

CHAPTER V

DYNAMICS OF PERFORMANCE: TRADITION AND TRANSITION

5.1 Movement from Agrarian set up to Socialization

In the earlier Chapters of the present study, it has been discussed that the Bihu constitutes a festival cycle in itself observed on three occasions along the agricultural season. The *rongali/Bohag* Bihu or the spring time observance amidst these three is the most remarkable of these and is marked by multiplicity of celebrations by different communities in different ways constituting another cycle of observances. Each of these observances, rooted in fertility and agriculture comprises performances of various sorts and a series of rituals, community feasting, gaiety and most importantly music and dance. In Chapter III, it has been pointed out that the *rongali* Bihu being related to fertility and the art of creation, was originally celebrated in the crop fields to bring fertility and a good harvest. Since the festival celebrates youthful vigour, love, eroticism, union, and separation, the youth across all communities sing and dance in gay abandon with spontaneity, unrestrained by any written norm, rule or canonical prescription that often prevails in a classical tradition of dance and music. Thus the Bihu like any other folk tradition brings to fore representations inherent in customs and such other practices and above the mentalscape of the communities through all such performances. With the changes in social environment over time there has been considerable change in the dynamics of performance in respect to rituals as well as music and dance connected with the *rongali* Bihu. During the whole process of the shift of this popular culture, a prolonged cultural struggle has been going on between the age old traditions and the demand of the modern amidst conflicts and contradictions of culture and class.

In observing the *rongali* Bihu, the customary household rituals appear to have remained almost unchanged through centuries. The expressive ritual practices of music and dance which were performed in forests or crop fields by youths began to find social acceptance wider in community life. The open eroticism of songs and gestures began to

change and content modified to become more socially acceptable for roadside group performances, synchronising with spring-time beauty of nature, New Year and the Bihu which came to be called as *husori*. The *husori* carol singing, composed of a team of members of the village which goes along the village roads singing Vaishnavite prayers or balladic verses began to form an integral part of the *rongali* Bihu celebration. Performers used instruments like *dhols* (drums), *taal* (cymbals) *taka* (split bamboo clappers), and *pepa* (hornpipes). The *husori* tradition moved from the village roads to the royal court. The Bhakti Movement of Assam led by Srimanta Sankaradeva during the 15th – 17th centuries added impetus to this process of socialisation of Bihu music and dance by adding a Vaishnavite tinge to the texture of *husori* music. The discourse of representation in this respect found a shift from a spontaneous overflow of youthful emotions to social expressions of joy in celebration of nature and a desire for the well being of the community. The vibrant melody and resounding rhythm of the newly emerging form of performance, by virtue of its popular appeal, found its way to the royal court as a mode of public entertainment.

The performance of Bihu dance and music thus underwent a paradigm shift paving the way to take an institutionalized form and structure. During the rule of the Ahom King Rajeshwar Singha another dimension was added to the *husori* performance by its placement in the *Ranghar*, the royal amphitheatre, as a part of the Bihu celebrations with added royal grandeur. On the *Bohag* Bihu day the *husori* singing team blesses the king and the royalty, singing some prayers and hymns. It gradually became a tradition of singing *husori* in the courtyards of all domestic households. Slowly and steadily it spread all over. *Husori* came to be sung in the courtyards of all the households in a village. Various *husori* teams were invited for public performance giving it the form and meaning of social entertainment and a carnival. Today in the urban areas *husori* singing is mostly seen as a distinct performance on the stage in a stylized form, whereas in the villages the traditional practice continues.

As referred to earlier (Chapter II), during the British Rule Bihu dance and music was stigmatised. The observances of domestic as well as community rituals were however not subjected to such criticism. However, some elites of the state, under the strong influence of colonial rulers, criticized the Bihu festival as immoral, vivacious and of having sexual overtones. Criticizing the erotic overtones inherent in the Bihu dance and

music writers like Kamalakanta Bhattacharyya denounced it because of its overt sexual and erotic connotations stating:

Sosakoi bihut jen nilaj kothabur boke, sunilei kanot haat di sribishnu suori polabo lage. Aibilak asobhyo kandaa amar bor laaj apamanor kotha....shikhit bhaisokol, bihur xoloni upokari dhemali eta xumuai, bihuk sonkale atorabor sesta kora...(Goswami, 1923: 325-326).

Really, in Bihu obscene things are talked about, immediately after hearing that ears need to be closed taking God's name. These indecent activities are matter of great disrespect...dear educated brothers some beneficial game should be inserted and this Bihu should be displaced as soon as possible.

Ratneshwar Mahanta wrote in one of his poems,

*ananda karak pahoruk sok
bisuddha bhabere majok sit
kintu kune hari laaj parihari
salale bihur nilaj geet
awa gakhirot kon karanot
gobarar sita mihali hol
kun durasare dusto bebohare
samasta deshok burai gol(Bhuyan, 2003: 105-106)*

Celebrate, forget pain, take pleasure with purity. But o god, leaving aside shame, (some people) sang the crude Bihu songs. Why did cow dung get mixed with untainted milk, whose mischievous behaviour did sink the whole nation (to disgrace)?”

AnandaramDekhialPhukan has said:

ei Asom deshor onek thait bosori bihut jibur bibhisar kriya kore tak sokole jane. aekuriti aan kunu deshot nai aru si assam ek maha kalanka hoise. hai hai! lukor ki dharma gyan nisei gusil? sod lok saka leki ae kutsit kothat eke beliu souk mudile? bihur akarmar kotha kaar site bisom nepab? hey deshostha bar lok sakal tumaloke ae kukaram ake beliu gusabar purusartha kora oboshye pariba (Barua: 2013: 4).

In various places of Assam, people used to commit misdemeanours during the yearly Bihu. This bad ritual is not prevalent anywhere else and is a curse to Assam. Alas! Alas! Have people lost their conscience and knowledge? Is the wise section of people closing their eye to this gross thing? Who won't be affected by the imprudence of Bihu? Oh the patriots you should persevere to remove this undignified doing. You will surely do it.

Gunaviram Barua has said:

chaitar bihut sankranti pora sadin kunu thair etor luk sokol- stri purush kunu prakashya sthana loi goi nritya geet kare. si समयot beshya aru ashliil geet gowa aru nirlojja bhab bhangi dekhwa hoi. aeti niyom sigher deshor pora gushile bar upakar aru suniti sthapan hoi... (Barua,1972: 202-203).

In the seven days, from the *sankranti* of the *Chaitra* Bihu, in some places male and females perform dance and music in an open space. During that time crude songs and lewd dance postures are presented. This should immediately be removed from the state, only then decorum can be established.

A similar view is also reflected in the marginalisation of dance in sociology which focuses on the problem of modernity. This is so much so that the concern with dance in sociology as shown in studies in the 1970s and 1980s has focused mainly on working-class subcultures and youth, and when couched in functionalist perspectives, their behaviour of dance would be seen as an escape from the routine of work via some kind of fantasy, in short, tending towards deviance from social norms. Helen Thomas sums it up by saying that “in relation to dance, subculture is to dominant culture as primitive is to modern culture: a dangerous, exotic, non-rational, marginal ‘other’” (Thomas, 1995:10).

The Bihu dance and music also suffered from a similar attitude advocated by the literati who denounced it as vicarious threat to society. Such a demeaning attitude continued until the advent of Romanticism in Assamese literature in the early decades of the 20th century. The patriotic fervour of Romantic writers like L. N. Bezbaroa (1864-1934) and his contemporaries upheld the Bihu, with its attendant aspects including dance and music, as the expression of Assamese nationality in which the community should revel. So, starting from the late nineteenth century, because of the efforts of some litterateurs like, Lakshminath Bezbaroa among others, commented that,

Bihue kako dukh nidiye, soko loke rang diye, sei dehi bihuk lukehahe, beya pai
(Hazarika: 1968: 1344).

Bihu never inflict pain on anybody, it imparts happiness, so people mock Bihu and laugh at it.

Padmanabh Gohain Baruah wrote in his poem,

*sobhyotar bhemot pahori asilu
rongali bihu r kotha
gaon fura mon gaon bate bate
furute lagil todha...* (kalita, 1981)

In the guise of civilisation, I was forgetting about *rongali* Bihu, village loving heart, roams around its roads, and become puzzled while roaming.

The Bihu festival was restored from its lost ground and revitalised as a symbol of heritage of the Assamese community that brought about a change in the perceptions towards Bihu in the public mind. In Turner's words, "Performance whether as speech behavior the presentation of self in everyday life, stage drama or social drama, would now move to the center of observation and hermeneutical attention" (1988:77). "What was once considered 'contaminated', 'promiscuous', 'impure' is becoming the focus of postmodern analytical attention" (Turner, 1988:77).

After the British rule in India, the people of Assam, along with rest of the country, were encouraged to obtain formal education. The rural people were mostly dependent on agricultural activities for their livelihood. However, the wave of education brought under its spell the rural people of Assam, resulting in many of them gradually attaining formal education. Entering into public life through governmental services became the new vogue. This dissuaded the people from learning and practicing Bihu in its earlier mode of performing in the crop field. While the educated elites in independent India saw Bihu as a symbol of Assamese culture they looked for a platform where they could see it as an integrated phenomenon combining the discourse of tradition and heritage in a palpable form.

The advents of electronic media - radio and television since second half of the 20th century have added a critical dimension to the discourse. Practising Bihu groups were invited to the newly emerging media houses, initially of All India Radio stations and then Doordarshan Kendras established in Guwahati and Dibrugarh, and invited to perform Bihu music and dance as a representation of cultural expression which in turn served as entertainment for the audience. The desire of the emerging elites who wanted to see the Bihu grow and expand on public platforms became vindicated to a certain extent through this process of media intervention. With the appearance of satellite television and the mushrooming growth of localized private television channels the

Bihu has now, over recent years, been subjected to over mediatisation in the recent decades.

According to Wang and Yeh, (2005: 176) “As cable and satellite television mushroomed in the 1990s, the demand for films and television programs grew twentyfold and more. This demand has led to the localization of global products and the globalization of local products on an unprecedented scale. This phenomenon allows producers to borrow ideas to enlighten an established story model or to make content adjustments to cater to the needs of a different audience, but it also creates a need to adapt, repackaging or transform an existing product to make it more appealing to different viewer groups”. The above statement finds validation with the establishment of Doordarshan Kendra Guwahati in 1985, which introduced many cultural programmes among which Bihu was a highlight. These media houses attracted a number of youths practicing the *dhol*, *pepa* and Bihu dancers from the villages were handpicked or contacted to perform on screen. Guwahati, the cultural hub of Assam and its present day capital city at Latasil playground saw the organization of Bihu as a public event in 1952 on a proscenium model stage on a larger scale. The event augured well- earning increasing popularity year by year. The event added another dimension by holding competitions on a number of Bihu related practices - dancers, percussionists, drummers, food items inviting participation of Bihu practitioners from distant areas. Over time, the Latasil experiment found itself to be multiplied by further public events that spread all over the enlarging Guwahati City and other urban centres across the state giving the festival a new look with newer performative novelties. A number of competitions were introduced. Bihu practitioners from the villages started earning money from competitions. The practitioners became professionals. Slowly and steadily the *husori* tradition, *gabharu* Bihu and *deka gabharu mukoli* Bihu collapsed due to non- availability of Bihu music players and dancers in rural space. Bihu moved towards becoming an urban spectacle. As a result, Bihu is more of a stage performance today than a ritual, rural spectacle or spontaneous celebration that it once used to be. The Bihu festival has increasingly become a medium of social entertainment in the public life in Assam. It gradually became elevated in the larger public mind and assumed proportions of other larger festive occasions in the ever-growing urban space. As a social gathering or public function of cultural import, performance of Bihu music

and dance has found a place as a symbol of representation and a source of entertainment.

Cultural performance for Milton Singer is “the elementary constituents of the culture and the ultimate units of observation. Each one had a definitely limited time span or at least a beginning and an end, an organized program of activity, a set of performers, an audience and a place and occasion of performance...” (Turner, 1988: 23). The entire concept of Bihu performance in the changed context reminds one of the aforementioned observations. It used to be celebration of life force of human and natural world. The Bihu dance, an inevitable part of the festival is a spontaneous celebration and has close association with the spring time fertility. The Bihu dance with its enchanting melodies and evocative gestures and movements signifies the notion of sexual union which resulting in fertility and agricultural production. Earlier the dance form presumably used to have some salient patterns and gestures, which were performed in the crop fields under the shades of trees. The dance involves the whole body concentrating on hand work, foot work and swaying of the pelvic region. With every beat of the *dhol* the pelvic region sways along with hand and foot work. “Dance patterns, gestures, and paraphernalia transcend an ornamental purpose” (Kurath, 1960: 242). All the dance steps and gestures, rhythmic and invigorating, of the Bihu dance signify and replicate different objects of nature and have a beginning and an end. As found in field work⁴, earlier, girls used to perform in circular movements with a limited number of dance steps. It was celebratory, spontaneous and effortless. No rehearsed choreography was prevalent at that time. The dance form being so energetic and colourful caught the attention of onlookers. As the dance and music with changing environment and perceptions slowly and steadily traversed to the proscenium stage spontaneity and easefulness took the way towards display and rehearsed performances choreographed for the pleasure of the large assembly of spectators. With gradual detachment from the rural setting attended with ritualistic practices to entertainment oriented performance on stage through the organization of Bihu *sanmilanis* in the urban centres, the performance dynamics in all respects too underwent major shifts. Each and every performer on stage today presents a prepared rehearsed performance that includes sections of improvised arts. The paradigm shifts in performance attended with newer meanings has often been a subject of debate.

Among the old practitioners and the new generation of Bihu professionals in Assam the older generation rooted in rural environment has grown up with a deeper commitment to the values and ethos inherent in the Bihu and is critical of the increasing commercialization which has led the Bihu towards its emergence as a part of Assamese national culture. Hall has stated that “Cultural struggle arises in its sharpest form just at the point where different opposed traditions meet, intersect. They seek to detach a cultural form from its implantation in one tradition and to give it a new cultural resonance or accent” (1998: 445). Therefore, there is a constant cultural struggle between the old and the new generations of Bihu practitioners. “...in the complex lines of resistance and acceptance refusal and capitulation which makes the field of culture a sort of constant battlefield. A battlefield where no once for all victories are obtained but where there are always strategic points to be won and lost” (ibid).

5.2 Enduring Tradition through Continuity and Change

“Tradition is a vital element in culture, but it has little to do with the mere persistence of old forms. It has much more to do with the way elements have been linked together or articulated” (Hall, 1998: 450). In the process of its movement from fields to the urban stage, Bihu underwent several changes in its interpretation of tradition including within its allied parts including the performance of music and dance, costume, jewellery, decoration. Along with the changes there is also a change at the level of perception and environment from a state of interwebbing with nature and the society to a state of urban environment with a set of audience to be entertained with.

Choreography, improvisation and many new dance movements have entered into the performative aspect of Bihu dance to give it a new attractive look and also a new sense of direction. Earlier it was danced in circular movements but now it is danced in linear ways. It has also been observed that formations are made following the English alphabets like A, V, U, S, X, etc. moving more towards the audience. As Turner has rightly said “They try to show others what they are doing or have done; actions on a ‘performed - for – an - audience’ aspect” (1988:74). The performers perform keeping in mind the concept of audience. There is now a defined stage and space where the performance is conducted. Another remarkable thing is that the stages in both urban and rural areas are decorated keeping in mind the setting of village fields. So, it can be said that, though the dance is no longer performed in the fields, efforts are made to bring the feeling of the original setting. “Local dance forms are adjusted to theatre

concert stage, with each dance number set to beautiful and modern choreography and inserted into a flowing and well-rehearsed program. Since it has become an audience centric dance form the use of electronic devices are prevalent, use of microphones, sound system, lighting etc” (Namiki, 2011: 66). A variety of local dances are presented in a hybrid form or manner that intentionally adopts Western theatre practice and aesthetics.

In terms of music traditional instruments *dhol*, *taal* (cymbals), *pepa* (horn pipe) *gagana*, *sutuli*, *bahi* are still used. They are played intermittently. The Bihu *dhol* is played through out and is responsible for keeping the rhythm i.e. pace of the dance. The *taal* (cymbals) accompanies the *dhol* throughout. *Pepa* or horn pipe is played at the beginning, middle and at the end when the tempo is at its highest. *Gagana* is a stick like instrument made of bamboo played between the lips twanging it with fingers. But now with the advent of modernization many western instruments have entered into Bihu music. All the traditional tunes are now produced by western musical instruments, except the sound produced by *dhol*, *pepa* and *gagana*. For instance, if we watch the performances held during the Bihu season all the instruments accompanying the singers are western ones. The only traditional instrument played is the *dhol*. This is also the case in Bihu music videos and track recordings. Few traditional instruments are in use.

Again, if we consider the costume and jewellery used by both male and female dancers in the Bihu dance, the female dancers adorn themselves in *muga silk* (golden silk) *mekhala* and *reeha sadar* with red green or yellow floral or other motifs, red blouse, Assamese jewellery (*jonbiri*, *dholbiri*, *golpata*, *japifuli* etc) and *kopou phool* (foxtail orchid) at the hair bun. The male dancers wear cotton or *muga dhoti* and *kurta*, *tangali* on their waist and a *gamocha* on their head. The colour of dresses not only reflects brightness but also the significance of the colour to the Assamese culture. *Muga* silk has always been an identity marker of Assamese community. The colour red also symbolizes erotica and love. The female dancers also paint their palms with henna leaves (*jetuka*), which symbolizes love and romanticism. *Jetuka* or mehendi is an integral part of bride’s cosmetics in Indian marriage. Now many multiplicities have entered into the costume and jewellery of the Bihu dancers. The dancers, following some recent trends in the world of fashion and colour have changed the existing costume, jewellery mixing elements from different cultures. The traditional costume

and jewellery made by rural artisans are becoming lost to mechanized productions marketed by traders.

However, with all these changes in the material aspect of Bihu dance and music, one aspect that is constant, is the tradition of Bihu which endures generation after generation. While it may have faced criticism from all quarters Bihu is still being celebrated every year with the same mirth and happiness.

5.3 Cultural Exchange, Commoditisation, Media, and Hybridisation

From the above discussion about the various facets of Bihu dance and music it is evident that the whole form has undergone a radical change. The vital forces behind the changes might be cultural exchange, cultural dominance, commodification, and hybridization.

Cultural exchange or transfer, in the terminology of German and French cultural historians who opened up this new field of research, is defined as... “not only the actual and pure transfers such as the exchange of capital, labourers, goods, concepts and ideas, but also the images of and debates about the other society. Such comparisons by contemporaries do not only allow an insight into the way people thought at the time, including all the stereotypes prevalent in the period, but may also give interesting hints as to the reasons for different developments or the rapprochement of societies” (Kaelble, 1999: 21). Cultural exchange may lead to social and cultural change. This facet of cultural transfer is hinted at in the use of the term ‘different developments’, indicating that what is at stake here is not an assessment of a given society or culture as constant and unvarying, but the influences and factors that contribute to a culture’s transformation. Secondly, images, debates, and actions are in some way interconnected. Or, to put it differently: the symbolic side of culture – ideas, concepts, verbal images, stereotypes – cannot be separated from the material side – actions, goods, people, and vice versa.

Cultural exchange involves mutual exchange of symbols, artifacts, rituals, music, dance traditions etc with symmetrical power. Exchange or transfer of social and material resources is a fundamental form of human interaction. As has been mentioned earlier all other communities of Assam celebrate Bihu during the same month or season. For example, the Mising community of Assam celebrates *Ali Aye Li:gang* as their Bihu. Likewise, Tiwa, Dimasa, Hajong, Rabha, Bodo, Karbi, communities celebrate Bihu at

the advent of spring. All are agricultural related festivals and their sole motive was conciliation of mother earth and a good crop. So, to please the mother earth, dance and music were performed in the agricultural fields. All the communities exchanged their symbols, music and dance. In the Bihu dance gestures, dance moves and musical tunes from all the communities are prevalent. The dance movements reflected planting, harvesting of crops, weaving were absorbed into the Bihu dance from the Mising community. Likewise, Tiwa community dance gestures have been incorporated in the Bihu dance. In the Bihu functions nowadays dancers of Bihu groups wearing the traditional *muga mekhala* and *reeha* perform dance moves of many communities at the same time. Therefore, through cultural exchange the elements from other communities are getting assimilated in to the Bihu dance. This is both enriching and hybridising the Bihu dance and at the same time is posing a threat to the dance form of other communities as they might suffer from the issue of identity crisis. It refers here to a condition of cultural dominance, where the dominant culture is receiving and assimilating elements from the minority culture and the latter is imposed on to accept it. The cultural superiority of the Bihu dance is implicitly celebrated. So, the transfer and assimilation of culture from the other communities to Bihu dance is affected through the notion of cultural dominance.

The Bihu dance and music has also absorbed elements from the western culture. Cultural dominance is prevalent here also. It refers to a condition where the unidirectional imposition of cultural elements upon the colonized by the colonizer. It implies a relative lack of choice for the colonized but in accepting the imposition executed by “greater political, social, economic or military power” (Rogers, 2006: 480). Popularity, social and economic power of western concepts influenced the Bihu performance. As has been mentioned, earlier choreography was a totally westernized concept, the term was first used in the west in 1589. The concept of choreography flowed down to the east much later. In the Bihu dance the concept of choreography is gaining popularity. Bihu dance, being a folk dance, doesn't have any written rules and regulations, unlike the classical dance forms. But now Bihu dance is being taught in dance schools, workshops. During the spring season in all parts of Assam workshops are organized by some veteran practitioners of Bihu. The learning at dance schools and workshops are nothing but some choreographically patterned sequences of Bihu dance. Students are also taught to play the Bihu *dhol* and sing and dance in the dance schools

and workshops. Western elements have influenced the Bihu music. Nowadays the original flavor or taste of the folk instruments is at stake. All the audio and video recordings are nowadays digital productions for which only electronic instruments are used. All the traditional music is now produced on synthesizers and with software, as a result of which traditional instruments are taking a backseat. The actual sound qualities of folk instruments are also changing. Advancement of science and technology, an inherent part of globalisation and modernization has also influenced agricultural production and farming activity. This assimilation has been internalized by the Bihu dance and has led to formation of a new identity, which completely differs from the old form of dance and music. “Globalization has brought about nothing more than the hybridization of hybrid cultures” (Wang and Yeh, 2005: 176).

The Bihu dance whether old or new form is the most widely recognized and celebrated dance form of Assam. It has established its own global platform. Every now and then Bihu teams under the leadership of some Bihu ‘gurus’ are invited to performance by many national and international festivals. The Bihu dance is dominating the cultural arena in the field of folk dance and music in Assam. Cultural dominance has become possible for power relations. This discourse of assimilation and cultural dominance has given the practitioners and organizers of Bihu dance a social, cultural and even political power.

Another vital aspect behind the changes in the Bihu dance tradition is commoditization. Appadurai, (1988: 64) explains that “From a cultural perspective the production of commodities is also a cultural and cognitive process: commodities must be not only produced as things, but also culturally marked as being a certain kind of thing”. Commoditization is the use of any culture or cultural products whether the old or living form for exploitation or financial gain. Any object that enters into the exchange system is inescapably commodified. It can also lead to cultural exploitation. Cultural exploitation may have a corrosive effect on the culture as commodification may erroneously depict the culture and therefore scratch the fabric of cultural identity. Commodification can question the preservation of culture. The preservation of the integrity of symbols or cultural objects is best maintained by the natives but the commodified form may shake that integrity. On the other hand, commoditization of a cultural product can help a section of people to earn their livelihood. It can help the

younger generation, who may be detached from their roots to know about their own culture.

Within the larger frame of the festival the Bihu dance in recent years has been highly commoditized. It has become a major source of income. During the spring season the festival is celebrated through competitions held by different organisations for three or four days. It is usually done in the Assamese month of *Bohag* or from mid-April to mid-May. As mentioned earlier, under the able leadership of Radha Gobinda Baruah a section of educated middle class nationalist youths organised Bihu on stage for the first time in 1952 at Latasil playground at Guwahati famously known as Latasil Bihu Mancha. However, it was also found during this study that there were also several other proscenium stages in some districts of upper Assam where Bihu was performed as public events even before Latasil. However, this could not continue in the succeeding years. Hence Latasil Bihu Tali remained as the flag bearer of the modern trend of observing the Bihu in the public sphere as an organised cultural spectacle and a pioneer in organizing the most coveted competitions of Bihu dance in the present day. Gradually this concept of competition spread over the whole of Assam, including lower Assam, where it is said there were no major celebration of Bihu earlier⁷. The Bihu competitions organise both solo and group competitions. In the solo competitions mainly the young unmarried girls compete in Bihu *kuwari*, Bihu *rani* and Bihu *samraggii* competitions. However, Bihu *samraggii* is organised only by Latasil Bihu Tali not by others. The group competitions are named as Bihu *husori protijugita*, *mukoli Bihu protijugita* etc. Some Bihu committees also organise competitions for male Bihu dancers, such as Best *dhulia*, Best *pepuwoi*, Best *bihua*. The Bihu *sanmilanis* and competitions involve various sections. For holding the competitions there is an organizing committee, comprising all sections of people from a particular locality.

There are the competitors and their accompanist and some non-competitive participants. Large sum of money, jobs, cars, jewellery, and other basic amenities of life are offered as prizes for these Bihu competitions. The competitors practice for months and perform throughout the festival season in various Bihu competitions in Assam. The groups assemble at the end and divide the prize money they have earned among themselves. In these groups there are leaders also who manage the groups and the distribution of money. For the solo competitions the female dancers are

accompanied by seven or eight male accompanists. So the amount that they earn is divided on 60-40 basis⁸, 60% to the dancer and 40% to the accompanists or vice versa.

Corporate houses or industrial companies sponsor these Bihu functions in order to promote their respective business interests. They sponsor the prizes of the competitors and decide on the amount paid to the invited artists. In return their products are advertised in the form of banners, hoardings, tableau etc. and also sold during those three four day celebrations. Without these sponsoring houses it would be difficult for the Bihu committees to organise Bihu functions in grand scales. As a result, the committee members are bound to listen to these corporate houses and agree to many of their demands and wishes. Renowned singers are also invited for the *sanskritik sandhya* or the cultural evenings. They are paid handsomely for performances, much more than are paid to Bihu dance groups. Though it's a Bihu function these renowned singers perform songs of all genres, including those from commercial Hindi cinema.

These competitions that is quite indifferent to the very essence of Bihu, which was celebrated by common people to appease the mother earth and increase fertility of the soil. The whole concept of Bihu dance is delocalized to cater to the needs of the sponsors and the Bihu committees who are dependent on the corporate houses who might see the Bihu more as a prospective commercial proposition than as a spirited cultural expression of a community. "The term 'relocalization' to describe the incorporation of local elements into transnational products" (Wang and Yeh, 2005: 178).

Recently, local media houses have also organized Bihu competitions during the Bihu season in the form of 'reality shows'. These competitions follow the rules and designs of some other popular dance and music reality shows in some national television channels. Bihu groups and individual Bihu dancers from different parts of the state come and participate. There are a set of judges (practitioners of Bihu dance and music) who comment on their performances and also a *maha guru* who gives the final opinion about the performance. Along with the competitions the local channels start showing all three Bihus and their preparations from a month before the Bihus. The televisions of Assam present Bihu dance and music (which is performed only in *Bohag* Bihu) in *Magh* and *Kati* Bihu also. Traditionally that is not practiced. But the channels, with an aim to provide entertainment to the viewers, have made all the three Bihus almost the same, depicting the same rituals and performances. This may lead to a

misunderstanding for the young who imitate whatever is shown on screen and who might never know that there are three Bihus with different celebratory processes - the *Magh Bihu* might elapse as *Bohag Bihu* to be celebrated from the month of *Paush*. Through these shows a large number of people outside of the state, have the benefit of enjoying on screen. However, it is doubtful whether the local media houses are helping to uplift the dance tradition of the festival. Is it matter of TRP for them? Similarly, one wonders whether the participants in the competition come for their passion and respect towards the festival or to earn some fame.

Another important trend is the wide circulation of popular Bihu dance drama VCDs, which are well received in both the small towns, cities and rural setting. The Bihu VCDs emerged, almost as a new genre around 10 years (2005-2015) ago. These dance dramas revolve round the themes of romance, separation, eroticism of the male and female protagonists, often with an end note of conjugality and family union in a typical rural setting. These videos are responsible for one of the many reasons for arousing interest among the younger generation towards this popular folk form. Though the videos have been able to catch the core of the festival the dance and music that are showcased in the videos has been a subject of debate. The actors selected for the roles aren't well acquainted with the dance form. The quality and lyrics of the songs have also been modernized. As a whole it can be said, that though these music videos are in a way helping to pass on the festival to the folk form are said to often be erroneously depicted. Through the above process the Bihu is becoming transformed from a spontaneous activity to a trained art.

Another aspect of this training is the Bihu workshops. Every year some Bihu practitioners in association with some government student or social organisations organize Bihu workshops for a period of 7 to 15 days in the month of March-April. The workshops impart training in Bihu dance and music. Students of almost all the age groups participate in the workshops paying a registration fee which varies in amount. The trainers teach both theory and practice about Bihu dance and music. According to one informant, workshops should be encouraged since Bihu is no longer practiced in the fields or villages and people living in urban spaces are able to learn about the festival. Another informant conveyed that a workshop provides the environment in which to learn Bihu dance and music. Earlier in villages the juniors used to learn from the seniors while going from one house to another, singing *husori* ballads. But

nowadays in cities and town that atmosphere no longer exists so workshops give them the environment to learn. Workshops have also become a major source of income for many Bihu 'experts'. However, it is also seen that some of the trainers themselves aren't well acquainted with Bihu. Usually a full length Bihu dance comprising *dholor seu*, *Bihu naam*, *pepa naas*, *gagana*, *sutuli naas*, *kahi naas* are taught during the workshop, which is performed on the final day. The participation numbers are very high so the learners cannot make much progress or learn the form properly. It becomes simply a money making business for the organisers.

The Bihu dance is undergoing a rapid process of modernization, so is the festival. The agrarian festival which connects man and nature has been displaced to an urban bourgeois setting. The indigenous nature of the festival is largely affected because of this. Apart from the competitions, Bihu VCDs, workshops, Bihu dance is performed in many functions to which are not at all related to its core purpose. Recently, it was seen that for the popularity and publicity of a telecom network Bihu dance was used. A group performed Bihu in a street of markets and in the open space at the back of a truck. The new generation and youth may only have seen performance of the Bihu dance in open air stages or auditoriums.

The processes that are adopted to keep the festival alive are antithetical to the very core of the festival. Commoditization has shaken the very meaning and integrity of Bihu festival as shared.

The contemporary cultural landscape is an amalgamation of cross cultural influences, blended, layered upon on another and mixed. Pure or essential culture is hardly found. "All forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity" (Rutherford 1990: 211). Unbound and fluid, culture is hybrid now. In fact, the concept of hybridity occupies a central place in postcolonial discourse. This is particularly so in Bhabha's discussion of cultural hybridity. The Bihu dance and music has traversed a long passage from agrarian fields to the proscenium stage. In the process of its movement has encompassed within it several elements of other cultures. The form that is prevalent today has been subjected to the effects of hybridization. To use the concept of two forms of hybridization distinguished by Bakhtin and further modified by Werbner (1997: 65). Bihu folk dance is characterized by the combination of both "organic" and "intentional" hybridizations. According to Werbner, organic, unconscious hybridity is a historical process in which "culture evolves historically through unreflexive

borrowings, mimetic appropriation, exchange and inventions,” (and it does not disrupt the sense of continuity; whereas intentional or conscious hybridity) “shocks, changes, challenges, revitalises, or disrupts through deliberate, intended fusions” (1997: 4-5). In Bihu dance, group dances presented in a program are based on cultural diversity born of organic hybridization taking place through years of cultural interactions and exchange. When staged, these local dances are intentionally choreographed and stylized according to the western convention of stage art, and organized into a specific programme (which is aesthetically intentional hybridization). In modern times, the notion that any culture or identity is pure or essential is always disputable. The hybridized version of Bihu dance, which is aesthetically pleasing but unable to sustain cultural authenticity, has many a time generated criticism, especially from old practitioners and experts as well as a small circle of dance scholars and newspaper critics who regard it as too commercialized and vulgarized. But, with its innovative and creative performances, the Bihu dance has been going out on international tour to international arenas and has often been taken as a marker of Assamese identity.

So, the Bihu dance and music tradition has created a new identity of its own which is different from the old form. “Consumption exists within a culture of hyper-commodification, where newness, beauty and status are god-like in the minds of consumers and are the keys to forming one’s identity” (Woodward, 2007:135). This new identity and form of Bihu performance can be considered as Homi Bhaba’s “Third Space of Enunciation”, in which cultural systems are constructed.

5.4 Preservation of the Bihu as Cultural Heritage

“Festivals and other touristic activities reinforce social bonds, contribute to the economy, and foster identity construction in a dual mechanism. Two concepts of culture coexist: one as commodity and one as heritage” (Bankston III and Henry, 2010:11). Cultural heritage incorporates, under its cover, festivals. Festivals are traditional, contemporary, representative and identity markers and pass from one generation to the other. Festivals rise up from the fibre of communities to create celebrations of scale, depth, and gravity. Festivals are cultural celebrations and have always occupied a special place in societies (Getz, 2010:7).

The Bihu festival of Assam is a repository of the elements of heritage in both tangible and intangible form having a historical cultural and aesthetic value. The Bihu festival

with its history and tradition is being followed and celebrated by the people of Assam generation after generation and globally recognised as a distinguished festival. Valued as a socio cultural institution and catering largely to the cultural elements the festival has so far been able to display the richness of its cultural heritage.

The Bihu festival is a treasure trove of all cultural embodiments, be it tangible or intangible. With rapid modernization, globalization and hybridization enormous change has come to rituals, traditions and Bihu dance and music. A debate is ongoing among the sensitive class of people in the state as to how to keep the traditions or the quintessence of the festival intact. With a group of concerned people and practitioners of Bihu a committee was formed in December 25, 2010 called it as *Sodou Assam Bihua Bihuwati Bihu Bisesogyo aru Bihu Bisarakar Kendriya Samiti*, which was renamed as *Bihu Suraksha Samiti* in March 12, 2011. The main aim of the committee is preserve the traditions of Bihu festival. The main emphasis of the organisation is on *Bohag* Bihu as they consider it is more disrupted by time and globalisation. Now Bihu dance and music is practised only on stage through competitions therefore the judges should be made aware. They have set some guidelines for the competitions. However, without the participation of the common people and their consent nothing can be changed.

Bihu performance is undergoing a rapid process of modernization, so is the festival on the whole. The celebration being linked to agricultural roots is displaced to an urban setting. In the process it underwent several changes. Sticking to the age old form is not encouraging but disengaging from the roots is also not appreciated. Cultural exchange recalls an ‘innocent’ era in which the different communities of Assam freely and mutually shared cultural elements, perhaps with the effect of greater cultural understanding and creativity. Cultural domination and exploitation is modelled on dominant–subordinate relations. The results of commercialisation and commodification which have been documented by Robinson (2004) have seen the idea of festival removed from this local nexus and become known as ‘placeless festivals’. As Reynolds (1987: 56) observed “Many arts festivals have been commercialised which has left local exhibitions and artists in the shadows.” Local artists and performers may only have limited local appeal and may be discarded in favour of more popular mass performers with a known reputation.

“In selecting venues, artists, themes, and direction the festival producers and directors can be seen as the ‘gate keepers’ as they develop absolute control over which

community traditions or values are displayed to visitors through the manipulation of marketing processes and festival strategy” (Jepson, Wiltshier and Clarke, 2008: 8). This analysis revealed numerous examples of the organisers taking cultural control of a community festival in order to maintain exclusive influence over its production. Even the appointment of an independent festival professional who had considerably more festival expertise did not challenge the organisers’ dominant position. The ‘expert’ was given the title of ‘festival coordinator’ which meant the person with considerable experience became merely a coordinator of the established organisers’ ideas. This highlights a practical need for organisers to clearly define their roles and responsibilities in the planning process. Not doing so can lead to unbalanced power relationships between employer(s) and employee(s), limited democracy, and curtailing the culturally diverse input into event production. This subsequently reduces the cultural diversity of the festival delivery, and creates confusion over the roles and responsibilities of the organisers leading to failures such as not achieving their established goals. “We are reminded by Ulf Hannerz that, cultures are by nature fluid and are always in motion as the result of continuing interaction both from within the culture itself and with the outside world. Both Bakhtin and Levi-Strauss noted, that all cultures are hybrid (Wang and Yeh, 2005: 25)”. Therefore as Hall (1998: 448) suggests “The danger arises when we tend to think of cultural forms as whole and coherent: either wholly authentic or wholly corrupt”. “Since ordinary people are not cultural dopes, they are perfectly capable of recognising the way the realities of working life are reorganised; reconstructed or reshaped by the way they are represented” (ibid: 446). Bihu dance has become the identity marker of the Assamese community at the global platform so now efforts should be made by all stakeholders so that no further decaying of the dance form is incurred at any cost. It should be preserved and celebrated for the well-being of the greater Assamese community.

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BIHU CELEBRATION AT RANGPUR, SIVASAGAR



Fig. 53 The replica of Ahom King proceeding towards *rang ghar* in *rongali* Bihu at Sivasagar, 18.04.2014



Fig. 54 The replica of Ahom King sitting at the stage enjoying *rongali* Bihu at Rangpur, Sivasagar, 18.04.2014



Fig. 55 Bihu teams performing at Rangpur, Sivasagar in 2016
Photo courtesy: BikashHandique



Fig. 56 Bihu teams performing Bodo dance at Rangpur, Sivasagar, 19.04.2016

BIHU WORKSHOPS



**Fig. 57 Bihu and Dholbadan Workshop conducted by Somnath Bora Oja,
31.03.2014**



Fig. 58 Learners and Instructors in a Bihu Workshop, 24.05.2016
Photo courtesy: Dreamly Gogoi

BIHU COMPETITIONS ON STAGE



Fig. 59 Bihu competition performed on stage, 21.04.2016



Fig. 60 Bihu dancers during a competition, 23.04.2016

COMMERCIALISATION OF BIHU

উন্চল্লিশতি তম্
বেতকুছি আঞ্চলিক বঙালী বিহু সন্মিলন

তাৰিখ : ১, ২, আৰু ৩ ব'হাগ (ইং ১৪, ১৫ আৰু ১৬ এপ্ৰিল ২০১৬)
স্থাপিত : ১৯৭৬ চন, লখৰা চাৰিআলি, গুৱাহাটী- ৪০

বিহুৱতী প্রতিযোগিতাৰ
প্ৰথম পুৰস্কাৰ
এখন স্কুটা

বিহু হুচৰি প্রতিযোগিতাৰ
প্ৰথম পুৰস্কাৰ
নগদ ৫০,০০০.০০ টকা

ইচ্ছুক প্রতিযোগীৰ অংশগ্রহণ আন্তৰিকতাৰে কামনা কৰা হ'ল।

যোগাযোগ : বিজু মেধি, সাংস্কৃতিক সম্পাদক
মোবাইল নং- ৯৭০৬১১২১৪৫

Fig. 61 Scooty and INR 50,000 as prize for Bihu competition, 12.03.2016

**VARIOUS ACCOLADES TO BE AWARDED
BY BELTOLA BOHAGI UTSAV SAMITI, 2014**

PATMADOL, 2014
A beautifully crafted Memento and cash reward of Rupees Two Lakhs only. Doner: Beltola Bohagi Utsav Samiti.

BIHUWOTI Competition
Winner - Biva Goswami Memorial Award and cash reward of One Lakh and One Rupee only. Doner: Shri Sanjay Goswami

Runners-Up
Indrakanta Deka Memorial Award and cash reward of Fifty One Thousand and One rupee only. Doner: Shri Girin Deka

Winner of BIHU HUSORI Competition
Sayeeda Sahida Akhter (Anu) Memorial Award and cash reward of One Lakh and One Rupee only. Doner: Syeeda Sahida Akhter (Anu)

Runners-Up of BIHU HUSORI Competition
Yasoda Sarma Memorial Award and cash reward of Fifty One Thousand and One Rupee only. Doner: Shri Bhasker Sharma

A state level singing competition was organized in memory of Late Phukan Chandra Kalita, Ex-President of Beltola Bohagi Utsav Samiti among the budding singers on last 9th and 10th April and the winners being selected on merit through audition rounds will be awarded the "Beltola Bohagi Utsav Award, 2014" along with cash reward of Twenty Five Thousand and One Rupee to each of the two winners.

The Winners are: 1. Smti. Pratiksha Deka, Guwahati and
Doner: Shri Somen Kalita

2. Kristina Kashyap, Tezpur

Best DHULLA and Best PEPUWOI, 2014
Nilakhi Gogoi Memorial Award and cash reward of Rupees Eleven Thousand to each one of them.
Doners: Smti. Parijat Gogoi and Smti. Junmi Gogoi.

Fig. 62 Hefty amount as prize money for Bihu competitions, 22.12.2016

MEDIATISATION OF BIHU



Fig. 63 Bihu Competition organized by a local news channel
Ref: www.dy365.in



Fig. 64 Expensive cars as prize for Bihu Competition organise by local news channels
Ref: www.dy365.in

USE OF BIHU DANCE AS PRODUCT PROMOTION



Fig. 65 Use of Bihu dance to sell products of companies, 06.05.2016



Fig. 66 Use of Bihu dance to attract onlookers to sell products of some companies, 08.04.2017

BIHU ON SOCIAL MEDIA

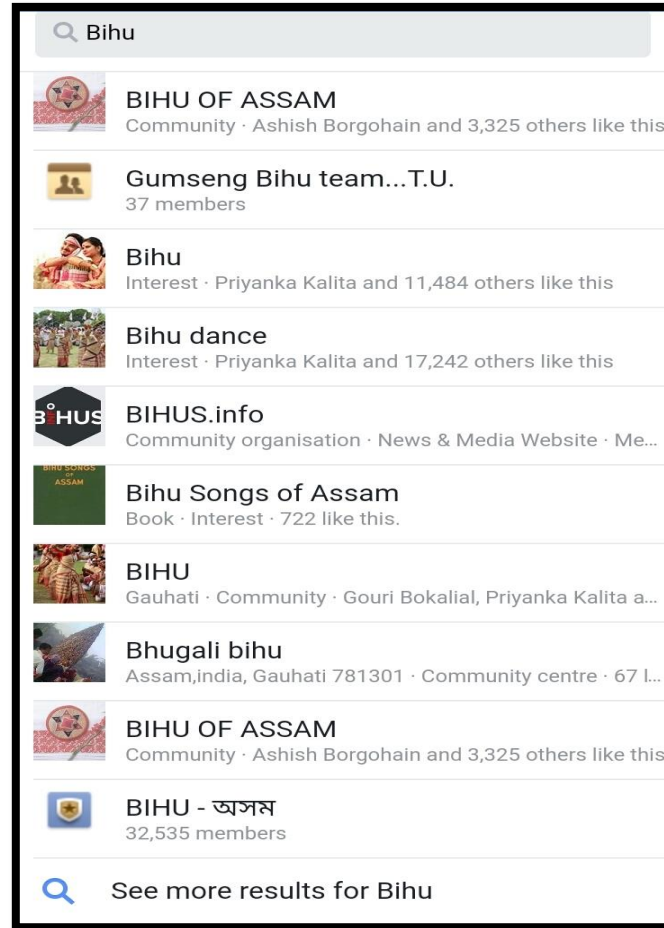


Fig. 67 Pages on Bihu in social networking site Facebook
Ref: www.facebook.com