

ST. JOSEPH'S UNIVERSITY
#36, LALBAGH ROAD, BANGALORE- 560027



Bihu: A Celebration of Assam's Rich Cultural Heritage

MAHARNAV MAHANTA
222ECI076

School Of Humanities
St. Joseph's University
Bangalore- 560027

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that Maharnav Mahanta has completed the term paper titled “Bihu: A Celebration of Assam’s Rich Cultural Heritage” for the academic requirements, for the academic year 2022-2025.

Dissertation Guide
Ms. Anusuya A Paul
School of Humanities
St. Joseph’s University
Bangalore

DECLARATION

I, Maharnav Mahanta, declare that the project entitled “Bihu: A Celebration of Assam’s Rich Cultural Heritage” was carried out by me in the year 2024 towards the partial fulfilment of my bachelor’s degree in Economics and Industrial Relations under the guidance of Ms. Anusuya A Paul, Department of Languages, St. Joseph’s University, Bangalore.

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INTRODUCTION

Bihu is a vibrant and significant festival in Assam, India that showcases the region's rich cultural heritage. The festival has a rich history and has evolved over time to reflect the socio-political environment of the region. Bihu is celebrated in Assam in three basic forms: Bohag Bihu, Kati Bihu and Magh Bihu, each corresponding to a specific agricultural cycle. Bihu is believed to have evolved from ancient agricultural techniques derived from nature worship and fertility rituals. Bihu has evolved from a rural agricultural festival to a more urban and multicultural event, reflecting the changing socio-economic conditions of Assam. Bihu has been celebrated throughout the ages as a reflection of the essence of Assamese cultural society and thousands of folk beliefs and rituals are intertwined with the festival. Parallel forms of Bihu are also found among various ethnic communities and social groups living in Assam including Bodos, Misings, Karbis, Tea tribes etc. The festival clearly reflects the customs, beliefs, performances, rituals and festivals prevalent in Assam. Assamese society. The traditional foods, folk beliefs and rituals of the festival like Meji and Bhelaghar further enrich its cultural significance, making Bihu an important part of Assam's cultural identity. The performance of Assamese Bihu songs has evolved to represent a world full of possibilities, combining seasonal performances with life and human longing. The songs of the festival contain a story that celebrates the ceremonial performance of Nason, expresses the idealized qualities of Assamese womanhood, and shows a change in performance dynamics and cultural presentation. Bihu is a cultural symbol of Assam representing the state's rich heritage, traditions and values. The celebration of the festival of life, fertility and nature reflects the essence of Assamese culture and its deep-rooted connection with the land and its people. Bihu is a unifying force that unites communities, overcomes social barriers and instills a sense of belonging and solidarity in the people of Assam. The broad style and broad participation of the festival reflects its importance as a promoter of social relations and cultural harmony in the region. This study deals with the historical aspects of Bihu, focusing on its conception, development and significance in the cultural landscape of Assam.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aims and objectives of studying Bihu, a traditional Assamese festival, are related to understanding its cultural significance, historical roots and contemporary relevance in Assamese society. Here are the main aims and objectives.

- To explore the cultural heritage of Assam by studying the rituals, traditions and symbolism associated with Bihu, contributing to the preservation and promotion of the Assamese cultural identity.

- To delve into the historical origin and development of Bihu by tracing its roots to ancient agricultural practices and to explore how it has adapted over time to reflect changes in Assamese society.
- Analysis To explore the socio-cultural dynamics of Bihu celebrations, including its role in promoting community cohesion, strengthening social bonds and passing on cultural values across generations.
- Assess the significance of Bihu today in the context of contemporary Assamese society, including its adaptation to the urban environment, its commercialization and its continued importance as a cultural symbol.

Achieving these objectives will enable scholars to gain a comprehensive overview of Bihu and its multifarious significance in the cultural landscape of Assam.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Several books/articles/documentaries have explored on the topic “BIHU”. Below are some examples:

Books:

"Bihu: A Celebration of Assamese Identity" by Sanjib Kumar Borkakoti

This book provides an in-depth look at the Bihu festival, exploring its historical roots, cultural significance and contemporary relevance in Assamese society. Through detailed analysis and anecdotes, the author delves into various aspects of Bihu, including its rituals, music, dance and culinary traditions.

The Bihu Festival in Assam: A Socio-Cultural Study by Mitali Goswami

Mitali Goswami's book provides socio-cultural information. A perspective on the Bihu festival, exploring its role as a unifying force in Assamese society. Based on ethnographic research and historical analysis, the book explores how Bihu reflects the changing dynamics of rural and urban life in Assam and highlights its importance as a symbol of cultural identity and sustainability.

Articles:

"Bihu: The Festival of Assam" by Dr. Parag Jyoti Saikia (Published in The Assam Tribune)

This article provides a detailed account of the Bihu festival, tracing its origins, development and modern manifestations. Dr. Saikia explores the cultural, social and religious dimension of Bihu and throws light on its significance as a marker of Assamese identity and heritage.

Dr. Dipankar Sharma "The Significance of Bihu: A Cultural Perspective" (Published in Northeast India Quarterly) Dr. Sharma's article provides an in-depth analysis of the cultural significance of Bihu, exploring its role as a promoter of social cohesion, a

promoter of traditional art forms and a preserver of indigenous knowledge. The article also discusses the challenges and opportunities to revive Bihu rituals in modern times.

Documentaries:

"Rongali Bihu: A Celebration of Life" (Director Rupam Saikia)

This documentary offers a visual journey through living life. Rongali Bihu celebrations that reflect the festival's spirit of joy, friendship and cultural expression. Through interviews with performers, artisans and community members, the film explores the various rituals, music, dance and culinary traditions of Bihu.

"Bihu: Echoes of Tradition" (director Gautam Sharma)

"Bihu: Echoes of Tradition" explores into the historical aspects of the roots and contemporary significance of the Bihu festival and includes interviews with scholars, cultural experts and practitioners. The documentary offers an in-depth exploration of the cultural significance of Bihu and highlights its role as a symbol of Assamese identity and resilience.

These resources provide valuable insights and perspectives on the festival of Bihu, enriching our understanding of its cultural heritage and enduring significance. in the Assamese language. society

HISTORY OF BIHU

The history of Bihu, a celebration of Assam's rich cultural heritage, is deeply rooted in the region's agricultural cycles and connection to nature. This traditional festival is celebrated in three primary forms, each corresponding to different agricultural cycles in Assam: Bohag Bihu or Rongali Bihu in spring, Kati Bihu or Kongali Bihu in autumn, and Magh Bihu or Bhogali Bihu in winter after the harvesting. Bihu is an integral part of cultural assimilation in Assamese society, reflecting the customs, beliefs, performance, rituals, and festivals of the region. The festival is a clear reflection of the essence of Assamese cultural society, with thousands of folk beliefs and rituals entwined with Bihu. The folk aesthetics of Bihu are illustrated through the Bihu song, dance, gestures, and overall ethos of the festival. The festival celebrates eros, romance, and fertility, highlighting the tension between folk and classical canons. Bihu has played an important role in political mobilization and awareness raising. During the 1979 Assam Movement, Bihu became a political forum, driving political messaging and extending the concept of Stage Bihu. This metamorphosis emphasizes the adaptability and resilience of Bihu as a cultural icon, mirroring the sociopolitical situation of the time.

Bihu has undergone significant modernization, with the dance form being introduced to the metropolitan arena, converting the festival from its basic agricultural roots to a more 'sanitized' version.

Bihu's history is highlighted by its close connect to Assam's agricultural cycles, its position as a representation of Assamese cultural society, and its capacity to adapt and evolve throughout time while retaining its essence and relevance in Assam's cultural environment.

THE THREE TYPES OF BIHU AND ITS TRADITION

Bihu, with its three unique seasons (Bohag, Kati, and Magh), corresponds closely to Assam's agricultural and astronomical cycles. This alignment emphasizes the intimate connection between Assamese culture and the rhythms of nature.

Bohag Bihu, also known as Rongali Bihu, is a traditional celebration that marks the Assamese New Year and spring season. Bohag Bihu is a celebration of life, fertility, and nature in which people participate in a variety of cultural activities such as singing, dancing, and feasting.

Kati Bihu, also known as Kongali Bihu, is a type of Bihu that is celebrated in the autumn season, around the time crops are harvested. Kati Bihu is a more serious and reflective event in which people pray for a plentiful harvest and the well-being of their families. The celebration is also associated with a variety of folk beliefs and traditions, including the burning of clay lamps and the presentation of food to the ancestors.

Magh Bihu, also known as Bhogali Bihu, is celebrated in the winter after crops have been harvested. Magh Bihu is a joyous occasion characterized by food, community gatherings, and cultural events. The event is also linked to the construction of temporary structures, such as Meji and Bhelaghar, which are used for feasting and communal gatherings. While Bihu is largely celebrated as an agricultural festival, its roots go deep into mythology and folklore. According to popular opinion, Bihu's origins can be traced back to ancient fertility rituals and nature worship practised by Assamese tribal groups. Legends tell of deities like Lord Krishna and Radha, whose celestial romance embodies Bihu's celebration of love and fertility.

Meji and **Bhelaghar** hold significant cultural importance in the Bihu festival in Assam. These structures are constructed on the night before Magh Bihu, known as 'Uruka' in Assamese society, and are deeply intertwined with the folk culture of Assamese society. Meji represents a temporary temple-like structure, while Bhelaghar symbolizes a makeshift hut-like structure. These constructions are part of the preparations for the grand festivities of Magh Bihu.

Meji and Bhelaghar play a vital role in the Bihu festival as they are central to the rituals and traditions observed during this time. They are not merely physical structures but embody cultural symbolism and spiritual significance. The construction of Meji and Bhelaghar signifies the community coming together to prepare for the festival, fostering a sense of unity and shared cultural identity among the people of Assam.

Bihu and Assamese Cuisine: Traditional Foods and Culinary Practices

Pitha, a staple of Assamese cuisine, takes center stage during Bihu celebrations. These rice-based cakes come in various shapes and flavours, each with its unique preparation method. Til pitha, made with sesame seeds and jaggery, is a popular choice during Magh Bihu, while ghila pitha, stuffed with coconut or lentil paste, is a favorite during Bohag Bihu. Pitha symbolizes abundance and prosperity, reflecting the agrarian ethos of Bihu.

During Magh Bihu, til laru and narikol laru (coconut laru) are prepared in large quantities and distributed among family and friends as a gesture of goodwill and camaraderie. Laru, or sweet balls made from coconut, sesame seeds, and jaggery, are another essential component of Bihu feasts, with each variety offering a burst of flavors and textures.

Masor tenga, a tangy fish curry, is a hallmark dish of Assamese cuisine and a popular choice during Bihu festivals. Masor tenga, made with souring agents such as tomatoes, lemon, or elephant apple, is a refreshing alternative to the richness of other Bihu meals. The addition of local herbs and spices enhances the flavor profile, making masor tenga a must-have on the Bihu menu.

Aloo pitika, or mashed potatoes seasoned with mustard oil, onions, and green chilies, is a simple but soothing food served at Bihu festivities. The earthy flavors of the potatoes, mixed with the pungency of mustard oil, create a beautiful balance that adds to Bihu's joyful mood.

Bihu is about more than simply eating excellent cuisine; it's about getting together as a community to make and enjoy meals. Families and neighbors come together in communal kitchens known as bhelaghar to cook traditional Bihu foods, establishing a sense of community and solidarity.

Bihu cuisine stresses the use of seasonal and locally available products, reflecting the region's agricultural abundance. Rice, fish, leafy greens, and indigenous herbs are staples of Bihu cuisine, providing freshness and authenticity in every bite.

Bihu dishes are prepared and consumed in a ritualistic and symbolic manner. Meji and bhelaghar, symbolic constructions built during Magh Bihu, serve as gathering places for communal feasting and cultural exchange. Sharing food with loved ones represents abundance, hospitality, and benevolence, which reinforces the spirit of Bihu.

ETHNIC GROUPS EMBRACING BIHU: A symbol of Cultural Assimilation

Assamese Community

The Assamese, who form the dominant ethnic group in Assam, have long celebrated Bihu as an integral part of their cultural identity. For them Bihu is not only a celebration but a way of life deeply rooted in their customs, traditions and collective memory.

Bodo Community

The Bodos, one of the largest indigenous ethnic groups in Assam, have also adopted Bihu as their cultural heritage. Despite their traditions and festivals such as the Bwisagu festival, many Bodos actively participate in Bihu celebrations, which shows a willingness to participate in and appreciate Assamese cultural practices.

Mising community

The Mising community, living mostly along the Assam River, have incorporated parts of Bihu into their cultural offerings. Preserving their unique identity and traditions, the Misings often participate in Bihu celebrations, adding variety and vibrancy to the celebrations.

Karbi Community

The Karbi people, who have their own rich cultural heritage, also participate in the Bihu celebrations, albeit in their own style. This fusion of Karbi and Assamese cultural elements during Bihu reflects the spirit of cultural exchange and mutual respect between the various ethnic groups of Assam.

Tea Tribes

Various communities collectively known as tea tribes, including Adivasis and other migrant workers, have also incorporated Bihu into their cultural mosaic. Despite socioeconomic challenges and marginalization, members of the Tea Tribes actively participate in Bihu celebrations and promote their unique perspectives and traditions in Assam's cultural landscape.

Cultural Assimilation and Unity

The widespread acceptance of Bihu among various ethnic groups in Assam underlines its importance as a cultural symbol that transcends ethnic boundaries and promotes a sense of unity and belonging between different communities. Bihu acts as a common

platform where people from different backgrounds come together to celebrate common values, traditions and aspirations.

The Evolution of Bihu from Ancient Rituals to Contemporary Celebrations

Bihu was traditionally conducted as a ritualistic ceremony to mark the changing seasons and harvest. It was an important part of the agricultural community's existence, serving as a way to thank the gods for a great harvest. The bihu festival evolved over time to meet the changing needs and interests of the people. During the medieval period, bihu began to integrate aspects of entertainment and social gathering. With the rise of Assamese dynasties and royal patronage, bihu became increasingly sophisticated and refined, including aspects of music, dance, and theatre. This shift has continued into the modern age, with bihu becoming an important cultural event embraced by individuals from all social classes. In the modern day, the bihu festival has grown into a major cultural event that celebrates Assam's rich heritage and traditions. It includes lively performances of traditional songs and dances, vivid costumes, and intricate choreography. The celebration of bihu has spread beyond the agricultural community and is today enjoyed by Assamese people from all walks of life, both inside and beyond the state. In the current period, the bihu festival has not only retained its traditional components but also accepted modern influences, making it more open and accessible to people from many cultural backgrounds.

Bihu evolved over time through a syncretistic process that combined indigenous customs with influences from other cultural traditions. The arrival of several ethnic groups in Assam, notably Austric, Tibeto-Burman, and Indo-Aryan peoples, contributed to the enrichment of Bihu with new customs, ceremonies, and musical styles. For example, the use of musical instruments like as the dhol, pepa, and taal illustrates the synthesis of indigenous and outside influences. During times of sociopolitical upheaval, Bihu became a symbol of resistance, fortitude, and cultural identification. The 19th-century Neo-Vaishnavite movement, led by Srimanta Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, had a huge impact on the cultural environment of Assam, influencing the formation of Bihu through devotional songs known as Borgeet. Bihu has been urbanizing and modernizing in recent decades, adjusting to urban people's changing lives and preferences. Bihu's traditional rural focus has extended to include urban themes and current challenges, reflecting Assam's metropolitan reality. Modern Bihu songs, for example, frequently include topics such as migration, globalization, and environmental conservation, making them appealing to urban audiences while conserving the festival's cultural legacy. Despite the problems that industrialization presents, attempts have been made to maintain and rejuvenate traditional Bihu practices and customs. Organizations like the Sangeet Natak Akademi and the Assam Sahitya Sabha have been instrumental in

promoting Bihu as a cultural legacy by sponsoring festivals, workshops, and competitions to encourage participation and appreciation. Furthermore, grassroots organizations and cultural activists have worked to revitalize endangered Bihu rites and art forms, assuring their continued existence for future generations. The Bihu celebration has evolved from ancient times to current years, reflecting a complex interaction of tradition, adaptation, and invention. While the event has evolved in response to societal changes and cultural influences, its fundamental purpose as a celebration of life, fertility, and cultural identity has not changed. Bihu, which combines tradition and modernity, continues to thrive as a lively manifestation of Assamese culture and heritage.

Reviving Endangered Bihu Rituals: Challenges and Opportunities for Cultural Preservation

Bihu is not only a celebration of cultural heritage but is also a reservoir of traditional ceremonies and customs. However, in recent years, some Bihu ceremonies have been threatened with extinction due to changing lifestyles, urbanization, and socioeconomic issues.

One of the most significant problems in reviving endangered Bihu rites is the shift in lifestyles and priorities among younger generations. With increased urbanization and globalization, traditional behaviours are frequently viewed as outmoded or unimportant, resulting in a decrease in youth engagement and enthusiasm. Migration, employment possibilities, and economic inequities all provide substantial barriers to the maintenance of Bihu ceremonies. Many rural villages, where Bihu ceremonies are strongly established, are seeing demographic transitions as younger generations relocate to cities in quest of better opportunities, abandoning traditional practices. The loss of cultural identity and the uniformity of cultural practices endanger the survival of Bihu ceremonies. As Assamese society becomes more impacted by mainstream culture, there is a risk of losing the region's unique Bihu ceremonies and customs.

HOW CAN WE PRESERVE IT?

Community engagement and grassroots activities are critical to restoring endangered Bihu rites. Local communities can be engaged in the preservation and promotion of traditional practices, fostering a sense of ownership and pride in cultural heritage. Educational programs targeted at promoting awareness about the significance of Bihu ceremonies can assist young people develop a feeling of cultural pride and identity. Schools, universities, and community organizations can arrange workshops, seminars, and cultural events to raise awareness about the importance of Bihu ceremonies. Government agencies, cultural organizations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can work together to conduct cultural revival projects that preserve endangered Bihu rituals. These projects may include recording, study, and preservation efforts aimed at protecting traditional traditions for future generations. Bihu songs and dances, which

are essential components of Bihu ceremonies, are likewise in risk of being overshadowed by modern forms of entertainment. To solve this issue, cultural groups and music schools provide training programs and performance opportunities for emerging artists, assuring the preservation of traditional music and dance styles.

CONCLUSION

Assam's Bihu festival celebrates the rich cultural heritage and traditions of the region, deeply rooted in agricultural cycles and connection with nature. Bihu has evolved over time from ancient rituals to modern celebrations, responding to the changing social dynamics while maintaining its essence and importance in the cultural life of Assam. Bihu, which originated in ancient fertility rituals and nature worship, has evolved into a celebration of life, fertility, and cultural identity, with thousands of folk beliefs and customs interwoven.

Despite problems like as urbanization, changing lifestyles, and cultural degradation, Bihu has shown resilient and adaptable over time. The festival has played an important role in political mobilization and awareness-raising, providing a forum for social and cultural expression at critical points in Assam's history.

Efforts to revive endangered Bihu rites are currently underway, with community participation, education, and cultural revival projects providing options for preservation and promotion. By involving local communities, creating awareness, and instilling a feeling of cultural pride, stakeholders may ensure that Bihu rites continue for future generations.

Furthermore, endeavours to document, research, and conserve ancient Bihu customs are critical to protecting Assam's cultural heritage. Bihu, a dynamic reflection of Assamese culture and heritage, may continue to thrive with participation from government agencies, cultural organizations, and grassroots initiatives. Bihu's development demonstrates the dynamic interaction of tradition and adaptability, resilience and change. Bihu, Assam's cultural icon, represents the spirit of community, unity, and celebration, transcending boundaries and instilling a sense of belonging in the people of Assam. By cherishing and safeguarding Bihu's rich traditions, we honor the past while looking forward to the future, ensuring that the festival continues to bring joy, inspiration, and cultural identity to future generations.

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