
Contesting and Reinventing the Identity of “Assamese Woman” through *Bihu*

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This paper is an extract from a larger study which looks at the representation of femininity, female sexuality and desire in *Bihu* presentations. *Bihu* is an innate constituent of ‘Assamese culture’. It is today considered the national festival and the symbol of Assam. It is largely symbolised by the *Bihu* dance and music associated with this festival.

The study tried to capture the experiences of performers, organisers, intellectuals and audiences of the art form from a feminist perspective through personal interviews. Some of the narratives have been used in this paper. I have also observed several *Bihu* performances.

This paper examines how the political atmosphere of Assam led to the creation and recreation of *Bihu* in the way that it exists in the contemporary times. It also explores how discourse on the Assamese identity and gender gets constructed and performed through *Bihu*.

Introduction

Folk culture has often been used as a symbol to represent communities. One homogenised identity stands to represent the identity of the entire community. Similar idea can be applied to *Bihu* dance and the Assamese community. *Bihu* and the Assamese community have come to be symbolised

by the *muga mekhela chadar* clad woman with a big red *bindi*. Irrespective of whether this symbol represents the community, it has been promoted as such by the State and a large section of the "Assamese" community and perceived as such by the rest of the world.

Cultural symbols have been historically used as markers of identity of a group. In the process of creating a national identity, historically folk culture has played a huge role. Kamla Ganesh writes about the how the question of Indianess emerged in the 19th Century during the social reform movement with India being recreated as the 'other' of Europe. The politics of the time required the submerging of diversities to creation of a pan-Indian identity and movements which challenged the idea of homogeneity were dubbed as sub-national.¹

Joane Nagel writes that groups construct their cultures mainly through the reconstruction of historical culture and construction of new culture. This is an ongoing task of the group in which new symbols, activities and materials gets added to and removed from the existing culture. These cultural constructions help in defining the boundaries of collective identity, generate a symbolic vocabulary and define a common purpose. This cultural construction is not just needed for the purpose of national unity but also for the construction of pan ethnic groups composed of subgroups with histories of conflict and animosity. It leads to the emergence of a collective consciousness. Ethnic movements often challenge hegemonic ethnic images and institutions by redefining or using symbols to dramatize grievance and demands.²

In case of Assamese identity, *Bihu* has been used as a symbol for the creation of national unity and collective consciousness of the people of the region. It was an attempt to bring together ethnic groups which had been diverse at different points of history. It was first initiated by the Ahom rulers who brought it to the king's courtyard to bind the people together. Later the nationalist movement and the social reformers used *Bihu* as a symbol to create an identity different from the Western colonisers as well as the mainstream Indian Nation. Although it did challenge the hegemonic "Indian" culture, it created another form of hegemonic image of the "Assamese" identity.

Subjecthood and Gender Performativity

How a subject gets constructed is perhaps one of the most pertinent questions of this paper. Simon De Beauvoir through her quote "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" talks about how a how the lived experiences of a female person makes her a woman.³ Judith Butler questions the pre-existence of sex itself and sees it as constructed at a discursive level. In this process of performativity, a subject gets created through identification and bodies come to matter. This identification, Butler says, excludes certain identifications that are not yet subjects but are abject beings that are outside the domain of the subject. "Collective disidentifications can facilitate a reconceptualization of which bodies matter, and which bodies are yet to emerge as critical matters of concern."⁴ Butler uses Levina's idea of the face to understand how the self is identified in opposition through the representation of the other. The other is acknowledged because the self cannot have an identity alone.⁵

Bihu as the marker of Contemporary National Identity

Construction of the Assamese Subject

If we use Judith Butler to understand the process through which *Bihu* emerged as a symbol of Assam, we realise that the attempt to attain the "Assamese subject-hood", led to defining the gendered body and desire. While these cultural discourses define the gendered body they also ensure that one is socialised into it and through repeated performance, the discourse produces the effect it names. The idea of Assamese gets manifested through the body and its performance. The Assamese subject gets created through the body identifying with these discursive ideas.

Here the "Other" or the "Abject" is sometimes the Non- Assamese speaking Indian, sometimes the Bengali Muslim otherwise known as the Bangladeshi or sometimes even the different ethnic identities or the "Modern" women within the Assamese community. Under different situations and conditions the abject would be shifting locations. The identification is sustained by a politics of policing and maintaining control over the body so as to maintain the normative heterosexuality under social structures of race, ethnicity, caste and class.

Although it cannot be ascertained as to when and how *Bihu* came to be associated with the Assamese identity, there have been definite and conscious efforts in bringing it into the public sphere and presenting it to a larger national and global audience. Purnima Shah writes about the Indian State's appropriation of various dance forms and giving it classical or national status. She says that in the late 19th and early 20th century, several artistic dance forms were revived and reconstructed as a part of the political and socio-cultural reforms associated with the establishment of Indian Identity.⁶

Paramesh Dutta writes that *Bihu*, under the influence of the colonial and western paradigm faced a lot of criticism from some elites the state in the 18th and 19th century due to its sexual overtones. *Bihu* which was originally performed in the fields was later brought to the royal proscenium under the patronage of the Ahoms. In the mid 20th century scholars and social elites brought the folk art form onto stage with the motive to bring out Assamese culture and identity and give it recognition throughout the world.⁷ The Mr Sarma, General Secretary of one of the first and the oldest existing staged *Bihu* celebrations in the Assam recounts how they started off in 1952. Mr Sarma says, "Eminent people realised that people who stayed in the town did not understand what Bihu was. They wanted Bihu to get recognition all over the world. So they started the stage Bihu tradition. From Latashil it spread out to several other places and today it is found all over Assam. Latashil started this tradition to show that Bihu was the National festival of the Assamese community."⁸

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

When the Folk art form was brought into the public sphere, several changes were brought into it. Not only did it have to be more presentable in terms of its looks, but it also became necessary to make it "suitable" for "women of good households" to be able to perform it. It gave women the space to participate in come to stage and participate in dances where they were traditionally not allowed. In the initial years the wives of the early Assamese intellectuals initiated the process of convincing the women. These women also played a major role in the freedom struggle and were perhaps the first few Assamese women to be educated. In the process of bringing people of the upper strata of society to perform *Bihu* it had to be detached from its earlier

association with the sexual nature. Mr. Borah, a subaltern historian and scholar says, "There are sexual movements but there is nothing unethical or immoral about it. They only danced and worshiped the nature and earth in order to bring fertility and youthfulness to it. In the modern age that is not possible."

⁹ Either these sexual elements were completely removed from public sphere as in the case of *Bongeets* which are today sang among the lower caste young boys within their own community celebrations or it remained invisibilised and left unspoken.

Ms. Rupali (name changed to maintain confidentiality), a journalist and researcher on folklore during a personal interview said, "People do not recognise and know about the vulgarity present in the art. There are several very bad lyrics which people today don't know and don't even use. Today people are calling the modern lyrics vulgar but originally there were even more vulgar lyrics. I believe that we should reject the bad and keep the tradition alive. If we don't maintain our folk culture our identity will be lost." She also spoke about several food items associated with Bihu Assamese culture having sexual metaphors. For instance the *pitās* made during Bihu which are an important symbol of Assamese culture and cuisine, are shaped on the male and female sexual organs. Even the orchid flower which is an important symbol of Bihu has phallic metaphor associated with it. It is never associated with their sexual connotation by the Assamese people for whom it is a major part of their folk culture.¹⁰

In the attempt to safeguard our culture and identity, there has been selective appropriation and reinvention of culture and traditional practices. While the culture has to be maintained and passed on to upcoming generations, it also has to be carried forward with a global appeal. Thus certain aspects of the traditions are approved, certain condemned and others reinvented. These approvals, rejections and reinventions are dynamic and subjective. The situation gets further complicated with the emergence of several sub identities within the Assamese identity resulting out of the socio-economic and political situation of the region.

Bihu as a cultural symbol has been used as the marker of identity of the community time and again, very strategically in an ad hoc manner. While the idea of "Assamese culture" lies at the centre, the debates around its preservation and internationalisation takes place at several levels. While there are attempts

to preserve the culture in its “traditional” form, there is the attempt to give it a “modern and international” feel by fusing it with other genres of performative art. Rather than existing in a binary these discourses exists in a continuum.

Bihu as an attempt to Recreate Gender

Passing on the Culture

Passing on the ideas of “Assamese culture” to the upcoming generation becomes important. B. Rabha one of the Organisers of All Assam Students’ Union *Bihu*, which played a major role in building the ideology of the *Assam Andolan* says, “Since a lot of people watch our programme so we would like to give a message to the people. The new generation should not forget the old culture. The Bihu culture, the folk culture should not get lost. The volunteers, girls all dress up in their traditional *pat muga chadar* and boys also dress up in Dhoti kurta. Unless they are dressed in these attires we would not let them enter into our function. So that even publicly atleast for one day the new generation does not forget their culture. We have tried to keep traditions such as that of touching the feet of the elders to respect them, etc alive.”¹¹

Although the idea as to what Assamese culture and identity mean may differ in each context, in the process a gendered body is constructed by codifying attires, standards of beauty, gender roles and desires into which people were not just socialised but also they also repeatedly perform it to attain subjecthood. For instance, while there are contestations to the view as to when did people start wearing the *mekhala chadar* made out of *muga* silk for the dance but it is commonly agreed upon that this codification was brought in during the mid 20th century when the dance came to be associated with Assamese identity. B. Sharma, an organising member of a *Bihu* Committee says, “When the idea of Bihu competitions was being discussed there was a discussion on the dress of the girls. What length should the sleeves of the blouse be, what should be the right attire and the right accessories, the dress should be *muga mekhela*, etc.”⁸

Codifying the dress was one way to detach it from the communities which were originally associated with it. J. Gandhiya, a senior artists of *Bihu* says, “Earlier *Bihu* used to be danced only by youngsters of Kari Paik (a caste group associated with manual labour during the Ahom times) families. Young

people of upper strata of the societies did not dance *Bihu* in the earlier days. Only in the present times people of elite families dance *Bihu*." He informs that the people of such households danced mostly in hand span cotton clothes. Women of lower caste households did not wear the *chadar* with the *mekhela*, instead they wore the *riha* (a piece of long cloth which the women wore on the top half of their bodies). The *chadar* was worn only by women of Royal and Upper Caste households post marriage. The women of the Royal households wore full sleeved blouse while the others wore blouses whose sleeves reached up to the elbow.¹²

In *Bihu* performances however usually the dress code is the *muga mekhela chadar* and the full sleeved red blouse. Although after much debate, today the *riha* is more acceptable than the *chadar* during *Bihu* performances. Besides the *mekhela chadar*, the different tribal groups have their own dress and fabrics. However neither the dresses of the other communities nor their style of performing the dance is considered as the "Assamese" *Bihu*. These dances are referred to as tribal *Bihu* or *Jana Jati Nritya*.

The codification did not just remain limited to attires it was also transferred to ideas of beauty and norms of behaviour. In the *Bihu* competitions organised for the female dancers where the participants were upto 13 years of age, the participants were advised by the judges to be graceful, steady, remain thin and eat less. Thus, from a very young age girls are policed into behaving and maintaining their bodies in a certain desirable way. Priya (name changed to maintain confidentiality), one of the former dancers shared, "*Bihu* songs are all about descriptions of girls and boys. The girl has to have a slim waist and long hair. My daughter is also a *Bihu* dancer and she will never cut her hair. I didn't get the prize in one of the competitions because of my crooked teeth even when the judge appreciated my dance. Women are idealised about certain standards of beauty. It is also promoted by the common people."¹³

Saving the Assamese Identity

However in the contemporary times the idea of Assamese identity has been imagined differently by different groups of people and they have used the space of culture and the global market to negotiate these identities differently in different spaces. This is also met with much resistance. Recently there has been a move to "save the *Bihu* culture" through a civil society

collective called the *Bihu Xurokha Samhiti* (Committee for Protection of *Bihu*). This collective comprises of performers, judges, intellectuals, function organisers and common people. They claim to go back to the roots of the dance and showcase the dance in its original form as was performed by village folk. Through their efforts, they have been able to restrict the participation of women in several reputed *husori* competitions. In their view the women were brought into *husori* when the style came to stage in order to glamorise the dance form by objectifying women. They have tried to prevent the strict choreography and creation of grammar in *Bihu* in an attempt to maintain the folk essence of the dance. They have been against using *muga* as the standard attire for *Bihu*. They are against modification, remix and fusion of the art form. However while breaking away from a certain predominant essential discourse they have managed to create another equally hegemonic discourse. Mr. B. Borah, a scholar of subaltern history of Assam says, "All the communities that have come and settled in Assam have come from different places and at different times. They would already each have different cultural roots. The new movement may be trying to codify a certain form of *Bihu* as the "Real *Bihu*". If you want to put a stamp forcefully you cannot do it. Each group would have their uniqueness. The Assamese community is a sum of its parts."

⁹ However most of the performers are trying to match up to this standard to maintain the "purity" of the dance form. Many of the artists, who are engaged in creating fusion forms and are critical of the puritan movement, also try to match up to the standards and maintain the "essence" of *Bihu* dance.

However while trying to bring out the folk dance in its "true" form several types of the art form is removed from the public eyes because they do not fit into the moral standards of what can be in public gaze. For example the *Bongeets* or *Bonghoxa* have disappeared in the process of bringing the "Assamese culture" into public space. Although most scholars and artists believe that these songs were perhaps sang within closed doors among peer groups or by young boys while they grazed cattle or worked together in the forests and fields, it was a part of "Assamese culture" and was public knowledge. Mr Anil Saikia a scholar of folk art and archivist said, "In the book *Bohagi 1917*, several *Bihu* songs were recorded with very explicit words. These explicit *Bihu* songs were perhaps for private sharing between individuals of a peer group. Even when we were young we often replaced some words in the *Bihu Naams* with explicit words and made fun. If in 1917 these *Bihu Naams*

existed we can definitely say that it is not a new phenomenon. But I believe these songs were a private matter. When it was sung in the dark, at the edge of the forest people could sing whatever they wanted. I can talk about anything in private but when I have to write something for a public platform I can't."

¹⁴ An anthology of *Bihu* songs by historian Dr Leela Gogoi *Bihugit aru Bonghuxa* which was first published in 1927 had several songs fraught with sexual metaphors. These songs have been removed from the more recent editions.

Similar moral standards are being created for some of the tribal *Bihu* styles which are trying to get acceptance in the mainstream. N. Deuri, a Tiwa *Bihu* exponent shares his experience, "If we show the original folk art then people will not accept it. This is the reason why Tiwa culture wasn't accepted by the Indian people. We had to change and modify our costumes a lot. Earlier the men used to dance wearing a *lengti*. Even if that dance was good, nobody came forward to learn that dance. So these days we have made the provision of wearing a dhoti. The jacket which was worn earlier was short. Today it has been converted into a full jacket. Women used to dance wearing extremely scanty clothes. We have made the provision of wearing several pieces of clothes which we have revived. The clothes that we use today in dancing were earlier used in rituals and marriages and people used to dance in their everyday work clothes."¹⁵

While on one hand the styles of *Bihu*, especially the ones performed by the tribal communities, which were previously on the margins are trying to gain acceptance by adapting to the standards set by the hegemonic style. On the other hand the communities and the artists are also detaching themselves from the style and in order to create their own distinct identity and subjecthood. R.Deka, a female *Bihu* artist who belonged to a tribal community says, "The entire Assamese culture is a contribution of the tribes. There is nothing called Assamese. Anyone who resides in Assam is Assamese. The Aryans have come from elsewhere. The Ahoms also came later through the Patkai hills. The Biharis and the Marwaris are not even Assamese. Since the tribal people were simple and uneducated they were cheated. Aryans took the land and culture but did not give them the recognition. Earlier the Bodos, the Mishings, the Tiwa tribes all lived together and they all spoke Assamese. But when the identity crisis rose among them they started asserting their rights, recognition and identity. Although in the political realm they have not

been able to dominate in terms of individual culture they have come out very strongly. They have exposed their culture to the world.”¹⁶

Both the Assamese language and its culture is a conglomeration of the cultures of the various communities who have settled in this region.¹⁷ Amalendu Guha claims that Assamese nationalism was a middle class phenomenon and pre 1947 the nationalism factor did not reach the peasantry, tribes or the Muslims of Assam. The Assamese Nationalist struggles were created by the middle class intellectuals. It was joined by the masses after a point. But later with the movement taking a largely communal (caste Hindu) and pro landlord stance, the social base of the movement narrowed down. Since the movement was not sympathetic to the demands of the marginalised, the conflict grew.¹⁸

When “Assamese” scholars and politically influential class realised the dissent among the tribal population they tried to get them back into the fold and present a picture of “*Bor Assam*” or pan Assam in front of the government which had allowed the “infiltration of foreigners” as the enemy.

The Assamese subject was also created through the creation of the abject, which is dynamic. It could be the Western other, the Hindi speaking other, the “Bangladeshi illegal immigrant” or even the “Assamese” other. The “Bangladeshi immigrant” or the Bengali Muslim is seen as the most threatening “Other” under the present socio political scenario. The *Assam Andolan* was largely a struggle against this identity. This identity however is extremely contested as they may have been Bengali immigrants who had settled a hundred years ago or may have illegally entered the State at a recent point of time. Several of these people may have intermingled and married within the local population or assimilated with them. However their identity continues to remain a threat irrespective of their citizenship status. They remain the “Other” that can never come within the Assamese subject location. While the ethnic groups which have started asserting their identity in the last few decades may not be complete Assamese subjects, their assimilation becomes necessary to strengthen the Assamese identity. Mr Borah, a subaltern history scholar in Assam shares, “Once I was asked to inaugurate a Bihu function while the save the Assamese Identity movement was popular. When all the judges were sitting together I asked what if one of the contestants who came in performed in a way we didn’t understand how *Bihu* is performed, if we didn’t understand

the language she sang in, the clothes she wore and the movements she showed weren't familiar? Would we let her be a contestant in the *Bihu Kuwori* competition? This is the problem with save the Assamese identity movement. The tribal people thought that the Assamese was trying to save the identity of all of them. But they realised that it was only to safeguard the identity of who spoke the Assamese language in their homes and studied it in schools. They felt betrayed and left the movement. When the important people finally realised that they had lost the tribal population they said we should try and bring them all together. But if we are to bring everyone together then the movement of Save the Assamese identity would have no meaning. Later the general public lost their faith and started entering the fundamentalist right wing forces." ⁹

The All Assam Students Union (AASU), which also played a huge role in the *Assam Andolan*, used *Bihu* as a secular symbol to paint the picture of pan Assam. During the time of social and political unrest *Bihu* provided the space for people to come together. In 1982 all the existing *Bihu* committees of Guwahati came together with the help of the students' union to safeguard the Assamese culture and *Bihu*, thus showcase the unity of the people of Assam. B. Rabha an organiser of the students' union *Bihu* says, "At that time the very existence of Assamese people was connected to the Assam Andolan. So this was certainly a way to bring about a movement through culture. It was a way to show the government the unity of the Assamese people. Any gathering during that time would be associated with the movement." ¹¹

Under this discourse, women were very strategically encouraged to come into the movement and given space to create a progressive imagery of the group. The *Assam Andolan* saw several women leader come out in the forefront. They belonged to an educated class and became the symbols of the movement. Even in the cultural front women of educated households took up to performing *Bihu* in the stage. They were glorified and became examples for the upcoming generation because they belonged to "good families" and were educated. Priya, a former dancer says, "When we came out to dance we made some history. During our time there were few girls who came from very good families with good educational backgrounds. Many other girls were encouraged to dance Bihu because there were a number of girls like us from good families who were performing." ¹³

Even today the process of creating the Pan Assamese identity remains amidst the growing conflict and tension in the region. Several troupes are making an attempt to create *Bihu* performances which are more inclusive, atleast symbolically. They have tried to bring together several tribal forms of dance and music together to create performances. D. Gogoi, the choreographer of one such performance shared, "All the tribes celebrate the *Bihu* in their own way. We are trying to bring together all the *janajatis* since "*bor axom*" is an amalgamation of all these communities. The *Bihu* that is performed and presented on stage these days to represent Assam, is actually a product of bringing together of the dances of different communities. All these forms of *Bihu* dances have fused together to form the *Bihu* dance that we see today. When we say Assam all the *janajatis* are included in it. We should give a glimpse of all the different communities so that people can experience them together. Our new generation is totally unaware of the different forms. One reason for the extremism that is prevalent today is because we are neglecting a large section of the tribal population. The ethnic groups have their own distinct style but they are still the dance of the larger Assam and we should show that the dance of larger Assam is an amalgamation of all the dances. We decided to beautify it not by creating a remix but by showcasing different communities and creating one dance. The new generation of the cities and towns should know that *Bihu* is not only about the so called Assamese *Bihu*."¹⁹

However this performance has received several criticisms from the tribal groups as well as a few feminists. A person belonging to one of the tribal styles showcased said that it had hurt them sentimentally because it had used the "Assamese" drum instead of the tribal drum thus forcefully trying to assimilate their identity. On another occasion a feminist critiqued the performance by commenting that it was not being inclusive because it showed even the tribal women in a very "Hinduized" manner by donning the red *bindi*.

Today political parties and government bodies in Assam also use the symbol of *Bihu* to associate themselves with the identity. For instance almost every major political party has their own *Bihu* celebrations. The Police department too celebrates *Bihu* and the female police officers performed the dance to entertain the senior officers and guests. The media portrayed them as brave police women who protected the society but could also dress up as

regular "Assamese" women and dance to the cultural tunes.

Hence in this process women get constructed in a certain symbolic way. The idea of the Assamese woman gets portrayed in a homogenised manner which is exclusionary. *Bihu* culture has been selectively appropriated by a politically conscious class of people to portray an idea of Assam and its people, an idea that is contentious and imbued with contradictions. While cultural globalisation today plays a huge role in how the art form gets represented, whenever the question of Assamese identity comes in, *Bihu* becomes the cultural symbol and women often become the upholders of this identity.

Glossary

Ahom: The descendants of the ethnic Tai people that moved into the Brahmaputra valley in 13th century and ruled the area for six centuries.

Andolan: Agitation

Bindi: A forehead decoration

Devdasi: Temple girls

Dhol: Drums

Husori: The Bihu performances where a group of people go in a procession from house to house during the time of Bihu

Kuwori: Princess

Lengti: a small strip of cloth worn between the thighs to cover the private parts

Muga: A type of silk produced in the region

Pepa: A flute like musical instrument.

Pitha: Rice cakes

Riha: a piece of long cloth which the women wore on the top half of their bodies

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