



SOCIO-ECONOMIC SIGNIFICANCES OF THE FESTIVALS OF THE TIWAS AND THE THE ASSAMESE HINDUS OF MIDDLE ASSAM

Abstract:-

The Tiwas of Mongoloid group migrated to Assam and scattered into different parts of Nagaon, Morigaon and Karbi Anglong districts and settled with the Assamese Hindus as an inseparable part of their society. The Festivals observed by the Tiwas and the Assamese caste Hindus have their distinct identity and tradition. The festivals celebrated by these communities are both of seasonal and calenderic and some festivals celebrated time to time. Bihu is the greatest festival of the region and the Tiwas celebrate it with a slight variation. The Gosain Uliuwa Mela, Jonbeel Mela and the Barat festival are some specific festivals. Influence of Neo-Vaisnave culture is diffusively and widely seen in the festivals of the plain Tiwas and the other Assamese caste Hindus. The Committee Bhaona festival of Ankiya drama performance celebrated in Charaibahi area is a unique one. This paper is an attempt to look into the socio-economic significances of the festivals of the Tiwas and Assamese Hindus of Middle Assam.

Key Words:- Bihu, Gosain Uliuwn, Bhaona.

1. Introduction :

In the valley of the mighty river Brahmaputra in Assam, different groups of people of different ethnicity, culture, religion and following various customs and traditions began to live from the very ancient times. Some of them were autochthonous while others came across the Northern or the Eastern hill from the plains on the west as traders or pilgrims. The Assamese identity is also a textured identity. Being a product of an old age interaction among various cultures and groups in the Brahmaputra Valley it is only but natural. (Medhi, B.K. Athparia R. P. & Sud J.K. : 2009 : 354)

Morigaon and Nagaon districts of the Brahmaputra valley is a land of prosperity and attraction inhabited by many ethnic groups. Tradition of Hindu cult mainly stuck its roots into the area. Followers of Islamic faith and Christianity too have their settlement mainly on the Laharighat revenue circle area and in the Morigaon district border side of Karbi Anglong respectively.

The Tiwas of Mongoloid group migrated to Assam and scattered into the different parts of the Nagaon, Morigaon and Karbi Anglong districts and settled with the Assamese Hindus as an inseparable part of their Society. They have played an important role in the history of Assam as well as in moulding the Assamese society and culture like other tribes of North East India. They have been designated as 'Lalungs' in Government records, books, monographs and maps etc. The other name 'Tiwa' has widely been used by scholars, writers and researchers, without however, discarding the official name 'Lalung'. (Sen Soumen (ed) : 1985 : 113). The festivals observed by the Tiwas and the Assamese caste Hindus have their distinct identity and tradition and some relations are there in these districts of Middle of Assam.

The folklorists have regarded festivals as one of the important genes of folklore. The festivals constitute a major domain of social folk custom. It being the life span of folk tradition and syndrome of social cohesion, affects the form and substance of social life.

The festivals celebrated in Assam are both of seasonal and calenderic and some other festivals celebrated time to time by the tribes, non-tribes and by the minorities. Bihu is the greatest festivals of the Assamese people. It is secular in concept because it is intimately connected with agriculture. The three Bihus that come off at various stages of the cultivation of paddy, the principal crop of Assam : Bahag (Baisakh) Bihu, Kati (Kartika) Bihu and Magh (Magha) Bihu. As Dr Prafulladutta Goswami writes "Astronomically Bahag is associated with the vernal equinox, Kati Bihu with the autumn equinox and Magh Bihu with the winter solstice. The term Bihu is traced to Sanskrit visuvan, equinox." Kati Bihu is also known as Kangali Bihu (Poor Bihu), for there is not much fun since the villagers store house is almost empty. Magh Bihu is also known as Bhogali Bihu, from the word Bhoga eating or enjoyment.

There are slight variations here and there, from place to place or from community to community in Bihu celebrations. In some Places the festival goes on for a month. Some communities start it only on a Wednesday, a day considering auspicious. Dr. Bhuban M. Das writes- The Bihu, an Assamese national festival, is considered by some authority to be a contribution of the tribal folk. Now the Assamese form of Bihu festival has become a common feature of many of the tribes, both in the hills and in the plains. One can hear the familiar Assamese songs and types of the plains echoed in the district hills. (Das B. M : 1966 :13)

Another festival not apparently connected with any religious belief is Bhatheli. It is also called Sori and confined to the western districts of Kamrupa and Goalpara and also to certain part of Darrang district adjacent to Kamrupa, where it is known as Deul. Mahoho is another simple festival. Village teenagers observe it enthusiastically in mimic acting of driving mosquitoes away. The festivals of purely religious origin are many and the most important among them are Deul of Barpeta, Ambubachi of Kamakhya in lower Assam and Sivaratri of Sivsagar in Upper Assam. Deul is DouL Jyatra which synchronizes with Holi. Sivaratri is widely observed in many Siva temples scattered all over Assam. Large fairs are held in connection with this festival at Umananda of Guwahati, Mahabhairav, Singari, Viswanatha and Nagsankar temples of Sonitpur district and Siva Dol of Sivsagar Town. The Rasa festival is the another religious festival celebrated in the full moon night of the month of Aghona (October-November). It is celebrated or the Rasaleela of Lord Krishana is performed in the Satras of Majuli and at Nalbari, Palashbari, Tihu etc. in different ways. The Gosain Uliowa or Mela festival of middle Assam and the Bhaona festivals by performing many Ankiya dramas are the other festivals related to Neo-Vaishnavite culture.

Beside the above festivals, the other major festivals of different tribes and communities are – the Baichago of the Bodos, Girkai and Bayakho-Trakkyo, the Ali Aye Ligang of Missing, Sagra Misawa and Wansuwa of Tiwas , Jahang festivals of Karbis, Tuchu and Holika festivals of the Tea tribes etc.

The folk festivals celebrated by the people of Middle Assam districts are both of seasonal and calenderic festivals. The common festivals of the Assamese Hindus are also celebrated by the Hindu peoples of the district. There are some specific festivals of the Tiwas in the district. The Gosain Ulliowa Mela, Bihu festivals with slight variation, Jonbeel Mela and Barat Festival are some specific festivals. The Sagra Misawa and Wansuwa (festival of pounding rice flour) festivals are celebrated only by the Hill Tiwas of Karbi Anglong District at present.

The original tribal name of the Lalung community is Tiwa. Ti in Lalung dialect means water, Waa means great noble, high and elevated reference of water and river in their religious deities, it is observed by the historians, that the Lalungs were originally living on the bank of a holly river. (Barua Anil: 1989:01). The Tiwas established several princely states in Nagaon known as kingdom of Pachoraja and Satoraja. The ancient kingdoms cover some areas of present Jayantia hills (Meghalaya) and some area of Karbi Anglong and Nagaon district. The Lalung presently found mainly in the villages of Morigaon District are- Silchang, Dahali, Makaria, Nelli, Palashguri, Beltola, Baolagug, Sonaikuchi, Kamarkuchi, Gaonliakuchi, Markangkuchi, Gova, Khala, Pachimnagaon, Barapujia, Charaibahi, Baghara, Manipur, Na-khola, Baha, Jagi, Bhakatgaon, Mayong, Chabukdhara etc.

The other Assamese caste Hindu communities of Nagaon and Morigaon districts are the Brahmins, Kalita, Keot, Nath-Yogi, Koch, Chutia, Kaivartta, Hira and a few Ahom people. All the communities celebrate the common Assamese seasonal festivals. Some special festivals are – Bihu Festival, Durga Puja, Lakshmi Puja Festivals, religious festivals like Rasa Mahotsava, the Bhaona festival by performing many Ankiya dramas and Neo-vaishnavite Festivals in different places of the district.

The Committee Bhaona festival is a festival of Ankiya drama performance celebrated in every three years in Charaibahi area. The festival is not a seasonal festival but it is a festival where 20-24 bhaonas are performed with the active participation of the people of the locality. It has 150 years of history and some legendary interpretations relating to the place of performance.

Different games and entertainments and fairs have remarkable place in the folk festivals of the district. The buffalo fights organized in different villages of the district in the time of the Magh Bihu (in January-February) are poplar among all the people. The Moh-Juj (buffalo fights) of Ahatguri is almost familiar in the entire state of Assam.

Influence of Neo-Vaisnavite culture is diffusively and widely seen in the festivals of the plain Tiwas and the other Assamese caste Hindu Communities also. Assimilation of different caste and communities through the festivals is a fertilizing manure to the plant of Neo-Vaisnavism in the district.

2. Socio economic significances of the Festivals of the Tiwas and Assamese Hindus of Middle Assam.

The various calendric and seasonal festivals celebrated by the Tiwas and the Assamese Hindus of Nagaon and Morigaon districts are a shared sequence of experience, civic as well as religious, emotional interaction and a time for homecoming. Games, dance and feast that reveal Jubilee expression of community satisfaction and good will, ingrain both his torieal as well as geographical tradition. The Bihu festivals of Tiwas and the Assamese Hindus have behavioral roots in past tradition. The wangzua, Yangli, Barat festivals are important from legendary and anthropological points of view. Festivals of Hindu tradition like Durgapuja have developed as geographical tradition. In provides positive interaction with their Hindu counterparts in the Morigaon district. The socio-cultural and economic significance of the festivals observed in wide variety and with religious beliefs and practices discussed as follows.

2.i Moral and social significance of the Festivals :

The religious festivals and the festivals worship of god, observances of rituals. Practices, reciting of scriptures and paying homage to the great saints have necessarily to be moral. The Puja festivals with religious beliefs by the Tiwas and the Neo-vaishnavite traditions have its moral significances.

The Committee Bhaona festival of Charaibahi is a unique, historical and traditional performance with its moral significance. In the Charaibahi area many ethnic group of various shades live and they are not bound by the same religious practices. But the committee Bhaona Festival creates an atmosphere of cementing bond of unity among the beliefs and practices. It was during the British regime that the committee Bhaona emerged as a result their faith in Vaishnavism and in God. The dramatization of the Indian mythical narratives of Bhagavata, Parana, Ramayana and Mahabharata attracted people as they embodied the message of the victory of truth and justice against injustice.

The committee Bhaona was perfumed at first by the people of Charaibahi to reveal their spontaneous feelings of Joyness due to Queen Victoria's proclamation in 1858. The British authority exploited the people of Assam. The feeling martyrdom aroused and they united. Their faith on Neo-Vaishnavism exhibited through the performance of the Committee Bhaona. Dr. S.N. Sarma says, Vashnavism inherits and blends into its texture much of the recognized ethical and social ideas of larger Indian through. The universally accepted principals of right living and exalted virtues of life, while long recognized errors of conduct have been deprecated (Sarma S.N: 1999:214).

The Gosain uliuwa mela festival, Barat festival and the Pujas have also the moral significances in the Tiwas and Assamese Hindu societies. The local people clean and repair their houses to welcome the festivals.

2.ii. Elevation of Backward class through the festivals :

The festivals are celebrated by the people of the region as a source of immense joy and pleasure for all sections of people living in the society. In the Festivals of the Assamese Hindus and in the Jonbeel mela of Tiwas, all the communities like Kaivartya, Koch, Ahom, Chutia, Brahmin, Hira, Nath (Yogi) take part under the same pandal. The mutual understanding and cooperation in respect to Sankardev's ideology is distinctly reflected through the Neo-vaishnavite festivals.

The ideology of upliftment of backward class and the people to come together and sink their differences in an atmosphere of mutual code and respect are justified in the Bhaona festival. Sankardeva did not or would not do away with the traditional caste divisions. But he has definitely minimized the rigour such discrimination by pronouncing that caste never be a bar for a devotee to be he a Brahmin or a so-called out castes in participating in the congregational prayer (Naam-Kritana). In Bhakti there is no distinction of caste, everybody has equal right to devotion of Krishna.

2.iii. Encourages the local Artisans:

The growth of popularity of the festivals like Barat Puja, Committee Bhaona, Durga puja etc. has given birth to a class of artisans who are specialized in the art of preparing costume, decorations and accessories of performance. The making of masks and costumes necessary for the Bhaona performance required specialized professional skill and in course of time it become a sort of hereditary art confined to new families at different localities (Sarma S.N.: 1999:240). The local artisans of Tetlia and Charaibahi are experienced in the making of the craft, masks, Barat Charai for Barat festival and the instruments for the Barat Festival and the committee Bhaona respectively. For the Bhanona, some brawarias also make the gadas (instruments to fight) around etc. The bahua (comic actor performed not related to Ankia dramas) uses some masks, thrones of some animals

like loin, horses etc. made by themselves or other local artisans. The performer of Barat dance in the Barat Festival of Tetelia make the masks and the special 'Barat bird' for the festival. The experienced and skilled artisans of that locality also make some bamboo framed status of different Gods and goddesses. The organizing committee and the local people of the localities prepare welcome gates decorated with artistic skill.

Through the celebration of these festivals, the whole art and crafts manship by the local artisans encouraged.

2.iv. The festivals as entertainment :

The vaishnava saints and their followers introduced Bhaona festivals through satras and naamghar to popularize Vaishnavism in Assam and its adjacent areas. They succeeded in their mansion. The festival like Barechahuria Bhaona, Committee Bhaona are the example of that popularity. On the other hand most of the festival of the Tiwas are full of songs and dances and merry mahng. The festivals like Sagra Miswa, Barat are full of done programmes. The Tiwa people enjoy then festivals with immense pleasure and entertainment. In the plain areas among the Assamese Hindus, the people live far away from the urban life choose the Neo Vaishnavite festivals like Bhaona, Rasa mahotsava etc. as their prominent source of entertainment. The mythical themes stories and dances minimizes their mental distress.

2.v. Communicative value of the festivals :

In today's context, all existing art forms has a role as a media of commendation. In this era of advanced electronic and satellite communicator, the observance and its live telecast for the entire world has been possible. In New-Vaishnavies Srimanta Sankardeva invented Bhaona as the media of communication between the devotees and God. 'Sankardeva and Madhav Deva and the other apostles handled this art form with so much of fitness and perfection that notwithstanding the fact that this Bhaona has been serving as a media of a mission have not lost their artistic grace, individually and beauty.

The communication between the plains and hills through barter system in observance of Tiwa Magh Bihu is reflecting in the Jonbeel mela.

2.vi. Festivals contribute to social cohesion :

Some of the religious festivals and belief in both the Tiwas and Assamese Hindus of Marigaon are continuing the unity and sacred strength to perform under one stage. Like all beliefs which can be shared, religious beliefs provide a basis for people to unite together and form integrated groups. If a society has a religion to which all or most of its members adhere, the religion will play a very important part in holding individuals to each other.

Every class of people of the society cooperate in the Bihu festivals. Durgapujas, Jonbeel mela, Gosai uliwa Mela etc. festivals in Nagaon and Morigaon districts. These festivals are the most concrete expression of collective emotions and loyalties of the people of the area.

2.vii. Festivals Sanskritizes the society :

In this context to evaluate the term and sanskritize we mean the cultural social Festivals and neo-vaishnavite traditions but not only the practices of the Vedic rules. The unethical themes from the Puranas and Sankardev's creation influenced the naïve village people mainly the Tiwas community people of Middle Assam. The religious spirit or sincere devotion to God is invariably accompanied by moral quality and

excellence. In the samskritization of the society, the moral perspective of the Neo-vaishnamism traditions performed have been playing its significant role.

2.viii. Economic significance of the Festivals of the Tiwas and Assamese Hindus of Middle Assam :

Now a days, festivals are also a source of income to many people in the villages or towns. In the early times, the people were aware of the successful performance only. But today a picture of its economic significance appears and a class of people earns some money in the two-three days performance at their locality. Shops and tea status are set up for the reason. They find a brisk business on this occasion in and around the pandal.

In the Jonbeel mela, a big fair is held where the local and the outside businessmen earn a lot. The village level self help groups and the handloom and textile departments also take part. The tourists come to the destination and spend their money in terms of scarce foreign exchange, hence the tourists are welcome in the festivals. Many tourists roam around with an intention of visiting beautiful craft producing regions around the world. They like to experience the creative vistas the craftsmen go through; see for themselves the economic and social conditions of those weaves or wood carvers or potters whose artistic expressions are so marvellous. Craft has been playing a vital role in the socio-cultural and economic milieu of the society.

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