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Culture Meets Nature: Some celebrated festivals of Middle Assam from an Ecological Lens.

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Abstract

Festivals indicate a season of social mirth when series of performances of Music, plays feasts or the like honorific celebrations of historical events birds or deaths of a hero or God are enacted by a community. Festivals are closely related to Ecology and environment. Now a days due to the unavailability of some species of creatures, plants and trees, many rituals have also been changed or avoided by the people. In the name of modernization and industrialization, we are neglecting nature .So, artificiality has been appeared in observation and performances of some festivals .Water pollution and degradation of wetlands have affected the community fishing. Due to extinction of some species of fish, the traditional food habits have also been affected. In this paper, it is tried to highlight the impact of ecological system in the celebration of the festival like Junbeel mela, Gosain Uliuwa mela, Neo Vaishnavite Festivals etc of Middle Assam.

Keywords: Ecology, festival, middle Assam

Fun Paper

Introduction:

Ecology is the study of the relationships between living organism, including humans and their physical environment. Environment denotes all the element process and condition around us along with their interrelation ships. It defines us the sum total of all the condition and influences that affect the development of life of an organism. Environment is very vital for us. We are dependent an our environment for Food, shelter; water, air soil and energy, fires, medicine, raw materials and so on. In spite of such importance of environment, we are degrading it in the name of development.

Festivals are closely related to the environment and ecology. Now a days, due to unavailability of some species of plants and tress, many rituals have also been changed or avoided by the people. In the name of modernization and industrialization, we are neglecting nature. So artificiality has been appeared in the celebration of some festivals. Water pollution and degradation of wetlands have affected the community fishing, which is a part of some festivals.

Festivals indicate a season of social mirth when series of performance of music, plays, feast or the like honorific celebrations of historical events, births or deaths of a hero or God are enacted by a community. R.J Smith states, " British and continental folklorists speculated that modern festivals were survival of ancient. Community's magical rules whose purpose to make the days grow longer, to expel winter, to appease Gods of the fields, forests and skies, and most especially to promote fertility, "Robert Briffault states the festivals are the most concrete expression of collective emotions and loyalties.

The folk festivals of Middle Assam are seasonal, calendric and some other festivals celebrated time to time by the tribes, non-tribes and the minorities. In this study the festivals of the Assamese Hindu communities and the Tiwas of Morigaon and Nagaon district have been tried to discuss in ecological context considering the assimilation of culture.

Objectives

The main objective of the study is to highlight the relation between festivals and ecological and environment and its impact in the celebration of the festivals in present day context.

Methodology:

The approach to this study is descriptive in nature based on observation. In fact, I am familiar with some folk festivals, the customs and traditions of the region as an inhabitant. Apart from my own familiarity and observation secondary sources include different articles or research journals etc.

Festivals and Ecology: Bihu Festival

Bihu is the main seasonal festival of the Assamese communities as long as the Tiwas of Middle Assam. In the Tiwa language Bihu is called as Pichu or 'Bichu' and the Magh Bihu is called Tamati or 'Makhpichu'. Kati Bihu is called as 'Khati Bichu'. The Bihu festival is not celebrated in the same day with the other communities by the Tiwas. They celebrate the Magh Bihu and Bohag Bihu on any Tuesday and Wednesday in the month of Maghang Bohag respectively. But this ritual has been changed by the plain Tiwas of Nagaon and Morigaon district and most of the people of this community now a days celebrate the Bihu festivals with the other Assamese Caste Hindus and follow their rituals.

Bihu is the festival which is assigned the utmost social importance by the people of Assam . The tradition of Bihu deals with practices related to cultivating the land and raising livestock. Thus the rituals and customs associated with it are seen by scholars as being closely linked to ideas about the promotion of agricultural prosperity, the transition of the seasons and the mode of living in a rice growing society in a tropical , flood plain ecosystem. The festival associated with the beginning of both the New year and crop planting season is the Bohag or spring time Bihu, which is held in the first month of Bohag (mid April) .Two other Bihu complete the annual cycle of Bihu festivals .One called Kati Bihu is held in October at the time when crops are growing and is of little festive significance , the other is the Magh Bihu ,and is linked with the end of the planting season .A connection between the sun, seasonality and agricultural reproduction would appear to have still permeated Bihu festivals in modern times. Although primarily identified with the dominant , Sanskritized Assamese Society ,parallel forms of Bihu are also found the various ethnic communities like Tiwas in Assam.

In the Bihu folk songs ,there are constant references of the season in which the festival is held.The temporal aspects of the festival consist of a specific period of time indicated by changes in the host landscape that can be clearly observed. Bihu is often identified as the time of year of the 'nahor flowers. Besides the 'nahar several other plants that flower in spring find regular mention in the Bihu songsketeki(Pandanus odoratissimus),bhebeli Iota(Paederia foetida) ,madhoi maloti(Hiptage madablota and bokul((Millsaps elengi) and it is their fragrance rather than their colour or form that is accentuated , for the fragrance is that is believed to contribute to the festive atmosphere. The lyrical

description of landscape has a deeper meaning in terms of the environment as it reflects a lived cultural experience of people in the landscape that plays host to the Bihu festival.

The main activities undertaken during the Kati Bihu are to plant Tulsi(basil, *Ocimum sanctum*) and to light lamps in the field. People in the villages of Assam light lamps as an act of reverence in order to obtain a good crop of rice and this is at a time of the year when supplies of rice are low.

The third of the triad of Bihu is the Magh Bihu,during the 'uttarayon Sankranti(the cusp between the months of Puh and Magh) and it coincides with the post harvest season that begins sometime in December. A fire ceremony is closely associated with Magh Bihu and this consists of burning temple like structures made of bamboo,straw and dried banana leaves in the empty harvested paddy fields .Offerings of food are made to the God of fire Agni .

The celebration of each of the three Bihu festivals at specific moments of the agricultural cycle indicates a link between these festivals and ecological functions It also points to an understanding of the cyclical nature of the seasons.

The first day of Bohag Bihu is known as Garu Bihu or the day of the Cattle.Cattle are dealt with in a ritualistic manner almost akin to that of worship;within the confines of the ritual space, cattle are given an elevated position and are viewed as auspicious. This ecological mode of existence has a direct bearing of cultural values and traditions. Birds and wild animals commonly found in the surrounding environment are often described in the Bihu songs The Bihu dances and other ritualized activities are regarded as important by the people in order to increase the fertility of the land. Plants and shrubs such as 'tora' (*Alpinia allughus*),patidoi(clinging dichotoma) and kochu are regarded as auspicious.

Mela Festivals and Ecology

Jonbeel Mela : Jonbeel Mela is the most significant seasonal festival observed by the Tiwas of Morigaon. Jonbeel is a famous wetland which is situated about 5kms away from Jagiroad Town. In the month of January during the Magh Bihu this fare festival helds.Jonbeel Mela is being carried traditional significance of barter system among the plain and the hills. Fishing in group on the occasion of Jonbeel Mela is a trend to the onlookers The group of people jump over barricaded water and start fishing with the help of tools like Polo and Juluki etc.

Gosain UliuwaMela: The Gosain Uliuwamela Festival plays a great role in the folk culture of the region and it reflects a distinct picture of Tiwa folk performing art (dance) ensuring Neo Vaishnavite influence in the celebration. The people carry the Simhasana or khatola traditionally to a public place or open field.

Barat Festival: Barat Festival has another significant festival of the Tiwas. In assamese Barat means fast, The ecological significance of the festival is people start Barat by offering a branch of banana, flower, country wine (zu) betel nut to the deities. The young men bring along with them the 'Barat Bird' ,which is a toy bird of bamboo or wood.

Bhaona Festival: The Committee Bhaona Festival of Charaibahi, Morigaon and The Hezari Bhaona Festival of karaiyoni, Nagaon are the two significant festivals of Middle Assam. The Committee Bhaona of Charaibahi is a unique,historical and traditional performance of Ankia drama having its own cultural significance. In this festival twenty to twenty four Ankia plays are performed on the same day in an interval of three years. The pandals for the Bhaona are made with bamboo, coconut tree leaves, straw etc. The artisans prepare the instruments like 'goda', bow etc using bamboo, cane, wood etc The eco-friendly atmosphere is a remarkable feature of the festival.

Besides these festivals different games and entertainments have remarkable place in the folk festivals. The buffalo fight, cock fight and egg fight are also arranged during the period of Magh Bihu.

Conclusion: The folk art forms and the festivals have flourished and contribute to the integrity of our society through the art and craftsmanship by the artisans using the raw materials from our surroundings. But due to the mishandling and lack of awareness we are destroying the ecological

system. Wetlands are polluted, bamboo and canes are decreasing. In the name of modernization we are adopting plastic culture. It is going to be reflected in the celebration of the festivals, which threats not only to the environment and ecological balance but also to our culture and traditions.

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