



The Assamese Rituals: with special reference to the Bohag Bihu

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“The fragrance of our soil, the rhythm of our Bihu, and the depth of our culture” -Zubeen Garg



Introduction:

Assam is a state of majestic colourful land. It is situated in North-eastern India, South of eastern Himalayas along the Brahmaputra and Barak. This beautiful land is known as the “Land of Red Rivers and Blue Hills.” Due to the rich biodiversity of Assam, since immemorial days people from different geographical areas were attracted to this beautiful land. Assam is as beautiful as it is rich for its culture. It is a state of multi-ethnic culture. The Assamese culture is being traditionally developing due to the cultural assimilation of its different ethno-cultural groups. The culture of Assam is like a melting pot of Mongoloid, Indo-Burmese, and Indo-Iranian influences resulting in a rich, composite culture with Assamese, Bengali and Bodo languages being prominent. The natives of Assam are known as Asomiya(Assamese) and their state language is also Asomiya. Assam has a rich history. It was the ancient kingdom of Kamrupa. In mediaeval it was followed by the Ahom king. The strong cultural identity of Assam is highlighted by its Anthem “ O mur Apunar Dex” and the backbone of Assam Bihu. Bihu is the identity of Assamese. Through Bihu the people of Assam renew themselves, refresh their mind with joy, and make the community united.

Festival Rituals of Assam:

Assam is very rich with its varieties of festival rituals. These are cultural expressions of the people with symbolic actions, ceremonies and customs which connect them with their beliefs, history and also community. It is a type of social cohesion that strengthens the bonds amongst the people through sharing experiences, love, affection and togetherness. The festive rituals are community shared activities that reinforce the specific group identity, mark the life pattern and connect the people to their traditions through involvement with specific gestures, dresses and foods. Assam is unique as it happens to be the melting pot of different ethnic, religious and linguistic communities which formed the great and beautiful Assamese culture. Assam is the land of multi - ethnic groups with their own culture, traditions, dresses, and the way of life. Bodo, Kachari, Karbi, Miri, Mishimi, Rabha, Deuri- these are the different tribes that live in Assam. Assam is the land of festivals which reflect the lifestyle, tradition, beliefs of Assamese people. The rituals of Assam are centred around the agricultural cycle primarily with the three types of Bihu- Rongali, Bhogali and Kongali. Bihu is the prime festival of Assam. Besides Bihu Ali-Ai-Liang, Baishagu, Baikho, Bohaggiyo, Bishu, Bathou Puja, Ambubashi Mela, Jonbeel Mela, Holi, Durga Puja, Diwali, Saraswati Puja, Lakshmi Puja, Kali Puja, Idd, Maharram, Me-Dam-Me-Phi etc. are the festival celebrated in Assam. Most of the festival Rituals celebrated in Assam are characterized with the spirit of accommodation and togetherness in the diverse faith, beliefs and customs of her inhabitants.

Bihu as an Assamese Ritual:

The main festival of Assam is Bihu. The word 'Bihu' is derived from the Sanskrit word, 'Bishu' which means "to ask for prosperity and happiness from God". The rituals as well as the customs of Bihu are deeply entwined with Assamese rural life, the changing season and the eternal cycle of sowing and reaping. The Bihu can be regarded as an eco-festival where the philosophy of Environment was unconsciously introduced thousand years ago. Bihu is not just a word, it's Asomiyas' Emotion, Asomiyas' feeling. Bihu is the heart of Assam. The feeling of Bihu makes the people of Assam happy and joyful. The Bihu of Assam is a series of three agricultural festivals which is celebrated throughout the year. Assam is rich with its colourful Bihu. The Bihu is not only a culture of dances and songs but also a festival of love and affection. The ritual and Customs that are associated with the Bihu being closely linked to the ideas of our life. It is deeply associated with the agrarian life of Assam. Bihu of Assam is not limited within a particular community or religion. It is a secular culture that all people of Assam take part in fully enjoying with its rituals. It is interesting that the Bihu is celebrated by different ethnic groups of Assam in their own traditional way. Three types of Bihu are celebrated to welcome Spring (Bohag Bihu), praying for harvests (Kongali Bihu) and celebrating the ending of harvesting (Bhogali Bihu). Bihu is the marking of New year, planting and harvest with marrymaking. Traditional Bihu dances with dhol, pepa, gogona, feast like pitha, laru, jalpan, cattle worship on Garu bihu, bonfire on Magh Bihu's Meji are the Mirror of Bihu festival.

Kangali Bihu is known as Kati Bihu. It is celebrated in the Assamese month of Kati (mid- October)when the paddy in the field is in a growing stage and the granaries of the farmers are almost empty. In the Kongali Bihu, there is less merriment and in this time the environment has a sense of solemnity. There is no feasting in this Bihu, hence it is a poor Bihu of Assam. So, in the Kati Bihu there are rituals like lighting the Saki or Akash Banti in the fields and near the sacred Tulsi Plant wishing and praying for a prosperous winter harvest.

Bhogali Bihu is known as Magh Bihu as it is celebrated in the Assamese month of Magh (mid-January). It is the Bihu of lots of feast. It is a harvest festival, since the granaries are full, there is lots of eating and feasting during this period. On the eve of the Bihu is Uruka, a night of communal feasting around a bonfire and the women folk of the household get ready for the next day with chira, pitha, laru, gur, curd, jalpan, the edible foods on Magh Bihu. The next day, people gathered in the field around the Meji that was made by the cowherds and the youths of the village and set fire to it on the day of Bihu Sankranti. In this Bihu, different types of sports like -Buffalo-fight, Egg-fight, Cock-fight, Nightingale -fight etc. are held throughout the day.

Bohag Bihu as an Assamese Festival Ritual:

As Dr. Bhupen Hazarika said, "Bohag matho eti ritu nohoi, nohoi Bohag eti maah, Asomiya jaatir e aayuh rekha, gono jibonor e saah" (Bohag is not just a season, nor is Bohag just a month , it's the lifeline of the Assamese nation, the breath of collective life). So, the Bohag is not a month, it is the heart spirit of Assamese people. Amongst the Bohag, people of Assam seek the inspiration, joyfulness of life. It is a Bihu of love and affection. Bohag Bihu is celebrated on the onset of the Assamese new year in the mid of April, which heralds the spring season. Bohag Bihu is the bihu of merriment, so it's called Rangali Bihu. This Bihu continues for seven days. These are - Goru Bihu, Manuh Bihu, Gosai Bihu, Tatar Bihu, Nangal Bihu, Jiyari Bihu and Chera Bihu. So, it is also called xaat Bihu.

Xaat Bihu: The first day of Bohag Bihu is **Garu Bihu**. This day is dedicated to the caring upkeep of livestock and a cattle show. Assamese people have love for animals and trees. They worship the cattle and dedicate the first day honouring the cattle. They bathe them with turmeric in the river or ponds, feed the cattle gourds/ brinjal and wear them with new ropes of jute (pagha) around their neck, and pray for their well-being.

The second day is **Manuh Bihu**. Manuh means people. On this day, people take bath early in the morning with turmeric, mustard oil, motha, maah etc. purifying them. They wear new clothes and offer to elders *Bihuwan or Gamosha* (red & white clothes) as a symbol of respect to them. In this Bihu, people focus on the relationship with elders and youngsters through respect, love and affection. They visit family and offer prayers for prosperity .

The third day of Bohag Bihu is **Gosai Bihu**. Gosai means Bhagawan (God/Lord). On this day, people clean their homes and statues of God and pray with Naam- kirtan for blessings and prosperity for the coming year.

The fourth day of Bohag Bihu is **Tator Bihu**. Assamese sipini(weaver) is expert in making clothes nicely. Assamese people give importance to the handloom. The weavers make our traditional culture Bihuwan or Gamosha through the handloom (loom). The Bihu is deeply connected with the women, looms and the spirit of the festival. Assamese women create dreams and emotions in their threads. Traditionally this day, the looms and tools are cleaned and is dedicated to honour the craft and textile , tat (loom) and the art of weaving.

The fifth day is **Nangal Bihu**. As Assam is an agrarian based state, so Bihu is generally celebrated for the prosperity of agriculture and the farmers. On this day, the farmers clean the essential tools specially Nangal (plough) to honour it. They also perform the ploughing of the season and seek blessings for the crops.

The sixth day of the Bohag Bihu is **Jiyari Bihu**. Another special part of the Bohag Bihu is the Jiyari Bihu which is also called **Chenehi Bihu**. This Bihu is focusing and honouring the women, specifically the married daughters. On this day the married daughters visit their parents home receiving gifts and blessings. It is the Bihu of love and affection and ties the family bonding within the community.

And the seventh Bohag Bihu is **Chera Bihu**, which is also marked as the conclusion of the week long Bohag Bihu. On the day of Chera Bihu, the community gathered like a fair. So, it is known as Bihu Mela. People joyfully celebrated it with traditional dance, music and took feasts and concluded the celebration.

Bohag Bihu is not only a ritual, it's the life spirit of Asomiya. Bihu songs, Bihu dances, varieties ethnic feasts, expressions of love and happiness , bonding togetherness etc. are the Mirror of Asomiya and Bihu, specifically Bohag Bihu reflects such lifelines of Asomiya. In primitive days Bihu was celebrated beneath the free sky. Through Bihu songs Deka-Gabharu(youngsters)From children to older people all participated in the Bihu dance and song spontaneously with joy and happiness. But now, these functions are moved to the formal stage organised by different groups.

Another specification of Bohag Bihu is **xaat saki**(seven spinach or leafy green). Spinach etc. are good nutrition for healthcare and it is traditional medicinal herbs. So, within the seven days of Bohag Bihu, it has a ritual to take the xaat saki.

Gamosha is very special in Assamese culture. It's made in Red and White thread by Assamese sipini in their home tat((loom). Gamosha is the symbol of love and affection for Assamese people. It is the symbol of Assamese pride and hospitality. Through the Gamosha the Assamese people entertain guests, convey thanks and use it as the Bihuwan as a symbol of love and respect. Now, the Assamese Gamosha has been recognised as a Geographical Indicator(GI) Product .

Conclusion:

Bihu is an agrarian Assamese culture that includes many ingredients of Ecology, Environment and Nature. The rituals, customs and the tradition that followed in Bihu are the expression of love and respect for nature. It is also focusing on the activities for protecting nature. Bihu is an Eco-festival or Eco-culture. Bohag Bihu has a deep root in agriculture. It symbolizes renewal, togetherness, prosperity through joyful expression with the traditional Bihu dance, Bihu songs, feasting, and family gathering. Through Bihu songs the Assamese people express their emotions of mind to their co- partner. It is a cultural mirror of Assam that reflects the rituals, traditions, customs, beliefs and community life of Assam and Assamese.

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