

**Bohag Bihu and other Spring Festivals among the People
of Lakhimpur District of Assam: An Understanding of their
Present Status**

Submitted by

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The Bihu is a national festival of Assam celebrated by all sections of the society irrespective of caste, creed and religion. The Bihu is the identity of Assamese people in all over the country. It is also the symbol of unity among the people of the state. There are three kinds of Bihu generally observed in Assam- Bohag Bihu or Rongali Bihu, Magh Bihu or Bhogali Bihu and Kati Bihu or Kongali Bihu. Every Bihu has its own features and characteristics which have enriched the cultural prosperity of Assam as well as the whole north eastern region. On the other hand although Bihu is the national festival of Assam yet it varies in form from place to place which have developed the cultural diversity of the state. Being a part of the state people of Lakhimpur district observe all these Bihus in their customary and ritualistic manner. Along with the Bihus some other spring festivals are also observed in Lakhimpur district with great enthusiasm. The present paper has an attempt to study the nature of these festivals of Lakhimpur district which are primarily observed in the spring season. It also analyses the present status of these festivals in this region and their impact on society, culture as well as environment in the district as well as the whole state.

KEY WORDS: *Spring festivals, Bohag Bihu, Present status, impact,*

Introduction:

Festivals are the external expression of social behaviour and the symbolic representations of situations. Modern festivals emanated from the beliefs and magical rituals of the ancient communities.¹ The ancient communities performed those magical rituals to make the days grow longer, to expel severe cold, to appease the deities of the fields, sky and water, to satisfy the rain god or to appease the deadly deities of diseases. Rituals were solemnized even to promote fertility. Dancing was an essential component of a ritual believed to be an enactment of a myth.²

Festivals form an essential aspect of a culture. The rituals and festivals initially were exclusively religious. The scope of festival has been extended in modern times to a number of secular commemorations including celebration of Independence Day and specific form of entertainment such as drama, dancing and music. In general the festival can be classified as seasonal or agricultural, calendar oriented, sacramental and of limited participatory type. The seasonal festivals are the products of man's desire to escape from monotonous work occasionally and to live in a joyous environment temporarily.³ The festivals of both the tribal and the non-tribal communities are traditional, characterized by popularity and universality. Acculturation and assimilation of the tribal and the non-tribal over the ages are the hallmark of the unique composite culture of Assam.⁴

The district of Lakhimpur in which the proposed study is carried out extends along the North Bank of river Brahmaputra in the state of Assam. Originally, it was a large district including Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Dibrugarh and Tinsukia district. At present, it is situated between 26.50 and 27.90° North latitude and 93.43° and 96.10° East longitude. Total area of the present district is 2,277 Sq. km. Total population of the district is 10, 40,644 with the density of 457. Regarding the population structure, Lakhimpur district is a meeting place of different tribes and castes having their own customs and traditions.

The district is situated in the humid sub-tropical region. The district is bounded on the North by Siang and Papumpare district of Arunachal Pradesh, on the East, Dhemaji district, Majuli, the largest river island situated at Jorhat district and the district of Sivasagar in the South, whereas, Gahpur sub-division of Sonitpur district is on its West.

According to the history of Lakhimpur district the name 'Lakhimpur' is believed to have oriented from the word '*Lakshmi*' the Goddess of prosperity. The word '*Pur*' means full. Therefore, Lakhimpur means a land of prosperity or the place where paddy is grown abundantly. Some other historians say that the name oriented from '*Lakshmidēvi*', the mother of Bhuyan Raja *Sumanta*, who was the descendent of king Arimatta.⁵

As per Lakhimpur district Gazetter (1876 A.D.) the district was notified as Lakhimpur through a proclamation issued by Governor General of Assam in July 1839. It is evident that before 1842, the district headquarters were at Lakhimpur and

were transferred to Dibrugarh for administrative convenience. From the year 1842, Dibrugarh continued as the district headquarters of Lakhimpur till its bifurcation in October, 1971. Later in 1989, the Lakhimpur district become separate with two sub-division- Dhakuakhana and North Lakhimpur, leaving Dhemaji as a separate district.⁶

Objective of the Study:

The present paper is an attempt to identify the following objectives:

1. To examine the different spring festivals observed by the various tribes of Lakhimpur district.
2. To find out the change and continuity of these spring festivals of Lakhimpur district in present day context.
3. To explore the socio-cultural and environmental impact of these festivals upon the different tribes of Lakhimpur district.

Methodology:

The attempted paper is both analytical and descriptive in nature. Both primary and secondary sources of information are considered to draw up a logical base of the paper. As for some primary information, a survey has been carried out with a bilingual set of questions (English and Assamese) in some selected areas of Lakhimpur district. The secondary sources of information have been collected from various books, journals, publications, articles, websites etc.

Bohag Bihu of Lakhimpur District in general:

The spring festivals are generally related with the agricultural process in Assam, for which these are also known as agricultural festivals. In Lakhimpur district Bohag or Rongali bihu is the most important spring festivals along with the other parts of the state. It may also be called New Year festival in Assamese society. It is observed by all castes, tribes and communities of the district following some particular rites and rituals in the mid-April every year. Generally, Bohag bihu starts on the last day of *chaitra* or *sot* (mid March to mid April) and goes on for a month. It begins with cattle worship known as *garu bihu* (cow bihu). The whole day is given to this service. On this day cows are given bath. *Matikalai* and raw *halodhi* paste with mustered oil are applied on their bodies and they are taken to nearby river. A garland of cut vegetables like brinjal, gourd, turmeric, bitter guard, gamboze fruit etc. is put around their necks and everyone sings the same hymns.

*'Lau kha begana kha
bosore bosore bahi ja
mar xoru baper xoru
toi hobi bor garu'*

Eat gourd, eat brinjal
grow from year to year
your mother is small,
your father is small
but you must be a big cow.

In the evening a bihu gift of new ropes known as *bihuwan* is given to the cows with which they are tied. They are also beaten with branches of two wild plants *dighloti* and *makhiyati* to drive away the flies and mosquitoes. It is also mandatory for all the family members to rub the paste of *matikaloi*, *halodhi* and mustard oil on their bodies and take bath and wear new clothes. It is also customary to have certain traditional food on this day, like duck and chicken egg fried with *amroli tup*, and *poita bhat*. It is believed that hundred and one varieties of cooked green *xak* should be eaten on the *Manuh Bihu*.⁷ Women folk prepare various traditional sweets made of special kind of sticky rice called *bora chaul*, they are *tilpitha*, *narikalor pitha*, *ghila pitha* etc, *jolpan of chira*, *muri*, *akhoi* with yogurt, cream and jaggery.

The second day is called *manuh bihu* or *bor bihu*. On this day the main festival begins and people pay respect to elders, visit village *namghar* and exchange *bihuwan* woven at home. The bihu songs and dances are integral part of Bohag bihu festival. It begins with '*husori*'- a community singing from the very first day and is followed by bihu dances and songs. A practice of writing mantras on leaves of *nahar* tree and keeping them under the rafters is also followed, which is meant as a protection against storms, lightening, and fire. For this is a season of under storms and heavy rains, a phenomenon popularly known as *bordoichila's* homecoming. Mostly at this time of the year married daughters come to their maternal homes. The religious rituals are an integral part of Bohag bihu. People of all age groups visit the *namghar* to pay their homage to God during the time of this celebration.

The *husori* band is entertained by each host family with refreshments. It is offered refreshments, some money, *tamul pan* and *gamocha* on a *bota* or *xorai* behind which all members of the family kneel down to bow to the party, whereupon the party ceremonially wishes them well and then departs. The social problems are brought out by singing *husori*. *Husori nam* follows the partly religious, partly ritualistic mode. On the other hand bihu songs are of various modes such as love, separation, eroticism and union.

After the long celebration, Bohag bihu is given a farewell called *bihu urua* or *bihu thowa*. *Bihu uruwa* or *bihu thowa* is done ceremonially by singing and dancing at a place a little distance from the village, a jungle or a lonely paddy field. All the articles used in the festival are left at this place and this marks the formal end of the festivities.

Bohag Bihu among the different Tribes:

The rituals of the Bohag bihu celebration vary from tribe to tribe in Lakhimpur like other parts of the state. Bohag bihu is known as *baisagu* among the Bodo Kachari of the district. The Bodo Kacharis dedicate the seven days differently. The first day is *magon* (cow-bihu), the second day *mansoi domahi* (man-bihu) The third day *saima* (dog-bihu) the fourth day *ama* (swine-bihu), the fifth day *daoni* (fowl-bihu), the sixth day for ducks and birds and the seventh day is kept for receiving the kith and kin.⁹ They traditionally perform some rituals and customs which are different from the others. On the opening day, all the cattle are give paddy to eat and then taken to the nearest river or tank for bath. The horns are smeared with oil and occasionally with oil; ashes and pounded rice-flour are applied in patches to the bodies of the cattle. On the second day, the Bodo Kacharis observe *bathau puja* in every house along with the worship of their forefathers. The Bodo Kachari also perform *husori* from house to house during the time of Bohag bihu.¹⁰

Among the Deuris of Lakhimpur district Bohag bihu is known as *bohagiya bisu* or *bisu* along with the other parts of Assam. *Bisu* is closely related with same religious rites and rituals. If on last day of *chaitra* is not Wednesday they starts their bihu on first Wednesday of Bohag month by sacrificing animals and birds at *gosain isal*. Before commencement of *bisu*, Deuris also conduct *ghardew puja* in every household by giving tribute to their respective Gods.¹¹ On the day of *garu bihu*, Deuris wear new clothes and they also teach how to wear *dhoti* among young boys and *pauga*

among the young girls. The Deori people also perform *husori* like other ethnic group of the district which is started from *gosainisal*. On the next Wednesday they close the celebration of *bisu* after completion of *husori* by worshipping at *gosaini sal*.¹²

On Sunday, before commencement of the Bohag bihu the Sonowal kachari observe *baitha puja* for its well beginning. On Monday the worship is done by scarifying animals and birds and Tuesday by singing '*haidang geet*' the bihu is formally started by the people. On the *sankranti* day (*chaitra* and *bohag*) they observe *garu bihu* and *manuh bihu* on the first day of the Bohag. They also perform *husori* singing their traditional song *haidang geet* from house to house from the day of *garu bihu*.¹³ They perform '*bohuwa nritya* (a special kind of dance) on seventh day of the Bohag bihu. However, it is worth mentioning that the celebration of the Bohag bihu among the Sonowal Kachari is influenced by the vaishnavite culture due to their conversion to vaishnavism in Lakhimpur district.

The Mising people of Lakhimpur also perform Bohag bihu with great enthusiasm and merriment. This is due to the cultural contact with non tribal Assamese. Missing people do not give much importance on rituals and traditions during the time of Bohag bihu like the other tribes of Lakhimpur district. But, they perform '*husori*' from house to house with songs and dances from the day of *garu bihu*. It is compulsory to all the young girls in Mising society to join in the '*husori*'. Otherwise she will be punished. The whole bihu team is well maintained by *tiree boruah* (leader of the girls) and *deka boruah* (leader of the boys). The householders show high respect to the *husori* team giving a tray full of betelnut, leaves and money. They also offer '*apong*' (a traditional liqueur) to the bihu team after their performance. The bihu festival ceremony among the Missing people is often described as '*Mising bihu*'.¹⁴

The Rabha people of Lakhimpur district also observe Bohag bihu in their traditional manner for three days which is known as '*baikhu*'. On the opening day, the Rabha people observe *garu bihu* with their traditional customs and rituals. On the next day, they observe *manuh bihu* or *bisuwa* with worship to their ancestor, Gods and Goddesses. Moreover, on the first day of Bohag, they create an image of *pawra devi* (an imaginary Goddess) and worship Her in the house of every family. They perform bihu from house to house along with the image of *pawara devi* for seven

days. The Rabha people give much emphasis on flooding during the period of 'bisuwa.'¹⁵

The celebration of Bohag bihu is started among the Ahoms from the day of *garu bihu* (first day of Bohag bihu) and continues for seven days. Ahoms follow some own rites and rituals in this celebration. Besides bathing of cattle, striking of egg, they eat hundred and one vegetables, the plump of reddish brown ant. Moreover, Ahoms traditionally eat the pork in Bohag bihu. 'Husori, rati bihu', use of drum, *pepa* (a kind of musical instrument), *gagana* (a kind of musical instrument) are also part and parcel of the Bohag bihu of the Ahoms.

Ahoms usually worship their forefathers in Bohag bihu. According to the myth prevailing among the Ahoms that if they not able to worship and give offerings to their forefathers, it is evil for their family. Therefore, they offer *barpitha* (a kind of cake), *borahandah* (a kind of dish) *gur* (a kind of sugar) *lowpani* (liquid made from rice) piece of *tamul* (Betelnut) in the evening for the name of *dam devata* (God of forefather). In the hymn of this worship they appeal the *dam devata* to protect them any kind of evils and to accept this offerings without having any form of displeasure. Significantly this tradition of the Ahoms during the time of Bohag bihu is not continued as it was. It has lost its originality to same extent in the course of time.

Like the Misings and Deuris, the Morans of Lakhimpur district also observe *uruka* on Tuesday, *garu bihu* on Wednesday and *manuh bihu* on Thursday. They observed *garu bihu* following their traditional rites and rituals which are to same extent different from the other tribes. On the day of *manuh bihu*, Moran people start *husori* from house to house. The Morans perform their *husori* according to the permission of their elders (*guru-bhakat*). The Moran people only use the dram and slymbal in their performance of *husori*. *Banhi* (a musical instrument) *pepa*, *gagana* are prohibited in *husori*. They also observe *bormagu* in the mid of the Bohag bihu celebration.¹⁶ Like the other ethnic group they also eat *pitha* (cake), *rice beer*, hundred and one vegetables during the time of *manuh bihu*.

The Tiwas (Lalungs) also celebrate their spring festivals *baishak bisu* for one or two weeks. Usually, the Bihu festival begins on Wednesday in the Tiwa society. The offerings are made to *bagh-rajha* (God of Tiger) *mahadeu* (Siva) and *kuber* (God of paddy and cultivation). Fowls are sacrificed as offering to these Gods. Like Assamese and other tribes, Tiwas or Lalungs also observe the first day of *bisu* for the

cattle. The Tiwas or Lalungs who reside in plains sing *husori* in the manner of Assamese, while those who dwell in the foothills dance in a piece of ground made muddy for the purpose. In some areas Tiwas or Lalungs organise fairs, the chief feature of which is the exhibition of martial art dances performed with old swords, spears and shields. The Dimasa people also celebrate Bohag bihu in the manner of the non tribal Assamese society. The Bohag bihu popularly known as *basagi sanjara* or *busu* among the Dimasa is regarded as the spring festival and pre-harvesting festival. Dance is an essential part of this festival and it has rhythm and movements.¹⁷ There is no much sex appeal in this dance and usually it is accompanied by musical instruments like *muree* (long pipe) *khram* (long drum) and *mari* (horn pipe)

Other Spring Festivals of Lakhimpur District:

Apart from the Bohag bihu some other festivals are also observed by the people of Lakhimpur district during the spring season. *Ali-Aye-Lrigang* of the Misings is one of the most important among these festivals. It is generally observed in the first week of *phagun*, prior to Bohag bihu.¹⁸ The literary meaning of *Ali-Aye-Lrigang* stands first sowing of roots and fruits (*Ali* stands for seeds, *Aye* for fruits and *Ligang* for sowing). Live of the Mising people are started as agriculturist from time immemorial. *Ahu* paddy was their principle product and such the coming of the *ahu* and *bau* season is marked with the celebration of *Ali-Aye-Lrigang*. Prayers, dance and feast are integral part of the festival.¹⁹ Now-a-days people of Lakhimpur district especially Misings are celebrating this festival in great ritualistic and devotional manner which has increased the spirit of unity among the Mising people of the district. Most important point regarding this festival is that they considered this festival as a mark of their cultural and ethical identity in recent times.

The *Poi-chancken* festival observed by the Buddhist groups of Lakhimpur including Khamti is another prominent spring festival of the district. In the beginning of Assamese Bohag month the Khamti people of Lakhimpur district celebrate this festival with religious rites and rituals. During this celebration Buddhist's image is shifted to a place which is known as *kamgpha ghar* made by an artistic manner for bath having some special water mixed with perfume. During the time of bath young boys and girls enjoy by singing and performing dances altogether. After the bath the people pray by lightening candle in front of the *kamgpha ghar* for the welfare of

whole world. They also organize religious assembly and cultural function among themselves. After three days, it is again shifted to its original place.²⁰

In Lakhimpur, the tea community people form a little part of the district population scattered different parts of the district. They have been observing a traditional spring festival which is known as *chaitra parab* or *chrak puja*. They observe this festival among themselves with religious rites and rituals for two days in the month of *chaitra*. The people are singing and dancing from house to house and wishes happy and peaceful life for every household during the time of this festival.²¹

The 'Phato bihu' of Dhakuakhana is a unique form of spring festival of this region. The Phato bihu of Dhakuakhana is a regional form of Bohag bihu observed by different caste, tribe and section of the locality. It is not a festival of a particular caste or tribe. The Phato bihu is a symbol of unity among the people of Dhakuakhana as well as the whole district. Originally, the Phato bihu was observed every year spontaneously from the first week of Bohag month. The main features of this bihu were unorganized, spontaneous and natural. At present, it is observed during the later part of Bohag at *mahghuli chapari* in the bank of river *charikari* in an organized manner.²²

The Phato bihu of Dhakuakhana has a rich traditional and cultural history. The people of this region involved themselves spontaneously in this bihu since the Ahom period. But, there are no reliable historical sources to know when and how this bihu originated and why it was termed as Phato bihu. However, on the basis of myths, legends, folksongs etc diverse opinions have been given by different scholars regarding the origin and the term of Phato Bihu. From the recent study it can be said that due to the location of *charikaria phat*, this particular bihu is named as Phatar bihu (bihu of *Phat*) later Phato bihu. During Ahom rule their officials established a *phat* at Dhakuakhana for the collection of taxes and revenue of north bank area in the bank of river *charikaria* which is known as *charikaria phat*. The local people came to the *phat* in large number and performed bihu dances during the time of *Rongali bihu* and hence Phato bihu emerged at Dhakuakhana.²³ The Phato bihu has a significant role in the preservation of bihu culture in its original form. Unlike other bihu functions, bihu dancers of Dhakuakhana still wear hand woven *muga mekhela* and *riha* and put red flowers on their hair. The males wear *churia* and *muga kamij*. Entry of the stage is prohibited without traditional dresses. Most important point

regarding this festival is that it has played a vital role maintaining peace and harmony among different sections of the people of the whole Lakhimpur district.²⁴ All the ethnic groups of this area including Ahom, Chutia, Kachari, Mising, Koch, Kalita, Kaibartta etc. can participate in this celebration and share their thoughts and feelings. Therefore, there is no ethnic violence at Dhakuakhana unlike the other parts of Assam

Conclusion:

From the above discussion we have found that as a meeting place of different tribes and castes, the people of Lakhimpur district celebrate Bohag bihu, the New Year festival of Assamese people following different rites and rituals. As a matter of fact it can be said that their original way of celebration remains same which is the backbone of these festivals. Besides, they have been observing some particular festivals in the time of spring season from the past following own customs and rituals which have enriched the cultural prosperity of the region in particular and state in general. The important point is that all the festive traditions of Lakhimpur district have some indigenous or regional elements which help in maintaining its peculiarity as well as originality in nature to a greater extent. Significantly, in the passage of time due to the impact of globalization, change has taken place in different aspects of these festivals of Lakhimpur district like other parts of the state. In spite of that the spring festivals along with the Bohag bihu prevailed among the people of Lakhimpur district have still maintained their original nature at large scale.

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