

BIHU FESTIVAL: DANCE OF THE GODDESSES

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Abstract

The amorous dance of the Goddesses—Kolimoti, Seuti and Malati—has given birth to the *Bihu* festival in Assam which has instinctively ingrained the joy of dance and music in every Assamese woman and man in every form of festivities in and beyond *Bohag Bihu*. The mythic origin of *Bohag Bihu* shows diversion from the blood sacrifice to the Goddesses to the repetition of and participation in the dance of the Goddesses. In the archaic spirituality of Assam, women dance repeating the mythic acts of the Goddesses and men partake in the joy as nature blooms and humankind prosper in the amorous state of the Goddesses. The paper presents interpretation of one of the myths of the origin of the *Bihu* festival.

“Man is obliged to return to the actions of his Ancestor, either to confront or else repeat them; in short, never to forget them, whatever way he may choose to perform this *regressus ad originem*” (Eliade, 1959).

Humankind has evolved as a race from the primitive to the modern state of being with numerous breakthroughs and developments in various spheres of activity since the twilight of civilization. However, even in this age of technology and materialism, the modern mentality continues to display traces of mythic traits, in spite of the mutations in religious and cultural history. To reinstate the words of Jung: “...every civilized human being, whatever his conscious development, is an archaic man at the deeper levels of his psyche” (Jacobi, 1953, p. 16-17).

The *psyche* of the modern individual participates not only in the historical and linear time of one’s own life but also in the mythological-circular time of the human race. The need to periodically participate in festivals in order to repeat the wholeness of the *illud tempus* is one such instance for the survival of the archaic modes of the human *psyche*. Festive time marks an interval from the monotony of linear and mundane time reminding of the cyclical patterns in nature by recurring and repeating itself every year.

Religious and cultural practices, from the Jungian perspective, are phenomena of ‘*apokatastasis*’—the unconscious tendency towards repetition of the collective and individual *psyche*; for we return to the original and the archaic acts to re-enact and re-live what was sanctioned by the gods and performed by our ancestors. Festivals, celebrating the religious and cultural beliefs, and expressing the traditional and existential situations of a given community demonstrate an eternal return of things that people behold. Festival is latent with the archetypal experiences, which repeats itself to renew, maintain and strengthen the community. The festive time is not merely a repetition of the sacred time of the beginnings, but it is a complete regeneration by bringing the energy of the essential source of being into the present, which can be considered as therapeutic and re-creative. It is the exemplary pattern of all renewal.

The theory of ‘eternal return’, according to Eliade (1959), is a belief, expressed in religious behaviour of mankind in their need to return to the mythical age and to become contemporary with the events described in one’s myth.

The calendrical year with ceremonial days maintains human being’s sense of living in the sanctified time, for without a technique to arrest the flow of time one is cut off from the deeper roots of existence. Certain festivals observed in the modern world, though apparently secular, still preserve a mythical structure and function and are

latent with archetypal experiences. The festival illustrates a collective 'return' to the primordial time wherein the entire community reminisce and re-create the events reported in the myths pertaining to that particular festival thereby, ritually repeating the original experience.

BIHU FESTIVAL

The *Burha Luit* (Brahmaputra River, known colloquially as the old *Luit*) majestically flows through the Assam valley against the backdrop of blue hills, fertilizing the land and shaping the *psyche* of its people and begetting a civilization and culture that identifies itself as the Assamese. The inhabitants of the fertile Brahmaputra valley, since time immemorial, have been observing the *Bihu* as an expression of their way of life which is closely knit to the agricultural cycle.

The Assamese is not a homogenous group of people but an amalgamation of heterogeneous elements including tribal and Aryan influences and a cultural assimilation of the two through a process of sanskritization. *Bihu*, which occupies the most prominent place in the Assamese cultural calendar, acts as a common thread connecting the masses spread across the hills and valleys of the region.

The folkloric character of *Bihu* gets reflected in its aesthetics of dance, music, tales, myths, proverbs, customs which are unique in its own way differing from the pan-Indian culture. It is considered to be a secular festival in its spirit which is celebrated without much overt religious sentiments or function. The *Bihu* celebrates not only joy and abundance but also sorrow and scarcity in its various forms.

Etymologically, *Bihu* is believed to have originated from the Sanskrit root word *Bisuvan* which is traced to the sacred Hindu texts, *Atharva Veda* (900 BCE) and the *Aitareya Brahmana* (600 BCE). *Bisuvan*, in these texts refers to a day on which a fire sacrifice was performed in the hope of obtaining a better crop. However, other texts such as the *Visnu Purana* (400 CE), states that a festival called *Bisuva* took place between winter and spring when the sun changed its position from one particular sign of the zodiac to the other (Pathak & Kalita, 2019). Assam, having strong astrological and astronomical connections in the ancient times, was known as *Pragjyotispur* (city of Eastern Astrology) with a temple dedicated to the worship of nine planets (*Nobogroho* temple).

Apart from the sanskritized conception of the roots of the origin of *Bihu*, it is believed that the word originated from the Tai-Ahom word *Poi-hu*. 'The ancestors of the Tai-Ahoms used to organize a festival known as the *Pongo-Sam-Nam* which means to enjoy and make merry by splashing water at people. Arriving at the *Soumar* land (*Soumarkhondo*) as early as in the thirteenth century, they saw the previous inhabitants from the Austric, the Alpine and the Tibeto-Burmese tribes celebrating a festival of worshipping cattle by splashing water at it. Having seen this, they called it as *Pongo-Hu* (from *Poi* meaning worship, *Hu* meaning cow). The term *Poi* by leaps and bounds became *Pi* and later *Bi* and now eventually it has come to be known as *Bihu*' (Gondhiya, 2011). During the rule of the Ahom kings (1228-1826 AD), the *Bihu* festival was granted royal patronage and declared as the national festival of Assam. The historical *Rongghor* at Sibsagar in Upper Assam was built in the form of a pavilion by the Ahom king *Xorgodeu* Rudra Sinha to witness the celebrations.

At the heart of the *Bihu* lies its accompanying songs and dance. *Bihu* refers not only to the festival holistically but also the dance (*Bihu Naas*) and songs (*Bihu Naam*) which are the most delightful components of the festival.

The *Bihu* festivals are three in number encompassing various stages in the agricultural cycle:

Bohag or *Rongali Bihu* (*Bihu* of Joy)

Kati or *Kongali Bihu* (*Bihu* of Scarcity)

Magh or *Bhugali Bihu* (*Bihu* of Indulgence)

Each of the *Bihus* synchronizes with a distinctive phase in the agricultural life of the people. Astronomically, *Bohag Bihu* (around mid-April) is associated with Vernal Equinox, *Kati Bihu* with Autumnal Equinox, and *Magh Bihu* with Winter Solstice. In this regard, the term '*Bihu*' is traced to the Sanskrit, '*visuvan*' equinox. The *Bohag Bihu* marks the advent of the seed time, the *Kati Bihu* marks the completion of sowing and transplanting, the *Magh Bihu* marks the gathering of harvest. All the three *Bihus* begin on the last day of the previous month, which is known as *Sankranti/Domahi* (i.e., the junction of two months).

Bohag Bihu or Rongali Bihu

As the sun's rays begin to feel warm again after the long months of winter, Mother Nature begins to put on new apparels while adorning herself with new leaves and fragrant blossoms. Bubbling with a similar spirit, the people of the land make preparations to welcome the newness around. *Bohag Bihu* holds the most intimate place in the heart of every Assamese among all the three *Bihus*. It heralds the Assamese New Year.

In the agricultural cycle, it marks the sowing season which is a repetition of creation on the vegetative level, as the new crop is equivalent to new creation. The celebration of the New Year highlights the idea of renewal of time and the regeneration of the world with the fertility of the earth, which also finds expression in the *Bihu* songs, dance, games, customs like wearing new clothes, *etc.* and the overall spirit of the masses.

Bohag Bihu starts on the last day of *Sot* (mid-March to mid-April) and traditionally, it continued for the following six days of *Bohag* (mid-April). Hence, the seven days of *Bohag Bihu* are called *Xaat Bihu*. These seven days of *Bihu* are; 1) *Bihu* of 'Sot' or 'Nixa' *Bihu* (*Bihu* of the night), 2) *Goru Bihu* (cattle worship), 3) *Manuh Bihu* ('bor' *Bihu*, on the first day of *Bohag*), 4) *Senehi Bihu* (*Bihu* of the beloved), 5) *Kutum Bihu* (kins and folks), 6) *Mela/Haat Bihu* (market and fairs), 7) *Sera/Era Bihu* (the final day). In several areas of the region the celebrations continue for the entire month of *Bohag* starting with the welcoming of the *Bihu* to bidding it farewell at the end of the month.

Bohag Bihu incorporates various types of dance and song performances. Few of them as described by Gondhiya (2011) are *Husori*, *Mukoli Bihu* of the youth, *Gabhoru Bihu*, *Bohua Bihu* or *Jeng Bihu*.

Husori

The main aspects of *Husori* are community gathering and congregational praying for a happy and prosperous new year. The content of the songs is devotional, historical, naturalistic or related to rural-life. The *Husori* troupe visits every household in the village performing dance while singing devotional songs in the courtyard and offers good wishes to the host families. It first offers blessings to the host families—"...may there be more cows in the cowshed...so it be; more buffaloes be tethered...so it be; more fishes in the pond...so it be..."

Mukoli Bihu

In this performance, young boys and girls dance close by while 'opening up their hearts' expressing love and yearnings. *Mukoli* means open and free. In olden days, the girls and boys performed in separate groups but close by, so that the singing could be done alternately. It is also known as *Rati Bihu* (*Bihu* of the night), performed by young boys and girls in the natural surroundings in open fields, or river-banks, under the open sky or under trees. The boy addresses the girl as '*hai-oi*' and the girl addresses the boy as '*dehi-oi*' while singing the '*jujona*' (a non-rhythmic song) and then begin with the '*juranaam*' (a kind of question and answer song) with the male asking a question and the female giving the reply. The *Mukoli Bihu* performance has an amorous and sexual character to it. Through the movements of the dance, the young boys and girls invite each other or hint towards mating (Gondhiya, 2011).

Gabhoru Bihu

It is performed by women and young girls (*gabhoru* means a young woman) at night in an isolated place under the trees, after finishing their daily chores. It is often confused with the *Jeng-Bihu* performance which is discussed next. While performing this dance, the women would put a barricade with dry branches or '*jeng*'. Men were not allowed to watch it and given appropriate punishments if they violated or crossed the *jeng*. The lyrics of the accompanying songs are women-centric.

Bohua Bihu or *Jeng Bihu*

This *Bihu* is a controversial one, usually misunderstood as the same with *Gabhoru Bihu*. This *Bihu* is no longer prevalent and was performed only in few parts of Assam. *Jeng Bihu* was performed by young men who wore masks of goat and would move around dancing and another bunch of men would dress up as hunters with bow-arrow *etc.* and follow or chase the other group. It is called *Jeng Bihu* because '*jeng*' or dry twigs from the bamboo is being put and is covered up later with green leaves and climbers. In a few remote parts of Upper-Assam, it is still performed with young men dressing up in guise of hunter and 'game'.

Cheng-Nang Bihu (Nixa Bihu/Bihu of the Night)

This *Bihu* was performed by young girls and was also known as *Poi-Cheng-Nang* in the Tai-language. ‘*Poi*’ meaning festival, ‘*cheng*’ means quality/deity/promise, and ‘*nang*’ means a maiden with qualities of dancing and singing. In short, it is the ‘festival of the young women’. The Assamese word ‘*Senai*’ (meaning, beloved) is believed to have come from the word, ‘*Cheng-Nang*’. ‘*Cheng-Nang*’ means ‘dear maiden’ in the Tai-language.

‘*Rati Bihu of Sot*’ is associated with *Cheng-Nang Bihu* today. Traditionally girls performed it secretly, later boys were to allowed watch it and gradually they began to dance close-by under the same tree. A leader from the girl’s troupe and a leader from the male audience were chosen to watch over that group so that a couple could not elope from the *Bihutoli* (*Bihu* ground).

Apart from the *Bihu* songs and dance, other notable aspects include the various sports and games, musical instruments such as the *Dhul* (drum), *Pepa* (buffalo horn pipe), *Gogona* (vibrating reed pipe made of bamboo), *Xutuli* (earthen whistle), *Toka* (bamboo clapper) and so on, *Jolpan* (special meals) and *pitha* (sweet-meats), the *Bihuwan* (or *Gamusa*, which is a beautifully woven cloth in white with red patterns, gifted as a symbol of respect and love), etc.

The heartfelt sentiments associated with *Bohag Bihu* can be captured through the song by Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, “*Bohag mathu eti ritu nohoi, nohoi Bohag eti maah, Axomiya jatir ei ayux rekha, ganajibonor ei xaah*” (*Bohag* is not merely a season, nor is it merely a month; it is the lifeline of the Assamese culture, inspiration for social life).

The present paper is focussed on one the myths of the origin of the *Bihu* dance and the springtime *Bihu* festival.

Kati Bihu

Kati Bihu is also known as *Kongali Bihu* (*Kongali* meaning poverty). By the time it is autumn, the harvest from the previous agricultural cycle that was stored in the granary begin to replete and there is scarcity of food grains for the peasant. With very little to eat, the atmosphere surrounding this *Bihu* is one of sobriety and devotion. In the fields, the paddy seedlings begin to grow. The cultivator goes to his field and prays for the protection of his crops and to be blessed with abundance of harvest. A special type of lamp is lit up in the fields called the *Akaxh Bonti* (sky lamp) on top of tall bamboo poles. Incantations are chanted for the fruitfulness of the growing paddy and to ward off birds, rodents, insects, and animals from destroying the crops. The womenfolk plant a *tulsi* (holy basil) sapling in their courtyard seeking blessings from goddess Laxmi for plenitude and supply.

Magh Bihu

Magh Bihu is the harvest festival. It is known as *Bhugali Bihu*, which comes from the word ‘*bhog*’, meaning feast or indulgence. It marks the end of the harvesting season and the peasants look forward to spend upcoming days without any shortage. The central character of this *Bihu* is merrymaking, holding community feasts, engaging in various sports and games and so on. On the eve of the *Bihu*, *Uruka*, the villagers make the *meji* (bonfire made of green bamboo) and the *bhelaghor* (makeshift hut), generally in the fields or near a river. The night is spent cooking food together, eating, drinking traditional rice-beer and dancing to the beats of the *dhul* around the bonfire. The youth spend the night in the *bhelaghor*. Boys engage in stealing articles like firewood, bamboo, vegetables, poultry in the darkness of the night and it is considered socially acceptable on the occasion of *Uruka*. The next morning, the central *meji* is burnt and prayers to the fire god are offered by appeasing it with *pithas* and *tamul-paan* (raw areca nut and betel leaves). Various kinds of sports such as egg-fight, nightingale-fight, cock-fight and buffalo-fights are organised in the fields all through the day.

DANCE OF THE GODDESSES: MYTH OF ORIGIN OF BIHU

The origin of the *Bihu* festival and its dance in the springtime is rooted in a myth as documented by Baishya (2004)—

The creator God, Brahma, had three daughters—Kolimoti, Seuti and Malati—who once had a thirst to drink human blood. In order to quench their thirst they went to Lord Shiv to seek his permission. Lord Shiv refused to accede to their demands and instead directed them to start a journey from the east to a place in the western part where there were no human beings. Kolimoti, along with her sisters voyaged downstream in a boat and arrived

at a place called Garuchar Rajya located at the foot of a hill which was the abode of numerous deities. As the three sisters voyaged downstream, they began taking off their apparels and performing songs and dances while exhibiting their naked bodies. The deities residing on both the banks of the river enjoyed the dance and joined in with cheer, laughter and whistling. Other female deities and fairies joined the three sisters while imitating the same form of dance and merriments. As a consequence of their dance, the dry and withered surroundings turned into lush greenery and vibrant blossoming with the magic touch of spring. Doyang Dew or Dhonkoliya who was present at the site was informed that the *Bihu* would be an agricultural festival to be celebrated among the peasants. The agricultural produce would be consumed by both deities and the human beings. Garuchar Rajya at the foothills of the Satai Parbat is believed to be the present day Koliabor in middle Assam where the *Bihu* songs and dance was initiated by goddess Kolimoti.

Dhonkoliya arranged for the musical instruments—*dhul* (drum), *pepa* (hornpipe), *toka* (bamboo clapper) and *gogona* (reed pipe) to accompany the *Bihu* performance.

An old woman named Kuji was on her way to the *Bihu* ground when she met two sisters, Bordoi and Sorudoi. At the request of Kuji, the maidens agreed to forecast the advent of *Bihu* among the human beings by creating strong gales.

Kolimoti's endeavour was fulfilled as she introduced the *Bihu* dance to benefit the peasants by improving the fertility of the crops and an increase in productivity. The peasants were gripped with the thrill of *Bihu* and engaged in singing and dancing. After they became weary with all the celebrations, the peasants bade farewell to *Bihu* with the prayer for recurring every year at the same time. The *Bihu* merriments inspired the peasants to engage in agricultural activities.

Hypothetical Interpretation

The daughters of Brahma imitate Shiv in his tantric practices and are destined to follow the path of the Lord of Dance (Nataraja). Usha, Goddess of the Dawn, or Shatarupa, Goddess of Forms, in relation to Brahma become the co-Creatrix, with God as the root of *animus* in woman's *psyche* due to the incestuous desire of the Heavenly Father. Goddesses Kolimoti, Seuti and Malati establish an extraneous relationship that with Lord Shiv bringing home esoteric ways as instinctive to woman's *psyche*, making woman the Goddess incarnate in *Tantra* and dance as a natural expression of joy in the body. Besides the masculine *Tandav* dance of Lord Shiv, yet another powerful dance that can overpower evil, emancipate from impediments in the order of creation and emanate love, joy and grace is the dance the Lord Vishnu in the feminine form of Mohini (*Mohiniattam*). The dance of the Goddesses Kolimoti, Seuti and Malati transcends destruction and evil; it belongs to the order of nature to celebrate each season and the fruits of the land, enjoy various time periods each year in one's personal contextual situations. In the continuation of the act of creation, the daughters of Brahma with the facilitation of Lord Shiv blessed humankind (especially Assamese) with the joy of dance and music.

The myth begins with the daughters of Brahma thirsting for human blood indicates the practice of the Left-Hand of the Gods in Assam to appease and venerate the Goddesses Kolimoti, Seuti and Malati. Divine intervention of Lord Shiv affects a religious shift, a transition that would journey far beyond the sacrifice of human beings in the flux of time and history of Assam.

According to the Tai-Ahom history (*Lid Phi*) or the *Akshaya Bihu* chronicles, the creator of *Bihu* was Kesaikhati (eater of raw flesh) or Kolimoti and the site of origin of *Bihu* was Sodiya (Borah, 2005). Even today most of the ethnic groups of Sodiya in Upper Assam denote the first Wednesday of the *Bohag* month to the propitiation of Kesaikhati by offering worship and sacrifices and celebrating *Bihu* in the shrine of the Goddess. Goddess Kesaikhati/ Kolimoti is also known as 'Kamakhya of the East'. Kolimoti is the Earth Goddess thus presiding over the agriculture and it is the libidinal aspect, the human instinct and fertility that makes Her the originator of *Bihu* festival. No wonder, *Bihu* is a sacred amalgamation of the agricultural calendar, romance and social merriment, and in covert ways celebration of the sanctity and naturalness of human sexuality. It is the annual ritual of celebrating *Bihu* that incarnates Goddess Kolimoti in each agricultural year, unconsciously renewing Her spirit among the masses, and brings the sacred time of Her myth into our profane-temporal space and time.

Goddess Kolimoti-Kamakhya still seeks blood sacrifice in contemporary times but in practice it is that of an animal, namely buffalos, as the replica of humans. The sacrifice of human blood, viewed as barbaric, stopped during the British period extends further back in the mythical time when Lord Shiv imparted a divine precept beyond human blood sacrifice and established a stream of consciousness—voyage on the water—that initiated the practice of *Bihu* as a form of dance and a festival, in the land wherein there were only deities, *genius loci*,

and no human beings. Garuchar Rajya is symbolic of the non-existence of any one social-cultural order, from mythological perspective, among the heterogeneous people of Assam. The journey of the Goddesses on the waters of life brought down the spirit of *Bihu* in the hearts of the people of Assam as a universal way of life. The people of Assam continue to partake in the initiation of the Goddesses and imitate the dance of Kolimoti, Seuti and Malati.

The *Bihu* dance has an archetype in the acts of the Goddesses Kolimoti, Seuti and Malati. The naked dance of the Goddesses Kolimoti, Seuti and Malati is symbolic of the spirit of *Bihu* that its dance belong to the nature and its joy is pure thus love is freely expressed through the medium of the songs, and not restricted to only the red letter days of *Bihu* festivals in the calendar. The dance of the Goddesses still instil spontaneous joys and festive spirit in the consumption of food, especially meat, and drinks, resulting in emotional bonding, as various deities from both sides of the river join in, in the similar spirit people find soulful connection with near and dear ones, with one's land, and that earthliness even enchant the outsiders. Such is the spirit of the celebration of the springtime. As nature blooms in the myth and in the year, the people of Assam celebrate the joy of living.

The people of Assam have traditionally known the time of festivities. It is hypothesized that the presence of the old lady in the myth, *Kuji* (hunchback), is *Koliburhi*—the Dark Old Lady—who meets the two sisters on the way to celebrate *Bihu*. *Bihu* marks the meeting with *Bordoi* and *Sorudoi* that personify the wind and water respectively, i.e., the experience of the strong wind and rain during the month of *Bohag*. The *Koliburhi* (Dark Old Lady) dance in Koliabor (the place features in the myth as Garuchar Rajya) which is performed by the elderly women during the *Bihu* could be traced to this myth wherein men are restricted from witnessing or participating. *Kuji*, meeting the two sisters, *Bordoi* and *Sorudoi* on her way to the *Bihu* ground is the coming of wind and water in the passage of the yearly cycle personified by the two maidens as harbingers of the arrival of *Bihu*. The two sisters personify the climatic conditions during this period of the year.

In Assamese folkloric tradition, *Bordoisila* is believed to be a daughter of Assam who is married to her bridegroom in a far away land. At the advent of the springtime *Bihu* every year she visits her mother and returns when the *Bihu* has ended. *Bordoisila* is experienced by the people of Assam in the form of two strong gales. The one preceding the *Bihu* is pleasant and calm while the after gale is often very turbulent and devastating, uprooting trees and collapsing houses. Since the land of Assam is the mother of *Bordoisila* thus, the return of the daughter during the springtime even though it brings furious storms, people fondly embrace her as the beloved daughter of their land. This shows the acceptance of nature in all her forms, both benign and wrathful.

The seeds of the musical instruments accompanying the *Bihu* dance are latent in the myth. The *dhul* (drum), *pepa* (buffalo hornpie), *toka* (bamboo clapper), *gogona* (bamboo reed pipe) have a divine origin traced to the deity Dhonkoloya/Doyang Dew.

The joy of *Bihu* dance and music rooted in the act of the Goddesses is archetypal which predominately the women repeat and the younger generation of girls imitate. In research, we discern the dance of the Goddesses by the manner in which traditionally *Bihu* dance steps as imitations of the movements of the trees swaying in the wind, birds taking flight, butterflies fluttering, spinning like a spindle, waves in the water, extending both hands like that of a buffalo's horns, reaping the harvest, pounding rice in the *dhenki* (rice pounding implement), moving in a circular motion like a *mandala* have passed down to the contemporary times (Gondhiya, 2011). The mythic dance of the Goddesses personifies the fructification of nature and manifests its numinosity in the socio-cultural context giving ever-flowing joy.

THE JOY OF BIHU

“*Oti koi senehor mugare mohura
Tatokoi senehor maku,
Tatokoi senehor bohagor bihuti oi
Nepati kenekoi thaku!*” (Goswami, 1962).

“Very dear to me is the *muga* silk reel
Dearer still is the shuttle of my loom,
But the *Bohag Bihu* is the dearest of all
How could I do without it!”

This *Bihu* couplet brings to life the imagery of a *xipini* (expert weaver) who sits by her loom busily weaving the *Bihuwan* (the traditional *Gamusa*) which she would gift to her beloved, kins and folks, as the season of *Bohag* is

just around the corner. The vibrant patterns that the *xipini* creates are reflective of her mood and imagination at the advent of *Bohag* when the fragrance of orchids and melodies of the *dhul* fill the air. One could easily imagine that the shuttle and the loom must be very precious to her, just as the sea is to a fisherman. But the *xipini* sings that the most precious to her is the *Bihu* of *Bohag*.

Weaving is associated in most cultures with the great Mother Goddesses as beautiful tapestries are created from the threads with the motion of the shuttle in the loom resembling the rhythms in nature. In Assamese folk life, the weaving loom is an integral part closely associated with the *Bohag Bihu*. Assamese women have traditionally been adept at spinning and weaving fantastic patterns in silk and cotton. They could even support themselves financially with their loom.

The *muga* silk is produced by the silkworm *Antheraea Assamensis* which is geographically associated and unique to Assam. The silk has a very fine texture and a distinctive golden-yellow glaze to it. The fabric is so durable that it often outlives its owner and gets passed on from one generation to the next, from mother to her daughter. The traditional attire for the women in a *Bihu* performance is the *Muga'r Mekhela-Sador* (a two-piece garment draped on the top and the bottom) woven with intricate red patterns on it.

The Assamese take pride in the *muga* silk and regard it with great value. However, the above *Bihu* song captures the most intimate sentiments felt for *Bohag Bihu* as it is considered to be dearer than even the *muga* silk. Such is the thrill and joy of *Bihu*.

“Dhe dheki de dheki de
Dheki de oi majoni
Hatot kula saloni loi dhe dheki di thakute
Poluwai o ninibi bhoribo lagibo dhon” (Goswami, 1962).

“Keep pounding on the rice-pounder
Holding the sieve in your hand.
Do not make me elope with you while I am pounding the rice
Or else you will have to pay back with money.”

The celebration period of *Bihu* begins much earlier than the festival itself with the preparation and heartfelt hard work by the womenfolk while pounding the *bora*-rice (sticky rice) in the *dhenki* (wooden paddy husking implement) to prepare various *pithas* (rice cakes).

The *dhenki* binds the womenfolk together as they all gather together in the *dhenki-ghor* (shed containing the *dhenki*). Each household take turns to pound the rice at their respective houses and make sweetmeats out of it so that the women in the neighbourhood can be present together at one house at a time to help each other out in the long process of pounding huge quantities of rice.

This spirit of shared sisterhood expresses the joy of *Bihu*.

The above *Bihu* couplet depicts a scene from the *dhenki* shed wherein the women are singing amongst themselves and playfully teasing each other about the outcome of eloping with their beloved. Marriage by elopement was not uncommon in villages during the *Bohag Bihu* with the season of spring bringing fullest inspiration to indulge in amorous pleasure.

“Pepati bojaute tiniti aangulir
Maajorti aanguli pore
Aamar nasoniye nasiboloi dhorile
Pokhila uradi ure” (Goswami, 1962).

“To play the hornpipe, out of the three fingers
Move the one at the middle.
When our beloved dancer begins to dance
Like a butterfly she flutters.”

The rhythmic beats of the *dhul* (drum) coming from afar, the resonating notes of the *pepa* (buffalo hornpipe) played by the men folk after a long day's work at the *pothar* (fields) with their silhouettes visible against the setting sun creates an atmosphere of romantic surges. The season of *Bohag* facilitates in the contagion of this consciousness from the natural landscape to the psychic landscape of its folks. As the music fills up the air, the

nasoni's (danseuse) heart gets restless in ecstasy to rush into the *pothar* and swirl like a butterfly. This is the thrill and joy of *Bihu*.

The spirit of *Bihu* is not limited to the season of *Bohag* alone, but it extends far and beyond the festival and finds expression at other events/moments of joy participated by the young and old alike. *Bihu* instils an acceptance and embracing of all the seasons of the year and consequently, of human life, be it springtime, fall or winter, joy or sorrow. It reminds of the eternal cycles in nature of birth, death and rebirth. The long nights of winter may feel cold and dry, but spring shall come again and life would bloom yet again. In the words of P. B. Shelley, 'If winter comes, can spring be far behind?' Such are the myriad hues that instil hope and joy of *Bihu*.

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