

# DIVERSITY AND INTEGRITY OF NORTH-EAST INDIA



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*Diversity and Integrity of North-East India* is a book of selected papers presented in the National Seminar on 'Cultural Diversity and Social Integrity of North-East India: Its Past, Present and Future', published by National Seminar Organizing Committee, Karmashree Hiteswar Saikia College, Guwahati-781022, Assam (India)

Date of Publication: 9th September, 2015

© : Karmashree Hiteswar Saikia College, Guwahati-22

Published by: National Seminar Organizing Committee, Karmashree Hiteswar Saikia College in Association with Bhabani Books, an imprint of Bhabani Offset Pvt. Ltd., Bhabani Complex, Hatishila, Panikhaiti, Guwahati-781026.

ISBN : 978-93-81139-05-9

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Price : Rs. 1199.00

Printed at : Bhabani Offset & Imaging Systems Pvt. Ltd.  
7 Lachit Lane, Rajgarh Road  
Guwahati-781007

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## EDITORIAL

It is my utmost pleasure and proud privilege to be associated with the Editorial Board as the editor of this ISBN book published on the occasion of the UGC sponsored National Seminar on *Cultural Diversity and Social Integrity of North-East India : Its Past, Present and Future* on 9<sup>th</sup> & 10<sup>th</sup> September, 2015 organised by Karmashree Hiteswar Saikia College. This is an edited collection of selected papers presented in the seminar.

The topic of the seminar is very much relevant to the present day scenario. The North-East of the Indian sub-continent boasts of bewildering ethnic multiplicity, bestowing on itself an equally mystifying cultural diversity. The diversity of cultures of North-East is very much significant for the national life of India. Some two hundred languages are spoken in the region and it itself is a testimony to the unique ethnic and cultural diversity. The North-East states of India share 98% of land with four neighbouring countries and attached only 2% of land with the main land of the country of her 4,600 km long boundary. There are questions that

often arise since long back in the inquisitive minds of people living outside the region such as what is North-East and Where is North-East? . Even for many people, North-East is not more than the land of mountains, rivers, rains, floods, tea, jungle and terrorists. So, eminent parliamentarian Hem Baruah once wrote, "North-East to most people is mentally a distant horizon like Bolivia or Peru, less known and more fancied".

Keeping this in view we want to break away from that prejudice and project North-East's rich culture to pave way for creating awareness and find ways and means for the new knowledge, new ideas, perspectives whereby people can discover the actual dimensions. The prime purpose of ours seems to be well set on its way, as we have overwhelming response from as many as 200 paper presenters from different parts of the country. This is a positive sign and it testifies to the participants' desire for exchange of ideas on an effective common platform, for academic discourse and research deliberation. The editorial board has painstakingly made selection of papers for the publication . Our sincere thanks go to all the paper contributors, the members of the editorial board and the college fraternity who have contributed in one way or the other. We are also thankful to Dr. Hemoprova Saikia and Dr. Amburam Gogoi for giving all support and guidance. We are thankful to Bhabani Offset for taking initiative to publish this work in time .

We apologise for any inconvenience caused and unnoticed errors. We hope the publication will be accepted widely by all .

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<i>ড° মৌচুমী ভাগৱতী</i>	সহযোগী অধ্যাপিকা, অসমীয়া বিভাগ, সোণাপুৰ মহাবিদ্যালয়
<i>ডলী ঠাকুৰীয়া</i>	সহকাৰী অধ্যাপিকা, অসমীয়া বিভাগ, সোণাপুৰ মহাবিদ্যালয়
<i>ড° জাকিৰ হুছেইন</i>	সহকাৰী অধ্যাপক, হিন্দী বিভাগ, কন্যা মহাবিদ্যালয়
<i>আব্দুল হান্নান</i>	সহকাৰী অধ্যাপক, হিন্দী বিভাগ, কন্যা মহাবিদ্যালয়

নমিতা দাস গুৰুং	সহকাৰী অধ্যাপিকা, বি, এইচ, বি, মহাবিদ্যালয়, সৰুপেটা, বৰপেটা
বিজু ৰাজখোৰা	সহকাৰী অধ্যাপক, অসমীয়া বিভাগ, কৰ্মশ্ৰী হিতেশ্বৰ শইকীয়া মহাবিদ্যালয়
দিগন্ত শৰ্মা	সহকাৰী অধ্যাপক, অসমীয়া বিভাগ, কৰ্মশ্ৰী হিতেশ্বৰ শইকীয়া মহাবিদ্যালয়
দীপ্তি দাস	সহকাৰী অধ্যাপিকা, ইতিহাস বিভাগ, দলগোমা আঞ্চলিক মহাবিদ্যালয়
দীপা ৰাণী দাস	সহকাৰী অধ্যাপিকা, অসমীয়া বিভাগ, দলগোমা আঞ্চলিক মহাবিদ্যালয়
গুনদা বড়ো	সহকাৰী অধ্যাপিকা, অসমীয়া বিভাগ, দলগোমা আঞ্চলিক মহাবিদ্যালয়
ড° মীনাক্ষী তামুলী	সহকাৰী অধ্যাপিকা, অসমীয়া বিভাগ, মায়ং আঞ্চলিক মহাবিদ্যালয়
ড° প্ৰাঞ্জলী মহন্ত	সহকাৰী অধ্যাপিকা, অসমীয়া বিভাগ, বটদ্ৰবা শ্ৰীশ্ৰী শংকৰদেৱ মহাবিদ্যালয়
ৰুমি দলৈ	সহকাৰী অধ্যাপিকা, অসমীয়া বিভাগ সোণাপুৰ মহাবিদ্যালয়, সোণাপুৰ
তাজেম আলী	গৱেষক ছাত্ৰ, গুৱাহাটী বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়
আবু স্খামা আহমেদ	সহকাৰী অধ্যাপক, শিক্ষা বিভাগ দলগোমা আঞ্চলিক মহাবিদ্যালয়
বিগু শইকীয়া	গুৱাহাটী
ড° মৌচুমী বৰদলৈ হাজৰিকা	উপাধ্যক্ষা, মুৰব্বী অধ্যাপিকা, অসমীয়া বিভাগ, কৰ্মশ্ৰী হিতেশ্বৰ শইকীয়া কলেজ

## Socio-cultural Identity and Phato Bihu of Dhakuakhana

Nipon Panging

*"Cultural differences should not separate us from each other, but rather cultural diversity brings a collective strength that can benefit all of humanity." Robert Alan, American writer, artist and social activist.*

Festivals offer possibilities for crystallizing, galvanizing and articulating local identities and have historically represented opportunities for local agents to act and influence their localized arenas<sup>1</sup>. India has cultural diversity of its own and many of its festivals are agriculture related and hence based on nature. The seasons of nature and agricultural works bring the festivity to the people. In Assam, Bihu is one such agricultural based festival and so it is celebrated by all the tribes and communities of the region. There are three Bihus celebrated at different times of the year - the Bohag or Rongali Bihu celebrated in spring, the Kati or Kongali Bihu celebrated in autumn, and the Magh or Bhogali Bihu celebrated after the harvesting of crops i.e. in winter. Bohag Bihu is the most important among the three Bihus.

People celebrate this Bihu with songs, dances and special cuisines. Apart from the distinctive observances of the festivals, some specific celebrations are also marked in integration by the composite culture in many parts of the state. The Phato Bihu of Dhakuakhana is such an example of unique regional festival with a distinct cultural heritage. People from all castes, creeds, religion and tribes joined the Phato Bihu at the open field of Mohghulisapori near the Charikoriya river and sing and dance under the trees to their respective tune simultaneously in the rejoicing and make it a symbol of socio-cultural harmony.

Festivals are the outward manifestation of the identity of the community and provide a distinctive identifier of place and people<sup>2</sup>. While festivals have a social dimension, they are also noted for their ability to become a vehicle for (re)establishing a sense of cultural identity, as well as reviving and maintaining traditional cultures<sup>3</sup>. To understand the reason that originally begets a festival, it is always essential to look into its historical setting. Located on the northern bank of river Brahmaputra, Dhakuakhana is surrounded by four main tributaries- Subansiri, Sampora, Korha and Charikoriya, and is inhabited by a variety of castes and tribes- Ahom, Chutiya, Mising, Sonowal Kachari, Kalita, Deoriana and Koibarta. At present, it is the sub-divisional headquarters of the Lakhimpur district. The ancient name of Dhakuakhana was Habung, which means a fertile land<sup>4</sup>. Sukapha, the founder of Ahom kingdom, in the earlier period settled at Habung but later abandoned it due to flood<sup>5</sup>. Historically Habung was ruled by the Kacharis and later by the Kalitas and Kayasthas<sup>6</sup>. Again we find mention about Habung in the Buranjis regarding Ahom king Sudangpha alias Bamunikonwar, where he was brought up by one Brahmin family of Habung<sup>7</sup>. During Ahom king Rajeswar Singha, a canal was connected for easy transportation and collection of levy and duty between Charikoriya and Korha rivers using the leaves of Betelnut trees (Dhakua) and from that time Habung is known as Dhakuakhana<sup>8</sup>. During the Ahom rule the internal and external traders mainly used

water transport and had to pay tax for the trade & commerce. The traders paid their dues to the officers of Ahom kings at the river banks and the bank of Charikariya river of Dhakuakhana was used for this purpose. The river bank where the officers of Ahom king assembled with the traders and collected taxes was called Phat<sup>9</sup>. They generally assembled at the Phat of Dhakuakhana in the month of Bohag, the festive season and invited the local people to celebrate the BohagBihuat thePhat and from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards Phat or PhatorBihu or PhatoBihu has been celebrated by the people of this region and later continued without the Royal patronage and it became their identity of regional culture.

The different tribes and communities like Ahoms, Misings, Deoris, Chutias, Koivartas, Kacharis, Kalitas, Koches join and celebrate the PhatoBihu spontaneously with zeal and zest in the last days of Bohag (May) for three days but earlier it was a week. PhatoBihu represents the social harmony as well as the cultural heritage of the region. The Bihu performers try to bear the originality of the PhatoBihu of the past through the costumes, songs, dances and musical instruments. They express agricultural life, productivity, love and romance, history, cultural life, social life, their sorrow, wants, exploitations, disasters, struggle, harmony through the bihu songs. Sometimes the misings and the deoris sing the songs in their own tribal languages besides Assamese.

PhatoBihu as a regional festival, has played a significant role in reflecting social harmony and the life and struggle of the people of Dhakuakhana. Earlier, there were no organizers of this festival and people from all castes, creeds, religion and tribes joined spontaneously. When they heard the sounds of *dhol, pepa* no matter in what they were busy with, it could be agricultural work or fishing or other, they rushed to the Phat in their immediate dress to join the bihu. This proves the fact that from the ancient times, PhatoBihu has always been a symbol of socio-cultural harmony and it bears the nature of peoples culture<sup>10</sup>.

Festivals provide a means of sharing and enhancing a

community's social and cultural values and today PhatoBihu becomes peoples culture for its identity-enhancing role with a minimum influence of commercialization. In the present times, this festival might have lost some of its inherent importance and again adds some new ideas to suit the present context and the reasons for which may be varied. Be it the influence of globalisation or the changing life style, political power or the annual wrecks caused by floods which has brought drastic changes to its topography. But, essentially the tradition remains unchanged and till today, PhatoBihu continues as a symbol of cultural heritage. From the year 1976, organizing committee was set up and a souvenir called Bihuan was published in the same year. Everyone can join the PhatoBihu and become a member of PhatoBihu organizing committee<sup>11</sup>. For the local people it becomes their unique identity and they have preserved the essence of this festival although the real form of the earlier PhatoBihu has undergone changes. Its natural traits have been preserved by the people of Dhakuakhana and celebrate it with utmost zeal and zest every year exhibiting an integrated and unique cultural identity.

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ISBN: 978-93-81139-05-9



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