

## **CHAPTER II**

### **THE BIHU AS A FESTIVAL: THEORETICAL PARADIGMS**

The analysis of the Bihu as a festival and the phases of its transition based on the resource material at hand is necessary in order to lay out the theoretical outline which helped in understanding this cultural phenomenon as a research question.

Emerging from agrarian community life, the Bihu found itself to be expanded, to a wider cultural arena and, in the process, interwebbing into its matrix a number of issues. The major issues relating to this major festival of the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam ranging from folklore, ritual and performance, ethnicity and its interrelated representation, heritage and identity, cultural industry, are discussed in the present study. As these issues are mutually interactive in nature and spirit, theoretical parameters are drawn so as to make the study a composite and coherent whole.

In the history of any society or community, festivals form a distinct part of its existence. Festivals, being a part of folklore studies, are inclusive phenomenon's which incorporate oral history and literature, customs and practices, music and dance, material culture in form of costume and jewellery, food and recipes, instruments. In the process of festival celebrations in any country, there have also been palpable impacts of technology and urbanization. This is increasingly felt in different ways in respect of the Bihu, constituting considerable changes at various levels.

#### **2.1 Defining Festival as a Cultural Phenomenon**

“The term ‘festival’ comes from the Latin word ‘festum’, meaning a holiday” (Cudny, Korec, Rouba, 2012: 708), which in the course of history of societies entered to many languages across the world. “The history of festivals is as long as the history of civilization. Even primitive tribes celebrated important social events (religious or otherwise) by organizing games and feasts, which were the early forms of today’s festivals” (ibid).

“Festival means a periodically recurrent, social occasion in which, through a multiplicity of forms and a series of coordinated events, participated directly or

indirectly and to various degrees, by all members of a community, united by ethnic, linguistic, religious, historical bonds, and sharing a worldview” (Falassi, 1987: 2). Jędrysiak (2008: 71) defines “festivals as a series of artistic events, usually of one type (e.g. film, music, theatre), which is a review of the achievements in a given area, organized at one time, under a common name and often in the form of a competition” (Cited by Cudny, Korec, Rouba, 2012: 710). Durkheim distinguished festivals as secular and religious. In addition, Falassi classified festivals as rural and urban festivals. Another division may be based on social class structure, power and social roles. “Festivals are a social phenomenon, occurring in almost all human cultures but expressed in different ways. A sacred or profane time of celebration marked by special observances, the annual celebration of a notable person, an event or harvest of an important product, a cultural event consisting of a series of performances of works in the fine arts often devoted to a single person, a fair, generic gaiety, conviviality, cheerfulness.” (Jepson, Wiltshier, Clarke, 2008: 7).

“Cultural festivals seem to be ubiquitous in modern societies, filling the social calendar and the cultural agenda with a vast array of events, happenings and spectacles” (Vallbona& Richards, 2007: 103). Cultural festivals form a conglomeration in the life of a community in one single space and their celebration through observances of various customs and practices. Cultural festivals as social constructs transcend time, regimes and criss crossing of history and their ‘raison de’tre’, is always people and community. They are seen as a means of celebrating local popular culture or at times as a site of sophisticated cosmopolitanism. Multiple manifestations of cultural festivals are enacted even in today’s technology driven urban life as both internationally renowned events and a local community events. Cultural festivals endure through time and space from an illustrious history to the contemporary time across an array of cultures and through a diversity of forms and approaches. Festivals have the ability to engage with the dichotomous impulse of cultures embracing both the traditional and the new. “The participation of large social units in public performances and entertainments leads to another kind of social folk custom to which the terms festival and celebration generally apply. Music, dance, costume, floats and processions may all enter into festivals, which are based on both religious and secular traditions” (Dorson, 1982: 3).

If uncovered to their bare bones, community festivals are a set of themed public celebrations which can act as a catalyst for demonstrating community values and

culture. “Having explored numerous community festivals Getz (2010:5) comments that the majority of neighbourhood / community festivals or events are celebrations of the special character of urban life and that festivals are intended to strengthen community pride and sense of place; others are linked to ethnicity and special interests” (Jepson, Wiltshier and Clarke, 2008: 7). According to Getz, we may presently identify three main trends in the study of festivals. The first is the analysis of their influence on culture and society based on anthropological and sociological research. The second brings in economic issues, i.e. the influence of festivals on the economy, promotion of cities and regions, as well as tourism development. The third trend in festival studies is more directed towards festival organization and management.

It can be summarised that festivals can be secular or religious, urban or rural, celebrating various themes but the essence of all festivals is community feeling and promotion of its cultural heritage. Festivals and events can provide direction for communities. The festivals carry heritage of a community through its organisation and celebration, and years of continuation of those festivals in a particular period of time develop national or sub national identity. Community festivals like the Bihu become cultural repositories, and in the process, form a part of cultural history of a community through its collective engagement inspired by collective consciousness and participation. Cultural history of Assam in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in particular, has increasingly seen an overpowering presence of Bihu celebrations through popular participation and popular concourse gradually transforming it to be a signifier of Assam’s distinct heritage and identity. There has arisen a process of attitudinal change towards it from a state of social condescension by the elite and literati like Ratneswar Mahanta and his contemporaries to a state of its revalidation as an expression of social solidarity by Lakshminath Bezbarua and his contemporaries.

## **2.2 Festival: Dynamics of Ritual and Performance**

Elizabeth Bell in her seminal work “Theories of Performance” mentions Catherine Bell’s classification of rituals as “Communal, involving groups of people who gain solidarity through their participation. Second, the action is traditional and understood as carrying on ways of acting established in the past. Third, ritual is rooted in belief in divine beings” (Bell 2008: 128). Catherine Bell further explains five characteristics of

ritual - like activities demonstrating the ritualization in a process which is flexible as well as strategic (ibid). They are:

- a. "Formalization is the degree of formality in dress or speech that marks an activity as ritual like"
- b. "Traditionalism appeals to cultural precedents"
- c. "Invariance emphasizes precise repetition and physical control"
- d. "Rule Governance maintains that rituals like activities are governed by rules that guide and direct the activities especially designating what is not allowed or accepted"
- e. "Sacral symbolism appeals to supernatural beings" (ibid.:128-129)

All the above mentioned characteristics are apparent in the course of performance. Victor Turner sees about rituals as performance stating "I like to think of rituals essentially as performance, as enactment and not primarily as rules or rubrics. The rules frame the ritual process and the ritual process transcends its frame. A river needs banks or it will be a dangerous flood but banks without river epitomize aridity" (ibid. 129).

Elizabeth Bell has categorised performance into three broad categories:

- Performance as both process and product
- Performance is productive and purposeful
- Performance is traditional and transformative

Turner's observations and the aforementioned categories of ritual and performance, hold well in respect to the celebration of the Bihu festival. Bihu is a community festival that is governed by rituals which are performances themselves. The performance constitutes a process through which they came into being as product serving the purpose of the community. The performers, be it in sacred or religious and secular or popular planes, are traditional in content and spirit and also adapted to changing social conditions.

### **2.2.1 Victor Turner's Liminality: Betwixt and Between**

"Everywhere people mark the passing from one stage to another..." (Schechner, 2006: 66). Victor Turner in *The Ritual Process* talks about Liminality, Liminoid and Communitas. Liminality is borrowed from the concept of Arnold Van Gennep that "all rites of passage or transition is marked by three phases: separation, margin (or limen, signifying threshold in Latin), and aggregation" (Turner, 1991: 94). Turner uses the

word 'state' in place of transition. Liminality is a period of time when a person is 'betwixt and between' (ibid.: 95). At this time in specially marked spaces transitions and transformations occur. "The liminal phase fascinated Turner because he recognized in it a possibility for ritual to be creative to make new situations, identities and social realities" (Schechner, 2006: 66). The threshold period is the limen. "Conceptually what happens within a liminal time-space is reinforced, emphasized" (ibid.: 67) in the limen period. The liminal period has been compared to various empty stages by Schechner. The next stage is 'liminoid'. With industrialization and the division of labour many of the functions of ritual were taken over by arts, entertainment and recreation. Turner used the word 'liminoid' to describe ritual-like types of symbolic action that occurred in leisure activities...the "liminoid includes art and popular entertainments" (ibid.). Finally comes the 'spontaneous communitas' which is more secular in nature and people feel the spirit from inside. "Spontaneous communitas abolishes status. People encounter each other nakedly in the face to face intimate encounter" (ibid.: 70) without any class or caste hierarchy.

Bihu, being an agrarian festival was celebrated in the field or in some sequestered places in earlier times. However, it gradually entered into the public sphere to which it adapted itself through a process of transformation. The transformative journey continued through centuries to its state of public celebration which may be seen in the light of the spectacles of the 'liminality period' as pointed out by Victor Turner. The present scenario of the Bihu festival is the 'liminoid period' where, with the advent of science and technology, industrialization and urbanization many changes have come.

### **2.2.2 Festival as an Intangible Heritage**

Heritage often finds itself to be situated with culture, cultural history and cultural studies. Heritage as a discourse refers mostly to valued objects of the past qualifying monuments and diverse traditions coming as an inheritance from previous generations. This embodiment of past heritage "by its nature values the past and is concerned with the manner through which the past is constructed in the present" (Soderland, 2009: 55). Heritage provides an enduring process of re - producing past knowledge. It encompasses two key ideas: heritage as ideals and heritage as things embodying the material and cultural aspects.

“The historical dimension of Heritage provides an enduring context within which its changing meaning can be traced” (Soderland, 2009: 77). We can find validation of the above definitions in the Bihu festival of Assam as the Bihu in all its aspects constitutes in itself the phenomenon of heritage as well as its function as a pursuer of heritage, and bears a long and eventful past. The Bihu festival with the paraphernalia of its multiple colours and dimensions, considered today as a part of the heritage of the Assamese community, is endowed with a history of its process of development.

“Cultural heritage was first addressed in international law in 1907 and a body of international treaties and texts for its protection has been developed by UNESCO and other intergovernmental organizations since the 1950's” (Blake, 2000: 61).

Cultural Heritage refers to the entire corpus of material signs - either artistic or symbolic - handed on by the past to each culture and, therefore, to the whole of humankind. As a constituent part of the affirmation and enrichment of cultural identities, as a legacy belonging to all humankind, cultural heritage gives each particular place its recognizable features and is the storehouse of human experience. With changing perceptions of culture and heritage the meaning of heritage, not limited to ancient monuments, historical sites and buildings alone, has got extended from the material objects to artistic expressions, practices and symbolic artefacts. The preservation and the presentation of cultural heritage therefore forms a corner-stone of any cultural policy.

The UNESCO declaration, while advocating preservation of intangible cultural heritage, lays importance, not merely on the cultural manifestations but rather, on the wealth of knowledge and the skills that is transmitted through it from one generation to the next. An understanding of the intangible cultural heritage of different communities enables intercultural dialogue within a nation and internationally. “According to the 2003 Convention for the safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) living heritage is the mainspring of humanity’s “cultural diversity” and its maintenance a guarantee for continuing creativity. UNESCO redefines the meaning and lays out the components of Intangible Cultural Heritage” (www.UNESCO.com, Retrieved on: 15.03.2017) as:

- **Traditional Contemporary and Living at the same time:** It does not only represent inherited traditions from the past but also contemporary rural and urban practices in which diverse cultural groups take part;

- **Inclusive**

We may share expressions of Intangible Cultural Heritage that are similar to those practiced by others. Whether they are from the neighbouring village, from a city on the opposite side of the world or have been adopted by peoples who have migrated and settled in a different region, they all are intangible cultural heritage. They have been adopted by peoples migrating and settling in a different region, and have evolved over generations in response to their environments a newer form of cultural practices which too are Intangible Cultural Heritage. They contribute to giving us a sense of identity and continuity providing a link from our past, through the present and into our future. ICH does not give rise to questions of whether or not certain practices are specific to a culture. It contributes to social cohesion encouraging a sense of identity and responsibility which helps individuals to be a part of one or more different communities and the society at large;

- **Representative**

Intangible Cultural Heritage is not merely valued as a cultural good, on a comparative basis, for its exclusivity or its exceptional value. It thrives on its basis in communities and depends on those whose knowledge of traditions customs are passed on to the rest of the community, from generation to generation or to other communities

- **Community Based**

Intangible cultural heritage can only be so when it is recognized as such by the communities, groups or individuals that create maintain and transmit it-without their recognition, nobody else can decide for them that a given expression or practice is their heritage (ibid.)

Therefore, it could be summarized that the vast repository of “Intangible Cultural Heritage as referring to the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated with communities, groups and in some cases individuals can be recognized as part of their

cultural heritage. This Intangible Cultural Heritage transmitted from generation to generation is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity” (ibid).

Cultural heritage incorporates under it the Festivals. Festivals are traditional, contemporary, and representative and identity markers which also evolve through generational knowledge and wisdom. 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).

### **2.2.3 The Duo of Heritage and Identity**

Laurajane Smith affirms that it is necessary to define the relation between heritage and identity through material culture. “Material culture as heritage is assumed to provide a physical representation and reality to the ephemeral and slippery concept of ‘identity’. Like history, it fosters the feelings of belonging and continuity, while its physicality gives these feelings an added sense of material reality. Material aspects of a culture impart a significant identity to a particular culture and that identity is enduring” (Smith, 2006: 48). Material culture links identity and heritage and the ways they are developed and maintained. “Heritage provides meaning to human existence by conveying the ideas of timeless values and unbroken lineages that underpin identity” (Smith, 2007: 48).

Along with the existent material culture, Smith also points out the day to day activities or images that draw a sense of identity. “It is often the commonplace symbols and everyday activities and habits that work to continually ‘flag’ or remind people of their national identity” (Smith, 2006: 49). The activities or symbols that are carried out on a frequent basis, link in to the concept of identity. The daily affair or image engraves a feeling or belongingness which draws identity. And such linkages are more permanent and substantial. Another aspect of the common and banal is that “everyday ubiquitous, and thus banalities, of nationalizing heritage through increasing leisure and heritage tourism activities, even at the most monumental, have perhaps facilitated and helped drive the heritage industry critique” (ibid.) It also helps the members of a particular social, ethnic or cultural background to relate more to their indigenous affairs and create a sense of identity. However, Smith (2006: 54) here states that no community



has a single identity; they have layers of sub-identities derived through various heritage aspects. This is applicable to the ethnic communities who have a sub community identity based on banal or commonplace symbols or rituals and also the national identity which has an identity politics governed by the people in political power and derived from intellectuals working in that particular field.

Along with this condition identity is often derived from memory of the past heritage. Reminiscing about the past derives a sense of belongingness and interpretation of the journey that the particular event has undertaken. However as Smith states, “The past can never be understood solely within its own terms; the present continually rewrites the meaning of the past and the memories and histories we construct about it within the context of the present” (Smith, 2006: 58). Here the language or the representation of the discourse of the past in the present context plays a pivotal role. The forms of memory most often associated with heritage are collective or social memory and habitual memory. Collective or social memory of a community of people about a festival or event draws on the feeling of heritage and is linked with a sense identity. However, it is also difficult to believe in the memory representation as the past is always recreated while keeping the present in context.

The Bihu as a festival and as a repository of community wisdom as expressed in rituals, skills, objects which are traditional and contemporary evolving through generational practices with wider community participation in all respects forms a significant part of heritage of Assam as recognized by the resident communities themselves. The festival with all its diverse features expanded through the passage of history has found itself to be a huge cultural phenomenon giving respective communities a mark of identity in contemporary times as the outcome.

### **2.3 Festival: Issues of Ethnicity and Power Relations**

“Many performance theories make claims that performance constitutes or creates identity, race, ethnicity, gender, desire, class, age, abilities, and Geopolitical regions are known to self and to others through performances that both comply with tradition and defy expectations” (Bell, 2008: 19). Ethnicity is viewed through three schools of thought:

- a. The Primordalist school of thought has three arguments - first ethnicity is ascribed identity or assigned status, something inherited from ancestors. Second,

the decision of who is a member of an ethnic group is fixed and definite. Third, people sharing the same biological and cultural origin belong to a particular group.

- b. The Constructionist believes that ethnicity is a socially constructed identity and has flexible social boundaries.
- c. The Instrumentalist considers that ethnicity is a tactical tool that can be used for gaining resources. People become ethnic and remain ethnic when they get something significant in return.

In the present study the concept of ethnicity in relation to the Bihu festival will be looked into keeping in mind these three perspectives and also how ethnicity and power relation are inherent in each other.

“Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain...Power is employed and exercised through a netlike organization... individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application” (Foucault, 1977: 99). Mark G.E. Kelly explains that Foucault's view of power, as presented in *Surveilleretpunir. Naissance de la prison*, involves the following features: “(i) The impersonality, or subjectlessness, of power, meaning that it is not guided by the will of individual subjects; (ii) The relationality of power, meaning that power is always a case of power relations between people, as opposed to a quantum possessed by people; (iii) The decentredness of power, meaning that it is not concentrated on a single individual or class; (iv) The multidirectionality of power, meaning that it does not flow only from the more to the less powerful, but rather comes from below, even if it is nevertheless nonegalitarian; (v) The strategic nature of power, meaning that it has a dynamic of its own, is intentional” (2009: 37-38). Foucault, says power is “coextensive with resistance; productive, producing positive effects; ubiquitous, being found in every kind of relationship, as a condition of the possibility of any kind of relationship” (Kelly, 2009: 38).

So, the power relation among the ethnic communities of Assam celebrating the spring time festival is not necessarily repressive or resistant but different and ethnicizing and leading to the creation to their own ethnic identities. The Bihu festival has increasingly emerged as more distinct among various ethnic communities. Rendering the celebrations with localized colour and distinctiveness has given representations of cultural nuances of respective communities under the umbrella of Bihu. In such an

environment the other ethnic communities also become resistant and this is leading to the establishment and popularisation of the other ethnic communities also. This power relation is productive positive effects in multiple ways and through dialogue.

#### **2.4 Cultural Industry by Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno**

Works of art are no longer considered independent but are governed by rules of commodification and consumerism and are products of economic relations seriously impacting human society and on its cultural or aesthetic values and productions. Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer discuss the notion of ‘Cultural Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception’ in their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1991). They have projected that cultural industry is the main by-product of late capitalism and encompasses everything within it, mainly for commercial gain, and focuses its attention to the interest of money and power. “Culture today is infecting everything with sameness...the belief that they are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the trash that they intentionally produce. They call themselves industries, and the published figures for the director’s incomes quell any doubts about the social necessity of their finished products” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002: 94-95). The main argument laid by them is that commodification of art is consumerism of human consciousness and creativity. “For the present the technology of the culture industry confines itself to standardization and mass productions and sacrifices what once distinguished the logic of the work from that of society” (ibid). The entertainment business of cultural industry has led the masses to eradicate self-thinking and become distracted from constructive criticism of good and bad art. “The whole world is made to pass through the filter of the culture industry” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1991: 4). The thinking capability of the masses has been conditioned by the cultural industry and has been overtly taken over by them. Though it is shown that different products have been released for public entertainment the essence of all the products are the same. This has led to effortless digestion by the audience or the takers without questioning the credibility or authenticity of the products. “The might of industrial society is lodged in men’s minds. The entertainment manufacturers know that their products will be consumed with alertness even when the customer is distraught, for each of them is a model of the huge economic machinery which has always sustained the masses, whether at work or at leisure—which is akin to work” (ibid.). This is how the cultural industry is imposing conformity through sameness. The needs of the society or larger

audience have been maligned and they are fed with things that can serve the best commercial value. So, Adorno and Horkheimer have questioned what cultural industry is serving, due to its heavy commercialisation, and in direct contrast to the dream that enlightenment rather than capitalism shown to the people.

“Nevertheless the culture industry remains the entertainment business. Its influence over the consumers is established by entertainment. This will ultimately be broken not by an outright decree, but by the hostility inherent in the principle of entertainment to what is greater than itself” (ibid. 9). This has been further boosted by the publicity or advertisement business. Through advertisement, the cultural industry is reaching out to a greater audience. “Advertising is an elixir of life. In a competitive society, advertising performed the social service of informing the buyer about the market; it made choice easier and helped the unknown, but more efficient, supplier to dispose of his goods” (ibid. 22). The Bihu festival, being mainly celebrated in the proscenium stage today, is a replication of the cultural industry.

The Bihu, as referred to earlier assumed the proportion of a mega cultural phenomenon with all dimensions of popular culture. Be it the performance of music and dance on stage or event management by institutions and organizations across the Brahmaputra Valley or the display of material objects including food pertaining to the tradition, a considerable amount of economic transactions take place. Taking the opportunity of huge gatherings, and the heightened excitement arising on the occasion, a number of corporate organizations have either been invited to support such events or have come to reap the benefit from them. The market around the season also sees buoyancy with sales of traditional performance, dress material and costumes with newer designs with a traditional flavour. Likewise, the food market also finds itself booming with production and sale of traditional food items. Even the cultural material of ethnic groups including food and clothes finds wider acceptance during these events. Taking the festival of Bihu as a whole, it can easily be surmised that this folkloric spectacle has found itself transformed into a cultural industry governed by power relations and economic transactions with increasing commoditization of all traditional material including music and dance performances.

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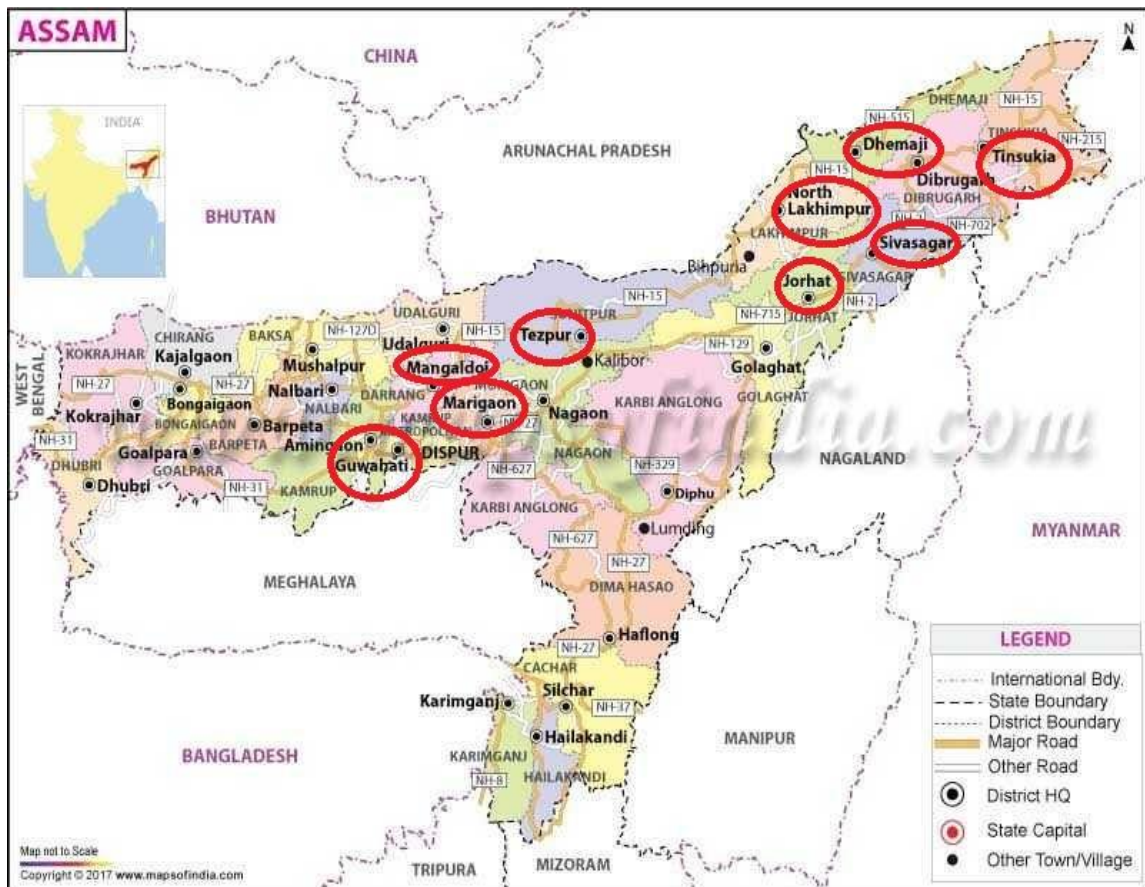
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## MAP OF ASSAM



Indicating the districts covered as field for the study

Ref: [www.Maps of India.com](http://www.Maps of India.com)