Rtd. Principal Kamrup Academy Higher Secondary School, Guwahati, Assam, India

<sup>2</sup>Principal, Sonapur Higher Secondary School, Assam, India

**Abstract** Bihu is Assam's national festival, celebrated to recognise the importance of agriculture in rural Assamese life. The event is held three times a year to commemorate three different stages in the development of paddy, Assam's native crop. The event is observed three times a year on Chaitra Sankranti, Ashina Sankranti, and Pousha Sankranti. The intangible heritages of the Bihu festivals, which include rituals, music, dancing, games, traditional foods, traditional sweets, and festivities, are extraordinarily broad and diverse. As a result of the Modern Era, traditional festivals and its constituents such as rituals, folklore, and folkdance have lost their real nature and face extinction all across the world. Therefore they must be safeguarded and protected.

Received 06 August, 2023; Revised 18 August, 2023; Accepted 20 August, 2023 © The author(s) 2023. Published with open access at [www.questjournals.org](http://www.questjournals.org)

### I. Introduction:

Assam, the northeast state of India, is a land of cultural embeddedness. Bihu, the state festival of Assam is the reflection of composite evolution of different culture of races and tribes of Assam, namely Mishing, Tiwa, Moran, Kochari, Bodo, Dimasa etc. These tribes are found throughout upper and lower Assam. The versatile conventional custom, social practices, tradition, folk music etc make the Bihu festival a source of endless mutual respect, love and attachment among the people of Assam irrespective of caste, creed, race, faith, belief and economic conditions and is the symbol of substantial harmony. As a result, Bihu has become the most important secular festival of Assamese people.

The festivals are the plethora of rituals and performances that are celebrated by the ethnic group with fun and abundance on a certain occasion. Bihu is the unified agrarian traditional festival of Assam. Nearly 75 percent of the people of Assam are dependent on Agriculture. It has a total geographical area of 78,436 sq. km, occupying 2.4% of India's landmass, providing shelter to 2.6% of India's population. The festival is celebrated spontaneously in the beginning and end of the harvest season. The celebration is characterised by three phases of cultivation of *Kharif*-paddy the native crop of the state. They are *Bahag Bihu*, *Kaati Bihu* and *Magh Bihu*.

Bihu is the indication of changing of the seasons. Each of the three Bihu celebration has its own well-defined significance and is celebrated with its own traditions. The festival at the beginning of the Spring season is Bahag Bihu, is associated with the Vernal Equinox in *Chaitra Sankranti*. The Kaati Bihu is associated with the Autumnal Equinox in *Ashwina Sankranti*. The Magh Bihu is associated with winter solstice in *Pausha Sankranti*.

In Bahag Bihu farmers prepare the field for cultivation. The Bahag Bihu, also known as the Rangali Bihu, represents joy and merriment and it heralds the Assamese New Year and the arrival of spring.

Kaati Bihu is also known as kangali (poor) Bihu to symbolize an empty granary and less availability of food during that period of the year. This is a critical stage in the lives of farmers in Assam. The panicle initiation stage of the farmers' Sali-paddy crops occurs during the Kaati Bihu period. Farmers primarily celebrate Kaati Bihu to seek God's blessings so that the panicle-initiated crops are not harmed and farmers can prepare for an abundant harvest. They light lamps in Sali-paddy fields to protect crops from pests and welcome the reproductive stage of their paddy crops. These lamps are suspended from the tips of tall bamboo. The farmers pray for the health of their crops. According to scientific evidence, the illuminated lamps attract insects from the paddy fields, which then become prey to the fires of these lamps. This improves crop health while also deterring insects.

Farmers' harvesting and collection tasks are completed during Magh Bihu. The festival signifies that farmers no longer need to be concerned about their crops because the plentiful crops have already been harvested. Magh Bihu is also called Bhogali Bihu. Bhogali Bihu is derived from the word Bhog, which means eating and enjoyment. As the granaries are full, there is a lot of feasting and eating going on during this time. Assam's Magh Bihu festival is enthusiastically celebrated by the entire population. This festival, marked by revelry and feasting, marks the end of the harvesting season, when everything is in abundance. This is when the state's hardworking agricultural folk sit down to reap the benefits of their labour.

Among these Bihu festivals Bahag Bihu is celebrated in the most comprehensive way in terms of rituals, singing, dancing and days of celebration. It is a kind of spring festival. The festival is a symbol of the mixed evolution, culture and harmony of different ethnic groups and tribes. Generally, Bahag Bihu begins on 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> April and is acknowledged as Assamese New Year Festival. It is also termed as Rangali Bihu. The atmosphere adds to the cultural vibrancy.

The Bihu Festival represents a seasonal return to one's roots. Bahag Bihu is regarded as the best example of non-religious culture in public performance and a thriving ground for collaborative local talents.

UNESCO The Assam Bihu festival embodies all aspects of intangible living cultural heritage.

The Bihu festival has been surviving the changing trends of time and enriched with divine cultural tendency to unite the people of Assam irrespective of cast, creed, race, faith, belief and economic conditions from its inception. Therefore, it is imperative and relevant to study this intangible nature of this festival. Along with the cultural manifestation, intangible cultural heritage owned its importance in the wealth of knowledge and skills that is transmitted from one generation to the next. Therefore, the objectives of the present study are as:

1. To study the origin and Etymology of Bihu.
2. To study the Intangible nature of *Bahag Bihu*
3. To discuss the need for Protection and Preservation of Bihu festivals.

#### 1. Origin and Etymology of Bihu:

There are several myths and legends which are related to the origin of Bihu. Nobody can definitely say how and when this Bihu festival is originated. The Bihu festival has been inextricably linked with the agricultural people of Assam since time immemorial (Rupam Gogoi, 2019). Majority of researchers believed that Bihu Festivals are about 5000 years old. The festivals were initiated by Austroasiatic people who were the earliest inhabitant of Assam. They lived in this state during 3000 BC to 1000 BC (Dr. Pradip Neog, 2020). According to some other believers Bihu festivals were initiated by Tibeto-Burman people. They came to Assam during 1000 BC. As a result of their immigration the Austroasiatic people migrated to Meghalaya and Bangladesh. Coming through a lot of evolutions over time at present Assamese people are multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and multi-religious. The ethnic groups include Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan, Tai-Ahom, Kuki-Chin, Dravidian, Tea Garden labours, Muslim, Bengali etc. Almost all of them celebrate the Bihu festival with fun and abundance. Therefore, Bihu festivals are highly influenced by the cultures of all the ethnic groups.

Some scholars believe that the origin of Bihu is embedded in its etymological definition. The Sanskrit word "Bisuvan" referred to a day when a fire sacrifice was performed in the hope of obtaining a better crop, as mentioned in the sacred Hindu texts Atharva-veda (900 BCE) and Aitareya Brahmana (c.600 BCE). Various scholars believe that this word, along with the practises it entailed, is the source of the modern word Bihu and the festival's associated customs (P. Goswami 1996, 1-6). Other texts, such as the Vishnu Purana (c 400 CE), claim that a festival known as Bisuva took place between winter and spring when the sun moved from one sign of the zodiac to the next (P.Goswami 1996, 1). Twentieth-century etymological studies that search for Sanskrit sources of words are also reflective of approaches intended to reinforce the view of Assamese culture as part of an Indo-Aryan lineage and its form as a result of the Sanskritization of local cultures. Relatively recent interpretations looking at the Tai origin of the word relate it to a form of cattle worship construed from "boi", "the rules of worship", and "hu", "cow" (Sarmah 1996, 61). This, however, does not explain the presence of festivals of similar name and origin in other parts of India.

#### 2. To study the Intangible nature of *Bahag Bihu* (Identity, belonging, connecting with past, through the present, with our future)

2.1 Intangible cultural heritage is important because it gives us a sense of identity and belonging by connecting our past, present, and future. Intangible cultural heritage is important for both social and economic reasons. It promotes social cohesion and makes people feel like they are a part of a community and society as a whole.

The intangible heritages of the Bihu-festivals include rituals, music, dance, games, traditional cuisines, typical sweets, and festivities, are exceptionally extensive and diverse. Many of these heritages are prototypical. The most enticing and appealing intangible heritage of Bohag-bihu are its distinct dance form, songs, and music. The dance form is known as bihunach, the typical songs are known as bihunam or bihugeet, and the typical musical instruments are known as bihu badhya. Assamese society considered these bihu badyas as deva badhya

(Devine Instruments). At present bihunach and bihugeet programmes are being showcased in national and international cultural events to great acclaim. (Dr. Pradip Neog).

On April 14, 2023, Assam made history by inducting over 11,000 dancers and drummers performing the traditional 'Bihu' dance and playing the 'dhol' at a single venue into the Guinness Book of World Records.

2.2 Identity: Bihu is the most important non-religious festival of Assam. It is observed by all, regardless of class, creed or caste. It has been being observed from time immemorial. It has been adjusting itself at various ages, taking into account the changing situation of a particular age. Bihu is primarily the identity of an Assamese and it is impartial of any religion.

### 2.3 Bihu's evolution from a rural festival to Assam's national festival

During 1696, Ahom king Rudra Singha granted royal patronage to the Bihu festival for the first time by making it possible it to be performed in the courtyard of Rang Ghar. The Koris and Paiks soldiers in the Ahom army participated in this celebration with an open mind as granaries were already filled with food. They saw it as the start of an agricultural New Year, which corresponded to the spring equinox. Bihu has evolved through several stages since its inception. Rangali Bihu has evolved from a low-key festival celebrated by a few to a wholesome celebration accepted by all ethnic groups, tribes, and communities over time - a new symbol of Assamese identity. (Gaurav Das, Times of India, April 12, 2017).

The participation of both sexes in the Bihu dance is the most significant change that the festival has undergone in the last three to four hundred years. It is unknown when men and women were allowed to dance together. However, it is known that it was once considered socially unacceptable for a man and a woman to be seen dancing together. The arrival of the British in Assam caused a shift in attitudes towards Bihu. With the mingling of both sexes during Bihu dance, a new emergence of intelligentsia among the populace at that time began to view Bihu as somewhat erotic. It is worth mentioning that prominent figures of the society like Haliram Dekial Phukan, Anandaram Dekial Phukan, Gunabhiram Barua, Kamalakantha Bhattacharya, Budhindranath Dilhial Bhattacharya etc. incited the then British government to ban Bihu songs and dances as obscene. In 1897, the British government decided to ban Bihu songs and dances. It is believed that Oza Moimot Tatinga and Seni Gabharu, brother and sister, along with Anada Das, were credited with lifting the British Empire's prohibition on Bihu (Nilav Saurabh, 09/04/2022). Bihu festival eventually became Assamese people's national celebration.

#### I) Salient Features of Bihu Festival

The Bihu celebration has a magnificently rich and varied intangible legacy that includes rituals, music, dancing, games, traditional foods, customary sweets, and festivities. Many of these heritages are prototypical. (Neog, ICOMOS, 20<sup>th</sup> September, 2020). The unusual dance style, melodies, and music of Bohag-bihu are among its most appealing and beautiful intangible cultural legacy. The traditional musical instruments are known as bihubadhya, the dance style is known as bihunach, and the usual tunes are known as bihunam or bihugeet.

Bihunach and Bihunam programmes are currently being featured in both national and international cultural events, and they are receiving a lot of positive feedback. With 11,304 dancers and drummers doing the "Bihu" dance and playing the "dhol" in one location on April 13, 2023, Assam cemented its place in the Guinness World Records.

Bihunach and bihunam are incredibly important to the Assamese people. The majority of Assamese people can sing and dance bihunam. Furthermore, every Assamese is quite proud of these magnificent prototype cultural heritages. Furthermore, bihu-festivals, bihunach, and bihunam are recognised as Assamese cultural identities. In fact, the word Bihu is regarded the Assamese race's cultural identity.

#### II) A look at rituals

More than 40 different types of rituals are traditionally conducted in the three Bihu-festivals. These ceremonies reflect not only the Assamese people's religious beliefs and deeds, but also their rich culture, indigenous technical knowledge (ITKs), ideologies, and occupational aptitude. The majority of the rites are adaptable and useful in the modern day as well. A couple of the rites are as follows:

- Washing and caring for cows and bullocks.
- Explicit traditional cuisines with medicinal value.
- Eating selected bitter foods on an empty stomach.
- Taking a bath with a traditionally made medicinal paste.
- Offering extra adoration to mother and earning a blessing
- Cleaning agricultural equipment.

- Cleaning the weaving tools
- Keeping auspicious objects at roofs of house and cattle-shed □
- Visiting parents by married daughter.
- Putting lighting in Sali-paddy fields at the panicle initiation stage to protect crops from pests.
- Thank giving Almighty, for the harvest and community feasting.

### III) Characteristics of Bihu-Dance

Bihu-dance, also known as bihunach, is a marvellously enticing and appealing folk dance with typical rhythms, motions, twisting of the body, particularly the waist, typical poses, and typical expressions. It is performed by both men and women in traditional Bohag-bihu dance programmes. The following are the key characteristics of this prototype dance form:

#### i) Typical rhythm:

Bihu-dance is essentially performed in a typical rhythm (Tal) of 3.5 Matras', which is constructed of closed bols (mnemonic syllables) such as "I khithhit I khithhit I" It is similar to Hindustani music's Khemta Tal, which consists of four Matras. Because all four bols of the tal are closed bols, it is 3.5 Matras. Of course, there are four different rhythms in which bihunam is sung.

#### ii) Typical movements:

Bihu-dance is performed in usual little steps, with toes rolling on the floor in typical ways, and in typical rhythm. The rotating body also makes movements at regular intervals.

#### iii) Typical twisting of waist:

Performers in Bihu-dance twist their waists smoothly and practically intermittently while maintaining the regular pace. In general, they twist their waist twice in the 3.5 matras' Tal rhythm.

#### iv) Typical poses of women's Bihu-dance:

Originally, there were no set bihu-dance stances for girls. Because the bihu-dance workshops for girls were held in the midst of nature, and the girls danced spontaneously. Bihu-dance serves cultural functions as a traditional performing art in the current period. In this context, researchers discovered the characteristic poses of girls' Bihu-dance in order for them to be performed while retaining their typical traits. The 'Bihu Surakshya Samiti, Assam,' an organisation dedicated to maintaining, preserving, and propagating Bihu culture in its original forms and features, has identified eight distinct stances or bhangimas.

#### v) Typical expressions in Bihu-dance:

Bihu-dance expresses the performer's outside and inner attractiveness. Bihu-dance poses do not represent anything special. The performer of Bihu-dance shows joy, love, excitement, exhilaration, thrill, and other emotions. Furthermore, the performer maintains a smile throughout.

#### vi) Additional forms of Man's Bihu-dance:

Men do Bihu-dance in a programme called Hunchari. Men's bihu-dance has the same characteristics as women's bihu-dance. Of course, they do not dance in a couple of the above-mentioned eight stances. Furthermore, there are various sets of well-structured dances in which men execute Bihu-dance in Hunchari. These are of four different rhythms. These dance sets are precisely created, much like Indian classical dances.

### vii) Characteristics of Bihu-Dance

Bihu-songs are also known as bihunam or bihugeet. They are extraordinarily fantastic and totally archetypal Assamese folk tunes. They are archetypal and of great quality not just in terms of lyrical features but also in terms of rhythms, tunes, and singing styles. Furthermore, the quantity of bihunam is extremely large. Several thousands of bihunam have been composed over many centuries, with over 5000 being documented in printed form in the contemporary times.

➤ Bihunam have excellent lyrical qualities in terms of word choice, metaphors, songlike elements, emotions, and personal feelings.

➤ Bihunam's topic matter is likewise extremely diverse. There are bihunam on every facet of Assamese agricultural life.

➤ The majority of the bihunam revolve around love.

➤ The majority of bihunam are rich in metaphors.

#### Musical instruments used in the Bihu-festival

Bihubadya refers to a group of seven musical instruments that are accompanied by bihunach and bihunam. Bihu-dhol, Mohor XinorPenpa, Toka, Gogona and Hutuli, Pati-tal, and Baanhi are among them. The first five of these are prototypes built of locally accessible materials.

### viii) Glorious Rati-bihu and Gabharu-bihu

Rati-bihu and Gabharu-bihu were two fantastic programmes held in the midst of nature as part of the Bohag-bihu festival. It is believed that these initiatives have been running since the prehistoric times. However, due to

the changing socio-cultural landscape, these programmes are no longer held in the midst of nature. Of course, both are currently on display at cultural gatherings held in honour of Bohag-bihu.

Rati-bihu was held in the jungle at night. A bunch of mature girls and mature boys took part while keeping a safe distance. The girls sang bihunam, performed bihunach, and played three traditional musical instruments: Toka, Gogona, and Hutuli. The lads sang bihunam and played three different types of traditional musical instruments. Pati-tal, Mohor XinorPenpa, and Bihu-dhol.

Gabharu-bihu was also held in the midst of nature, but during the day, and a group of grown-up females performed bihunach, sang bihunam, and played traditional musical instruments - Toka, Gogona, and Hutuli. Participatin of menfolk were not allowed.

Rati-bihu and Gabharu-bihu are a magnificent tradition of Assamese culture that demonstrate the independence and high status of women in agrarian Assamese society. They also represent the Assamese people's simplicity and good moral character, as well as the robustness of social standards in the agrarian society. Both initiatives were organised by females in the bush. Although Rati-bihu was held at night in a deep jungle, the boys always kept a safe distance from the girls. Nothing transpired that could be regarded damaging to the girls' prestige and standing. Of course, Rati-bihu made it possible for lovers to begin their wedded lives. Some couples married right away after taking part in Rati-bihu.

ix) Hunchari: In a Nutshell

Hunchari, the most illustrative and reverent of the three traditional programmes in which bihunach and bihunam are performed by playing bihubadya, is the most illustrative and reverent. Hunchari-dal is the name of the group that performs Hunchari. In general, one Hunchari-dal is organised each village, and it performs Hunchari in the courtyards of the village's families while adhering to a set of strict cultural traditions.

Hunchari is divided into four sections: Mangaldhani, Hunchari-diha, Bihu, and Ashirbad. The Hunchari-dal blesses the family in Mangaldhani and Ashirbad. Hunchari-dal sings bihunam and performs bihunach by playing bihubadhya in Hunchari-diha and Bihu portions. Originally, only men took part in Hunchari. Hunchari is currently hosted in the courtyards of families in a number of villages. It was held in numerous villages till the end of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, it is featured in the majority of cultural festivities held in the modern day on the occasion of Bohag-bihu.

### 3.1) Need for Protection and Preservation

As a result of modernisation in contemporary times, traditional festivals and its elements such as rituals, folklore, and folk dance have lost their real nature and face extinction all across the world. It is also happening more intensely and extensively in the case of the wonderful intangible heritages of bihu-festivals.

Instead of events on bihunach, bihunam, and bihubadya, the majority of cultural functions planned in hundreds of locations across Assam to commemorate Bohag-bihu are mostly promoting current music and songs with western musical instruments. These functions have become profitable only for modern music artists that perform modern songs and bihugeet on western musical instruments. Currently, the bulk of the aforementioned festivities are staged with budgets over Rs. 10 lakh, but in most cases, less than 20% of the money is spent on programmes to showcase and promote traditional bihunach, bihunam, and bihubadya. Folk artists are least rewarded by the functions. On the other hand, some important Bihu-festival rites are on their way out. Folk artists are the least rewarded by the functions. On the other hand, several worth adopting rituals of the Bihu-festivals are in the process of becoming obsolete.

It appears that in the present period, many young Assamese people lack the necessary knowledge and experience to practise, appreciate, and promote the traditional resources of the Bihu-festivals, such as the rituals, games, and traditional forms of bihunam, bihunach, and bihubadhya. Social activists, researchers, authors, and social groups have been working together to protect, preserve, educate, and propagate the intangible heritages of Bihu-festivals. However, local governments as well as national and international institutions are strongly encouraged to support such efforts.

## References

- [1]. Gogoi Rupam, Origin and Background of Bihu Festival, International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Publication p 20-21, 06/2019
- [2]. Neog Dr. Pradip, Glorious Intangible Heritage of Bihu-festivals, ICOMOS, 20/09/2020
- [3]. Goswami Prafulladutta, BohagBihur Parampara, 1996, 1-6
- [4]. Goswami Prafulladutta, BohagBihur Parampara, 1996. 1
- [5]. Sarmah, Achyut Chandra, Bihur Utpatti aruKramabikas, 1996,
- [6]. Neog Dr. Pradip, Glorious Intangible Heritage of Bihu-festivals, ICOMOS, 20/09/2020
- [7]. Das Gaurav, Times of India, April 12, 2017, Times of India, April 12. 2017
- [8]. Nisiddha Binu Punaruddhar, Nilav Saurabh, 09/04/2022
- [9]. Special Courtesy to Dr. Pradip Neog.