

Cultural and historical significances of Phato Bihu of Assam's Dhakuakhana

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Abstract: Assam is a land of unity amid diversity in the Northeastern part of India. The various tribes, ethnic groups across different areas of Assam are preserving their unique cultural characteristics. The greater Assamese society has come into existence with this concord of cultures among different ethnic groups. 'Phato Bihu' that takes place at historic Dhakuakhana in Lakhimpur district is an illustration of such cultural harmony. The congregation of various tribes and groups creates a magnificent scene at the venue of Phato Bihu. Because of its uniqueness, Phato Bihu has attracted the attention of the people not only from the state, but also from the abroad.

This paper seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis on Phato Bihu. It is expected it will reveal various information and aspects about Phato Bihu.

Keywords: Harmony, culture, tribes, history, assimilation, etc.

Introduction: Assam is a state in Northeast India which is enriched with various cultures and the harmony and amity among themselves. Phato Bihu of Dhakuakhana in Assam has been drawing the attention of the people from the state as well as abroad for a long period of time. Phato Bihu which is observed with the coordination of various ethnic groups and tribes has played a major role in the Assamese culture. The Phato Bihu venue at Dhakuakhana can be termed as a citadel of assimilation of different communities. The people from Bodo, Rabha, Mising, Kaibartya, Khamti, Tiwa and others tribes come together at this grand event. Phato Bihu which has been spreading the message of the unity in diversity has not only played a pivotal role in the Assamese culture, but it has also contributed in the promotion of Assamese culture at an international level.

Analysis: Phato Bihu is a cultural identity of the Dhakuakhana area, situated in the south-east of Lakhimpur district of Assam. Like Baresaharia Bhaona of Jamugurihat in Sonitpur district, boating competition at Sualkuchi, Doul Utsav at Barpeta, Phato Bihu of Dhakuakhana has also its unique cultural heritage. 'Phato' is a Tai-Ahom word. According to the popular belief, Phato is a place located on the bank of a river where trade and payment of taxes during the rule of kings took place. Though there is no written evidence on the origin of Phato Bihu, there are many lores that revolve around this festival. Dr. Jitram Kalita, a resident of Dhakukhana informed us that earlier a large amount of water of the river

Brahmaputra used to flow through a rivulet called Kherkotia. It caused floods in the Dhakuakhana area. Boat was the only means of communication when the most of the places were inundated. Therefore, there was no permanent agrarian settlement in this region till the Ahom regime. Those people who reached this region on the bank of the Charikoria river to perform Bihu songs and dances were mainly migrants. The Ahoms termed this Bihu as 'Fa-Tai Bihu.' In their language, 'Fa' means one who has come from the mountain. It also means migrants. The meaning of 'Tai' is human beings.

The participation of people from Dewry, Chutia, Khamti, Mising, Khamti, Kaibarta, Ahom tribes were in large. Because, people from these tribes had temporary settlement in this area (Handique, Amiya Kumar, page no 7). Therefore he wanted to claim that the history of Phato Bihu dates back to the 16th century.

Some people claimed that people in large numbers from various places gathered at the venue of Bihu on the bank of the Charikoria river. The gathering led to the 'earth crack' at the venue. Therefore, the festival was christened as 'Phato Bihu'. 'Phato' means 'crack' in the Assamese language.

Some other persons relate this Bihu with Sphatgreen, a British officer during the colonial rule in India. He was welcomed with Bihu dances and songs by the local people when he had arrived at Dhakuakhana. They opine that people used to mispronounce his name as Phato instead of Sphat. They believe, this unique kind of Bihu derived its name from the British officer.

On the other hand, many people claim that Phato Bihu had started before the arrival of the Ahoms in Assam. They also cite the example of Bihu song-'Pakhila uradi ur oi nachani, pakhila uradi ur, rojaro aagot Phato Bihukhonir, nepabi peeritir or (Hey dancer, fly like the butterfly, fly like the butterfly. The Phato bihu was much before the king. You will find no end of love)"

At the same time, some people believe that during the Ahom reign, there was a crack on the bank of the Charikoria river. People called it 'Pani Phat' or a crack of water. The employees of the royal kingdom received the taxes from laymen at this place. After the collection of the taxes, people performed Bihu on the seventh day of Rongali Bihu at 'Pani Phat.' Therefore, it was called Phato Bihu.

Though at present, this historic festival is being held regularly every year, it was disrupted for several years during the rule of the British East India Company. The reason is mainly attributed to the anti-British movement led by the tribal people. Some people from Mising tribe used to loot the Marwari traders before Bohag Bihu. The tribal people considered these traders as exploiters. Following such violent incidents, the police force under the British government launched counter-offensive operations in the villages inhabited by the Mising tribe. The villagers started to flee from their homes. At last, the mastermind of the attack Mohan Gam and his associates were arrested. After this incident, the Mising team, one of the key participants in Phato Bihu stopped participating in the event for many years. It damaged the spirit of the festival.

With the initiatives of a group of people, the Phato Bihu was organised first time at Dhakuakhana Government ME School with a day-long programme in 1948. But the massive earthquake that hit Assam

in 1950 once again dampened the spirit of Phato Bihu. In 1959, the local people organised Phato Bihu at the same venue with a two-day programme in 1959. It was in 1976 when the tradition of organising Phato Bihu annually in a regular basis started. In the initial phase, there was no permanent venue for this mega festival. Later in 1996, 'Mohkhuli Chapori' on the bank of the Charikoria river turned as the permanent venue for this annual festival.

Now, Phato Bihu takes place with a three-day programme which falls on Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

Phato Bihu is a festival of harmony and cultural assimilation. The vital aspect of this festival is that it has nothing to do with any religion. Everyone irrespective of caste, creed and religion takes part in this festival. People of various communities including Mising, Khamti, Rabha, Dewry enrich this festival with their participation. They add colour to this event with their traditional dance and musical performances.

Phato Bihu is organised in a scenic landscape. Normally it takes place towards the end of the month of Bohag, the first month of Assamese calendar. Cultural troupes from various tribes perform their respective traditional forms of music and dance below every tree at the venue. The three-day event becomes a mélange of culture and tradition of multiple communities.

Phato Bihu is very close to the people of Dhakuakhana. It occupies a very special place in the Assamese cultural arena. Besides, songs and dances, there is a great display of traditional attires of various ethnic groups at this festival. It has been made mandatory for the attendees to wear traditional dresses. It has been clearly mentioned in the booklet published on the occasion.

The women put on traditional attire and ornaments like hand-woven Riha, Muga Mekhela, Golpota Jonbiri, Dugdudi, Thuria etc.

On the other hand, the men wear Muga shirt, Dhooti, Gamocha etc. Many domestic and international tourists attend this festival every year to witness this spectacular show of cultural heritage and harmony.

Conclusion: The example of unity witnessed in the Phato Bihu is truly extraordinary. Assam is called a land of unity in the diversity. The Phato Bihu at Dhakuakhana is a clear reflection and justification of this saying. We can expect that Phato Bihu will not only preserve the cultural heritage of the state, but also this festival will strengthen the bond among different communities.

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