THE PHAT BIHU OF DHAKUAKHANA, ASSAM:
A STUDY OF PERFORMANCE AS TEXT

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Chapter I

Introduction

Performing folk arts form an important category of study in folkloristics. The recent shift of focus from content to process in folklore studies has enabled performance-based studies to become an important medium in confronting issues of cross-cultural contexts. The various actions and representations of a performance construct and communicate meanings at different levels of life and living. It aids us to focus upon the present realities of cultural processes and provides a more complete context by which to understand the people and their cultural productions. As Abrahams says, a performance-centered study allows a blend of social and aesthetic impulses of culture and represents an affirmative understanding of it; it also permits a “separation of the politics and poetics of culture” (Abrahams 2002: 11-19). A performance can thus be infinitely described, analyzed, and appreciated just as a literary text can be read and understood from various perspectives.

As a form of performative art, festivals have always been an important part of culture and community life. They can be broadly termed as celebratory events, historically and traditionally rooted in a community’s culture, which provides sites of meaningful social connectivity and exchange. According to Stoeltje a festival is a cultural performance, which is scheduled at regular intervals, temporally and spatially bounded, programmed, characterized by coordinated public occasions, and heightened occasions of aesthetic expression. It serves the purpose of the articulation of the group's heritage and is a communicative situation actively engaging participants, presenting a combination of participation and performance in a public context.
Similarly Geertz opines that one motivation for participating in festivals is social interaction; a festival strengthens the identity of the group by bringing it together. The messages of festival reflect the shared experience of the group, it communicates about the particular society while telling a story which people tell themselves about themselves (Geertz 1973: 117-119). A festival thus provides opportunities to observe the communicative system of the culture, conveyed through semiotically complex performance events. They are crucial in facilitating social interaction and also strengthening the identity of the group by bringing it together.

Festivals are an inherent part of all social existence celebrated in different forms by people all over the world. In India, folk festivals are associated with agriculture and productivity. The social manners, customs, habits etc. are the principle elements with which these festivals are integrated. In Assam, Bihu is one such festival connected with the seasonal and agricultural cycle, and is an integral part of the Assamese cultural pattern. There are three types of Bihu celebrated by the Assamese people at different times of the year: the Bohag or Rongali Bihu\(^1\) celebrated in spring, the Kati or Kongali Bihu\(^2\) celebrated in autumn, and the Magh or Bhogali Bihu\(^3\) celebrated after the harvesting season i.e. in winter. Of the three, the Bohag Bihu stands as the main marker of the Assamese community. It is a unified form of the folk songs, dances, musical instruments of the various castes and tribes of people that became the inherent natives of Assam from time to time.

There are many folk festivals celebrated by the indigenous tribes in Assam related to the agrarian calendar; like the Boishagu\(^4\) of Bodos, Ali Aye Ligang\(^5\) of Misings, Bisu\(^6\) of Deoris, Baikhu\(^7\) of Rabhas and others. Apart from these...
distinctive observances of the festivals, some specific celebrations are also marked in integration by the composite culture in many parts of the state. Mention may be made of celebrations like the *Bhatheli*\(^8\) of Nalbari and Barpeta, *Bare Chahariya Bhaona*\(^9\) of Jamugurihat, *Shuwonri*\(^10\) of South Kamrup and Darrang area, *Joonbeel Mela*\(^11\) of Jagiroad etc. The Phat Bihu is also one such festival that is unique to Dhakuakhana, a place located in the remote south-east direction of the Lakhimpur district of Assam. This festival exhibits a singular kind of cultural display and integration, which is very rarely found in other regions of the state. It is in this context that we have made an attempt in this study to document, detail and explain the interconnections that exist between this traditional folk festival and the ideas of performance so as to present the various facets of the performance of the festival as text.

**Statement of the Problem**

Phat Bihu is a festival that is celebrated exclusively by the people of Dhakuakhana, and the performances showcase a unique cultural display and integration which have stood as a symbol of cultural harmony over the years. However, there are no written records about the origin of this traditional festival. But it is generally believed that it was propagated during the *Ahom*\(^12\) rule in the sixteenth century. There are numerous opinions offered by people as to the origins and manner of the celebration. Memory is the only force operative in the forwarding of such views. There are no authentic and written documents to judge these as facts or fiction. The modern form of Phat Bihu presents a rich tradition embedded in the folklore forms performed by the people belonging to the various communities. Therefore, it constitutes a vital source material
for a folkloric study which points out how they construct, represent and view their own selves in relation to the festival. This necessitates a systematic analysis of this unique folk festival which has become a part of the cultural identity of the people of Dhakuakhana. Also, in recent times Phat Bihu has lost some of its inherent importance owing to many interventions—natural and human. Devastating floods, which wreaks Dhakuakhana almost every year has seriously affected the lives of the various communities residing here. Poor economic conditions and other associated hardships have afflicted the life and culture of the people. Moreover, in the contemporary settings culture has become a fragmented, disengaged commodity for commercial consumption. It has become crucial to consider and understand the constituents of cultural production. To quote Metraux,

“Traditional feasts and festivals constitute, symbolically, a renewal of the past in the present, a way of recalling the origins—whether mythical or historical—of a community of men [sic]; they are occasions when cultural and national identity can be re-asserted and feelings of self-awareness and participation in common experiences reaffirmed…(Festivals) played an important role in the past and nowadays there is a new interest in their socio-cultural function as the quest for self-identity and self-assertion unfolds within modern societies.”

(Metraux 1976:7)

The above quotation marks two important aspects

- it shows the inherence of the estimation of festivals as vital to social and cultural (re)production
- it drives the notion that this does not encompass only the traditional festivals and societies.
Thus, in the present times it is important to understand the dynamics within the global public culture and the ways in which it operates in different group collectives. And in this context, we take into account the educated middle class, which have considerably grown in number in the post-independence era and who are ‘culture hungry’, to take Bennett’s term (Bennett 1999), and have intervened to reshape festivals like Phat Bihu putting greater emphasis on collective identity and consciousness. As a result, social relations have come to adapt and reinvent meanings in new forms of narration. Such intensified pressure contributes to the revival and revitalization of festivals, which act as a form of symbolic response to the experiences of rapid socio-cultural change. In the process a number of forces come into operation. While the logic of celebration is ideological and structural, the process of celebration is competitive and dialectical. As a public and participatory phenomenon, the celebration is unusually open to conflicting claims. Social rivals contend for power, prestige, and other objectives within the context of celebration as well as beyond it. In the last few years, Phat Bihu festival has become a kind of a commodity since the motive of the celebratory rituals has been changing in the course of time and space. As a local festival, it has reflected the life and struggle of the people of Dhakuakhana, and the harmonious integrity of its entire people in the face of every natural or simulated disaster. The tales of the history, culture, life, love etc. of the people of Assam as well as the regional people’s sorrow, wants, exploitations, disasters, struggle, harmony, etc. get reflected in the various performances. How is the festival being framed in the present times? What are the aims of the celebrations? How do the decision making processes govern the implications of the celebrations? In what way does the festival contribute to the continuing vitality of traditions? In what way has mass culture
affected the age-old tradition? How does cultural politics function within the periphery of the festival and how this in turn contributes towards identity formation? In the light of the above, and such other nuances of the celebration, it becomes more important in the present day context and space to make a systematic analysis of the Phat Bihu festival which has been influenced by various socio-economic and cultural factors. Hence, the present study has basically emphasised on performing arts as a discourse to denote broad conceptual parameters of the human activities which contribute to the artistic constructions of the community and which are critical for them in their historical development.

**Objectives**

The major objectives of this study are:

- To examine whether there is a link that exists between performance art and the concepts of performance in Phat Bihu festival.
- To highlight the several intellectual, cultural and social concerns which has developed within this festival among the local people.
- To focus on the role of this festival in developing the spirits of social resistance/harmony and cultural integrity of the local people.
- The study also examines the changing nature of Phat Bihu in the light of the new socio-economic, cultural and political conditions and how this has influenced the community life as a whole.
As we have already mentioned above, Phat Bihu is a unique festival of the people of Dhakuakhana which showcases a singular kind of cultural display and integration rarely found in other parts of Assam. In the absence of any written documents on the origin of the festival, one has to fall back upon the numerous opinions offered by people as to the history and manner of the celebration. Memory is the only force operative in the forwarding of such views. There are no authentic and written documents to judge these as facts or fiction. The modern form of Phat Bihu presents a rich tradition embedded in the folklore forms performed by the people belonging to the various communities. Therefore, it constitutes a vital source material for a folkloric study which points out how they construct, represent and view their own selves in relation to the festival. A systematic analysis of this unique folk festival which has been a part of the cultural identity of the people of Dhakuakhana becomes significant as such.

Also, in recent times Phat Bihu has lost some of its inherent importance owing to many interventions--- natural and human. Devastating floods, which wrecks Dhakuakhana almost every year, has seriously affected the lives of the various communities residing here. Poor economic conditions and other associated hardships have afflicted the life and culture of the people. Moreover, modernization and commercialization have transformed the consciousness of the communities. Tradition is fast disappearing and culture has become a fragmented phenomenon. There is a sense of cultural dislocation which has been brought about by rapid structural change, social mobility and globalization processes. For the modern day farmer, the festivals have lost significance as symbolic performance of agrarian rituals and feasts. As such, social relations adapt and reinvent meanings in new forms of narration. Such
intensified pressure contributes to the revival and revitalization of festivals, which act as a form of symbolic response to the experiences of rapid socio-cultural change. In the process a number of forces come into operation. While the logic of celebration is ideological and structural, the process of celebration has become competitive and dialectical. As a public and participatory phenomenon, the celebration of Phat Bihu is unusually open to conflicting claims. Social rivals contend for power, prestige, and other objectives within the context of celebration as well as beyond it. The festival has become a kind of a commodity since the motive of the celebratory rituals has been changing in the course of time and space. As such, the study tries to explore the variations in the nature of celebrations in relation to the changing conditions.

**Area of the Study**

As already mentioned, the universe of analysis is Phat Bihu festival which is a singular kind of a celebration. The physical area where it is held is Dhakuakhana. The celebrations take place at *Mohghuli Chapori* on the banks of the *Charikoriya* River. The festival space has been fenced off and converted by means of various structures and plantations. It focuses upon a central stage for the performances, the front stage for the audience and the back stage for the organisers and other groups of people. People from the neighbouring villages assemble on the festival ground and join in the merry-making. The villages within a ten-kilometer radius from the *Mohghuli Chapori* forms the geographical area categorized for the present study and the community as a whole has been taken for this study. We have taken into account a general view and understanding of the entire society for background information. However, with a view to obtain specific information, more emphasis was given on the field work done during the performance.
a) Dhakuakhana: A Regional Profile

   (i) Historical and Geographical Account

Although remote and secluded, Dhakuakhana on the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra is a historically renowned place. It is surrounded by four main rivers---Subansiri, Sampora, Korha and Charikoriya, apart from the many tributaries. The history of the place is mainly based on stories and legends. In addition to that, one can find mention of Dhakuakhana in some history books, in family histories, as well as the bronze plates discovered from time to time. However, the word ‘Dhakuakhana’ finds no mention in any history book. It has been assumed that Dhakuakhana was a part of the ancient Habung kingdom. Habung gets mentioned in history for a few noteworthy events. The principal among these is the stay of the first Ahom king Siu-ka-pha along with his followers in this area for a couple of years. Sir Edward Gait in *A History of Assam* has said that in early 13th century, Chaolung Siu-ka-pha, a Shan (Mong Mao, in the present day Yunnan province in China) prince began his journey with his followers, crossed the Patkai hills, fought and defeated the Nagas and reached the Brahmaputra valley in 1228. He moved from place to place, searching for a seat. In 1240, he moved to Habung and settled there. Gait mentions, “In 1240, this tract of country became flooded during the rainy season, so he left it and descended The Brahmaputra to Habung, where he spent two years” (Gait 1906: 42). But, Habung was a flood affected region and so Siu-ka pha was forced to leave Habung and finally establish his kingdom at Charaideo in the Sibsagar district of Assam. G.C. Boruah’s *Ahom Buranji* (1985) also testifies a similar view. Had Habung not been flooded, it would have had the distinction of being the Ahom kingdom. History also mentions the rearing of Ahom prince Sudangphpha known popularly as *Bamuni Konwar* in a Brahmin home at Habung (GohainBaruah 1976: 63). Surjya Kumar Bhuyan also in his
Deodhai Asom Buranjee (1988) tells us about the conquering of the Habung kingdom by Ahom king Suhungmuhung in 1526 A.D. During the reign of Swargadeo Pratap Singha the administration of the entire northern area from Subansiri to Bharali was ruled under the supervision of the Chetia of Habung (Gogoi 1968: 11). In The Background of Assamese Culture (1978) Rajmohan Nath mentions of the arrival of Ibn Battuta, the famous explorer, in Habung and his subsequent journey to China from Habung. He also mentions about the location of the place—“The kingdom extended to the west upto Subansiri river and included the present North Lakhimpur Sub-division and a portion of Majuli—the richest paddy growing area which the Bodos called Habang or vast land. The kingdom was called Habang or Habung and the people were generally known as Kaltas or Kalitas” (Nath 1978: 37). This Habung, full of history and legends, is known as Dhakuakhana today. There are no historical written records as such; whatever facts are known now is mainly based on the oral information passed on from generation to generation. One such account says that as there was no road access to Dhakuakhana in the earlier days, the royal officers had great difficulty to travel to this place for collection of duties and taxes. So, during the rule of the Ahom King Swargadeo Rajeshwar Singha (1751-1769), a channel was gouged out connecting the Charikoriya and the Korha rivers and the soil was used to raise the river banks. The betel nut tree leaves (known as Dhakua in the local language) were used to carry the soil to the banks, and hence the name Dhakuakhana, Khona in Assamese meaning ‘to dig’. So, we can assume that the name ‘Dhakuakhana’ originated only towards the end of the Ahom rule.

The present Dhakuakhana is located in the northern side of River Brahmaputra geographically situated between 27.60 to 27.35 degrees north latitude and 94.24 to 94.42 degrees east longitude. It is located on the foothills of the Himalayas, about 90
meters above sea level, and therefore there are no mountains in the region. But, Arunachal Pradesh is situated at a distance of only about 40 kilometers and hence the streams and rivers flowing down from the hills of Arunachal Pradesh have continually affected Dhakuakhana. There is the presence of a lot of water bodies here—the chief rivers being *Subansiri, Charikoriya, Korha* and *Sampora*, and a lot of smaller tributaries like *Daangdhora, Ekoriya, Laipooliya, Kherkota* etc.

(ii) **Ethnographic Account**

With a population of more than 200000, historically Dhakuakhana is renowned as the melting pot of a variety of ethnic tribes and castes. There are several castes and tribes having racial affinities to the Dravidians, Mongoloids, and the Aryans that have become its inherent inhabitants from time immemorial. They are *Ahoms, Deoris, Chutiyas, Kochs, Kalitas, Brahmins, Gosains, Sonowal Kacharis, Suts, Misions, Nepalis, Koibarttas, Marwaris, Biharis, Muslims, Motoks* etc.

The greater Dhakuakhana community comprises of the various ethnic groups of both castes and tribes, and thus forms a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious society. We find the synthesis of three traditions here viz. orthodox Hinduism, Vaishnava Sectarianism and Tribalism. These three traditions have been instrumental in moulding the social structure in a unique form displaying rigidity, flexibility, mobility and egalitarianism at the same time. The forces of modernism have further affected this plural structure in recent years. Economic conditions of people have been largely responsible in determining the social status of people. The society composed of the various castes and tribes follows patriarchy. However, like in the greater Assamese society, women are highly respected and enjoy an elevated social position.
Dhakuakhana is primarily an agrarian society. More than 80% of the total population is dependent on agriculture and other related activities. But since time immemorial it has been a flood affected region. The people have been facing immense hardships owing to devastating floods almost every year. It has become a routine particularly for the people residing on the river banks. Developmental works are minimal here and people face immense hardships all throughout the year. For these reasons, Dhakuakhana was an almost inaccessible area till recent times.

Owing to many such factors the banes of modern life has left Dhakuakhana untouched; the simplicity of rural life and traditional values are still to be found here. The tribal people still live in their Chaang Ghars and are largely associated with cultivation and weaving. Almost every home has a loom. The Muga, Eri, and Mulberry silk of Dhakukhana is famous world over. Traditional clothes are widely woven out of these three varieties and thus they have been instrumental in taking forward the most significant tradition of the Assamese community.

(i) **Social structure**

Any study on society requires a very detailed account of all the elements that constitutes the basis of its thought and action. Such a detailed study is beyond the scope of this small section on the social structure of Dhakuakhana. Here we shall deal with only some of the very basic elements concerning the same.

Cultures, customs and traditions in India vary from region to region. However, the social structure is mainly based on caste system, in which the society is divided into four main castes---Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. The Brahmanas are
priests and hold the highest wrung in the society. They are followed by the Kshatriyas or the warrior class. Next in the social ladder are the Vaisyas who are the merchant class and at the lowest level are the working class or the Sudras. Caste as a social group in Assam is mainly seen as a racial division and hence the practical functional castes are very few. This system is prevalent in Dhakuakhana too, and as we have discussed above, a fairly good number of ethnic groups and communities exist in Dhakuakhana. These include Ahom, Chutiya, Koibarta, Mising, Deori, Sonowal Kachari etc. Apart from these indigenous communities, people belonging to other communities of the country like Marwari, Bihari, Nepali also forms a sizeable chunk of the society. The communities have a homogenous existence since olden times, and whatever little distinction was prevalent in the earlier days, has been allayed by higher education and other progressive forces to a great extent in the present times. Intercaste marriages are acceptable nowadays, and the organisation of the family is patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal. The lineage is determined through the male, that is, it follows the patrilineal system; the authority lies with the male head of the family thus entrusting it a patriarchal status. And it is patrilocal because after marriage a bride comes to reside in the father’s house of the bridegroom. However, women have an elevated social position and enjoy equal status with men.

With a literacy rate of over 75%, the people here are highly cultured. Though it is economically an underdeveloped region, it is much more advanced in education than in many other such areas of Assam. The educational and cultural development here is chiefly because of the initiatives of the people, and not of the government. Many people from the region have become famous personalities of the state. Of those, mention may be made of noted litterateur Homen Borgohain, educationist Taburam
Taid, Dulal Chandra Baruah, Jogananda Borgohain, Hemen Gogoi and a host of others.

(ii) **Selection of the Study Area**

The various communities of Dhakuakhana have their own festivals, both religious and festive in form. Of all the festivals celebrated in Dhakuakhana, Phat Bihu occupies a very special place. It is the living manifestation of the multihued culture of the place. There are many opinions offered by people as regards to its origin. Commonly, the origin of Phat Bihu festival is traced back to the days of Ahom rule. Some say it has its origin even before that. As has been already mentioned, Dhakuakhana is a low-lying area and so inundation by floods has been an annual event since time immemorial. The only means of communication during the early days was the boat. Before the Ahom rule, because of such reasons there was no stable agricultural society there. The flood-affected people, who sought shelter on the raised land by the river bank, were a heterogeneous mix of people from all sections of the society and were mostly refugees. And during Bohag, i.e. the Assamese new year, they celebrated Bihu and indulged in dance and merry-making together. However, there are no written historical records that can be found regarding its roots. As for the etymology of the term Phat Bihu, it is commonly opined that during the Ahom times, thousands of people gathered on the banks of Charikoriya River to celebrate the Bihu festival. Due to this huge congregation, there used to be cracks (known as Phat in the local language) on that land. So, it is known as Phat Bihu. Some say that, a section of the people segregated (Phat which in Assamese also means to separate) themselves from the high-caste society and started celebrating Bihu in their own way. Others say that during the merry-making of Bihu, the drums used to crack, the clothes worn by the
dancers used to get tattered, and voices of the singers broke due to continuous singing. That is why it is known as Phat Bihu. There are numerous such opinions and explanations offered by people. This Phat Bihu is said to have been propagated as a festival during the Ahom rule in the sixteenth century; but we do not have records of continuity in its celebrations. The present day celebrations have a history of about four decades with occasional breaks in between, and it involves a three-day extravaganza where there are displays of various ethnic and community performances. Communities of the entire area of Dhakuakhana such as the Mising, Deori, Ahom, Chutiya, Kaibartta, Sonowal Kachari, and others are its inherent partakers. Essentially, the festival stands as a symbol of cultural integrity and harmony and exhibit a unique cultural identity.

**Review of Literature**

In order to give a comprehensive idea to the research questions, this study comprises of various literatures that discuss the concept of festivals and performance in general.

Festivals have been defined by Falassi in the classical cultural-anthropological perspective as “a sacred or profane time of celebration, marked by special observances” (Falassi 1987:2). Festivals celebrate community values, ideologies, identity and continuity. Perhaps more reflective of the modern approach to naming events as festivals, Getz defined them as “themed, public celebrations” (Getz 2005:21). Pieper believed only religious rituals and celebrations could be called festivals (Pieper 1965:7). Numerous forms and themes of festival are possible, and the term festival is often misapplied and commercialized. There is no widely acceptable typology that has emerged.
Bakhtin deals with the event of the carnival as a central form of celebration. He notes that the carnival is not a performance, and does not differentiate the spectator from the performer. All people who take part in the carnival "live it" but it is not an extension of the "real world" or "real life" but rather, as Bakhtin puts it, "the world standing on its head", the world upside down. The carnival for Bakhtin is an event in which all rules, inhibitions, restrictions and regulations which determine the course of everyday life are suspended, and especially all form of hierarchy in society.

Bakhtin offers four categories of what he calls the "carnivalistic" sense of the world:

- Free and familiar interaction between people: in the carnival normally separated people can interact and freely express themselves to one another.
- Eccentric behavior: behavior that was otherwise unacceptable is legitimate in carnival, and human nature's hidden sides are revealed.
- Carnivalistic misalliances: the free and familiar attitude of the carnival enables everything which is normally separated to connect – the sacred with the profane, the new and old, the high and low etc.
- Sacrilegious: the carnival for Bakhtin is a site of ungodliness, of blasphemy, profanity and parodies on things that are sacred.

For Bakhtin, these categories are not abstract notions of freedom and equality, but rather a lived experience of the world manifested in sensual forms of ritualistic acts that are played out as if they were a part of life itself. Bakhtin notes that the carnival was confined in time, not in space. It penetrated the house as well and did not exist just in the public sphere or town square. But the town square and its adjacent streets were the central site of the carnival, for they embodied and symbolized the carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1997:2-78). He further argues that the popular-festive culture, “the chorus of laughing people”, is charged with a creative ambiguity “to express their
criticism, their deep distrust of official truth, and their highest hopes and aspirations” (Bakhtin 1984: 11-49).

Geertz contends that the concept of culture is essentially based on semiotic interpretations. Partly as a response to earlier anthropological schools like functionalism, structuralism, evolutionism who undermined the cultural aspect, and partly resorting to Parsonian understanding of a systematic human nature with the biological, psychological, social and cultural constraints, Geertz brought the “culture” on the spot with an acute emphasis on meaning. He borrows the distinction between the two largely from T. Parson and E. Shils without further elaborating upon the nuances between the two. Culture is “the ordered system of meaning and of symbols” and social system is “the pattern of social interaction.” The first is characterized by “logico-meaningful integration” and the latter by “causal-functional integration.” Culture is the “fabric of meaning” that guides people’s experiences and actions, whereas the social structure is “the form that action takes, the actually existing network of social relations.” We need to make this distinction to account for the times of social change when there is incongruity between the two, which leads to social conflict. Geertz concludes that semiotics and symbolic action is the means for interpreting cultures effectively, since cultures are symbolic systems, and actions are symbolic in themselves. In the discussion of spectacle as cultural performance, Clifford Geertz has suggested that such a performance is a collectively authored “text” about the particular society, a story people tell themselves about themselves. It is always an ‘emergent’ phenomenon, an interplay of communicative resources, individual competence and the goals of the participants in particular situations (Geertz 1977:83-148).
Turner focuses on ceremonial objects carrying rich metaphoric meanings. He maintains that the past is symbolically portrayed through dominant sacred symbols in celebratory rituals. These symbols stand for many things and thoughts at once: they are “multivocal”, speaking in many ways at once; “multivalent”, having various meanings or values; and “polysemous”, having or being open to several or many meanings. These “meanings” has to be revealed in order to understand the nature of a celebration. Turner describes the rituals as storehouse of meaningful symbols by which information is revealed and regarded as authoritative. Ritual then refers to ritual performances involving manipulation of symbols that refers to religious beliefs (Turner 1982: 32-77).

Similarly, Tedlock treats the relationship between performances and text as a field for experimentation. Texts that were taken down in the era of handwritten dictation and published as prose are reformatted and/or retranslated in order to reveal their poetic features. An ethno-poetic score not only takes account of the words, but silences, changes in loudness, tone of voice, the production of sound effects and the use of gestures and props (Tedlock 1972:21-27). In addition, the poetry of ethnic communities outside the western tradition, which is categorised as ethnopoetics, have been documented and analysed by several scholars.

Skorupski also traces out and assesses the implications which conflicting approaches have as to the meaning of ‘ritual belief’ and its relation to ‘ritual action’. He analyses the concept of ritual, paying particular attention to notion of ritual as symbolic and as communicative action (Skorupski 1976:88-96). Besides, Fine notes the critical issue of translating performance style into print as the focal point. The scholar examines the implications of performance theory for text making and constructs a model of an ideal performance-centred text based on aesthetic field study (Fine 1994:5-56).
Furthermore, Grimes makes a foray into the hermeneutics of ritual action, making attempts to orient the “would-be interpreter” in the field for two reasons:

- ritual is the hardest phenomenon to capture into text;
- anthropologists have written about ritual on the basis of participant observation. The function of any sign system, linguistic or otherwise, is to correlate the two planes of content and expression and each such correlation of the two constitutes a sign (Grimes 1995:11-46).

For Bauman, the way people communicate during specific situations and settings are based on certain reasons that have meaning to the members of the groups and communities. Every performance as such, differs from every other depending on the context and the group in which the performance occurs. Bauman further explains that the emergent quality of performance rests in the interplay of communicative resources, individual competence, and the goals of the participants within the context of particular situations. Therefore, the nature of a performance depends on what goes on during a performance and everything that surrounds it (Bauman 1984:86-114).

Manning propounds four central features of celebration. Firstly, celebration is performance, i.e. the dramatic presentation of cultural symbols. Secondly, it is entertainment and done for the fun of it. Thirdly, celebration is public; it socializes public meanings through the enactments. And lastly, it is participatory. He further states that the phenomenal growth of leisure in contemporary societies has provided one of the more obvious contexts for celebration to flourish. However, in present times, the understanding of leisure has to be taken into consideration with regard to
another contemporary phenomenon---the transition from producer to consumer capitalism (Manning 1983:4-19).

In a similar manner MacCannell underscores the central importance of “cultural productions” in the world. According to him these are dramatic presentations encompassing the following:

- A model (an embodied ideal, or ‘mode for’)
- An influence (themes, norms, and motivations deriving from the model)
- A medium (the communicative context of the model and influence---in our case a celebration)
- An audience (fans, constituencies, followers)
- A producer (those who create, control, direct, and enact the presentation)

In MacCannell’s terms, celebratory symbols are the prototypes that subsume the social experience of the celebrants, and cast it in dramatic form, and communicate cognitive and evaluative influences. Celebration articulates and modifies power relations and in examining these, the relation between the “producer” and the “audience” becomes crucial (MacCannell, 1976:20-35).

For Metraux, “Traditional feasts and festivals constitute symbolically a way of recalling the origins---whether mythical or historical---of a community of men. They are occasions when cultural and national identity can be reasserted and feelings of self-awareness and participation in common experiences reaffirmed” (Metraux 1976:29). And according to Farber, there is a central tension from which celebrations derive social significance. Reality is excluded from what Farber calls the “official town ideology”---a social identity and value system based on what is considered “good, stable, natural, and true.” This ideology is symbolically constructed by
extending the past into the present, showing that one’s heritage is an ongoing timeless experience (Farber 1983:60-89).

Festival studies, in both theoretical and empirical terms, are marked by tightly defined boundaries of their immediate social context, with an emphasis upon closed spaces, fixed times, indigenous social actors, internal regimes and symbolic contexts, and bounded rituals, opines Picard and Robinson. Festivity also incorporates symptoms of social life crisis, and audience are often mobilized and manipulated for the political and symbolic purposes of festival organizers and stakeholders. In this context, they become an important social vector in the reformulation of ethnic, regional, diasporic, or national narratives and identities (Picard & Robinson 2009: 3-16).

Writings on the tradition of celebrating Phat Bihu have found place in the various issues of the souvenir Bihuwan published during the festival over the past few years. These small articles on Phat Bihu are found in a collection Dhakuakhanar Phatbihu (2000) edited by Sibaprasad Gogoi and Ismail Hussain. The writings mostly deal with the experiences and views of the local writers regarding the celebrations. The history of Dhakuakhana and mention of the Phat Bihu festival can be found in Itihaxe Goroka Dhakuakhana (2001) by Dr. Jitram Kalita; while Dimbeswar Gogoi’s Deha Garakile Preme (1982) is a collection of the various Bihu songs that can be found in the area. Phatbihur Itihax aaru Oitijyo (2010) and Rongali Bihur Oitijyo Bisar (2010) by Ismail Hussain, have tried to focus on the festival to some extent. Hussain in Phatbihur Itihax aaru Oitijyo, has attempted to trace the origin of the festival, but may be due to lack of data, he seems to have based his observation on certain assumptions. He narrates mainly about his experiences of being a part of Phat Bihu over a span of about a decade. The other book by the same author, Rongali Bihur
Oitijyo Bisar, discusses the tradition of the Rongali Bihu festival of Assam, and Ismail Hussain in this context makes mention of the Phat Bihu of Dhakuakhana also. Sporadic articles on Phat Bihu can also be found in Bihu editions of popular Assamese magazines, periodicals, and newspapers.

The literature review revealed certain gaps in the studies on Phat Bihu. All these writings considerably lack systematic analysis from the conceptual and theoretical perspectives of cultural studies. Most of these works are scattered and do not focus on efforts to construct a multi-featured performance oriented discourse. A serious academic inquiry is absent in majority of the writings on Phat Bihu. Given this scenario, a systematic and analytical documentation of this local festival assumes tremendous importance.

**Methodology**

Research methods may be understood as all those methods and techniques that are used for conducting a research. It involves the processes of scientific enquiry and systematic analysis. The thesis aims at studying the various facets involved in the celebration of the unique festival of Phat Bihu. As such, it is important to make a methodical approach to understand the various nuances of the celebrations.

For this, basically the following methods have been applied in the collection, analysis and interpretation of the data. Since the study is on performance, it is essential to comprehend the celebratory rituals and the role it plays in the life of the entire community. Therefore, the observation method has been primarily adopted to see and understand the performances and the performance context. The ethnographic method
is employed to observe and understand the community’s life and culture. Again, through the evolutionary method the origin, growth and evolution of the Phat Bihu festival has been prepared. Unstructured interviews under the discourse method have been conducted with members of the community with regard to the festival in general and the performances in particular, in order to understand their attitude towards the festival and the celebratory symbolism.

The data for the study have been collected from both primary and secondary sources.

The field being the primary source of the study, extensive fieldwork has been conducted in order to gain a firsthand and in depth knowledge about Phat Bihu. From a range of available research methods used in field study investigation, the observation method, especially participant observation method, discourse method, ethnographic study are primarily used for the collection of the required data. These methods are particularly used during the performances of the folk events concerning the Phat Bihu festival. Apart from this, audio-visual aids are also used to record the discussions (concerning the tales, legends, songs, personal narratives) as well as the practices and performances associated with the celebration. These utterances and the performances reflect the dynamics of the worldview and culture of the communities associated with the festival through the ages.

The secondary data comprises of published and unpublished written sources such as books, manuscripts, journals, magazines, newspaper reports and scholarly articles. The survey of literature in the preceding pages is indicative of the same. The secondary data also includes the various web searches related to the topic under study.
Organisation of Chapters

The work has been divided into six chapters including the conclusion.

The first chapter under the title ‘Introduction’ offers a general discussion on performance studies. It briefly discusses the functions of folk festivals and outlines its impact on life. This follows with the statement of the problem, objectives, and a historical, geographical and ethnographical description of the area of study. In order to construct the basis of a scientific inquiry, the chapter then enumerates a review of literature and the methodology used.

The second chapter ‘Folklore, Text and Performance Approach’ discusses the development of the concepts of text in folkloristics, and performance, and this is made in terms of the enunciation of the definition(s), performance-centered approach and the implications for the text.

The third chapter ‘History and Tradition of Phat Bihu’ deals with the festival of Bihu in general, and then focuses on the historical background as to the celebrations of Phat Bihu. There are various nuances inherent in the performances and this chapter dwells at length on the intriguing phenomena and emphasizes on the attributes of culture dynamics rooted in these traditions. Apart from this, a comparative exercise has also been undertaken to study Phat Bihu in relation to a few other forms of concerted celebrations existent in various parts of Assam.

The fourth chapter ‘Impact of Mass Culture on Phat Bihu’ discusses issues of mass culture in the contemporary era and its influence on society. Mass culture has been largely responsible for the transmutation of culture and traditions in the present times.
This chapter focuses on the tendencies of commoditization that has crept into the festivity of Phat Bihu, and analyzes the outcome of this incision into the age-old tradition.

The fifth chapter ‘Phat Bihu: Politics of Celebration and Identity Formation’ delineates how festivals provide examples of culture contestation and become sites of latent tensions between festival as art and economics, between culture and cultural politics and discusses how all these in turn works as important determinants of identity formation.

The sixth chapter ‘Conclusion’ sums up all the chapters and gives the concluding remarks and observations.

**Chapter II**

**Folklore, Text and Performance Approach**

The existence of folklore depends on its social context, which may be either a geographic, linguistic, ethnic, or occupational grouping. It cannot exist apart from a structured group. This enables the distinction of three types of correlation between the social context and folklore: possession, representation, and re-creation. The literal interpretation of the term “folklore” sets up the first type of relationship. Folklore is the sum total of knowledge in a society, “the whole body of people’s traditional beliefs and customs.” (Ben-Amos 1971:6). Secondly, the communal possession can be expressed by the group at large in “collective actions of the multitude,” as Frazer defines it, including public festivities, rituals, and ceremonies in which every member of the group partakes (Frazer 1919:vii). And lastly, folklore can be recreated in
customs and observances that each individual chooses to, provided all the people in the society adheres to and abide by them. It represents a particular mode of collective customs, rituals and other observances as represented in the mode of thought that underlies them. It is thus not an aggregate of things, but a process—a communicative process, to be exact.

In this sense, folklore becomes a performative social process. It is an artistic action which involves creativity and aesthetic response, both of which converge in the art forms themselves. The approach of folklore and ethnography underwent a shift during the 1960’s. From mere collection, folklorists tried to synthesize and comprehend peoples and their creations in their own terms. Such recreations initiated the performance turn in folklore. Through performance human beings expressively and aesthetically create their cultural worlds through interaction with others and convey meaningful messages to those around them. Performance is applied as an analytical tool to examine human behavior. The performance aspect of folklore involves a social interaction through art and differs greatly from other modes of speaking and gesturing. This distinction is based upon sets of cultural conventions, recognized and adhered to by all the members of the group, which separate folklore from other non art communication. The locus of such conventions marking the boundaries between folklore and non folklore can be found in the texture, text, and context of the forms, to apply Dundes’ three levels for the analysis of folklore. He says,

“In most of the genres (and all those of a verbal nature), the texture is the language, the specific phonemes and morphemes employed. Thus in verbal forms of folklore, textural features are linguistic features… The study of texture in folklore is basically the study of language (although there are textural analogs in folkdance and folk art), (as such) textural studies have been made by linguists rather than by folklorists…The
text of an item of folklore is essentially a version or a single telling of a tale, a recitation of a proverb, a singing of a folksong. For purposes of analysis, the text may be considered independent of its texture. Whereas texture is, on the whole, untranslatable, text may be translated…The context of an item of folklore is the specific social situation in which that particular item is actually employed. It is necessary to distinguish context and function. Function is essentially an abstraction made on the basis of a number of contexts. Usually, function is an analyst’s statement of what (he thinks) the use or purpose of a given genre of folklore is” (Dundes 1980:22-32).

One view of performance theory concentrates on interpreting texts so that the artfulness of a particular depiction may be embodied on the paper and the aesthetic disposition of the performance act are to be discovered according to local understanding of language, speech patterns, genre, etc. This method is called Ethnopoetics and Tedlock, Hymes, Rothenberg, Bauman, Sherzer, Gossen and others credibly demonstrates that artful oral texts can be represented on the page as poetry according to rhythms, repetition, etc., by transcribing with meticulous details the pauses, loudness, and patterns of speech. We may regard this approach to poetics as a kind of anthropology of art.

The shapers of the performance theory persistently reiterate the significance of context. According to Bauman, “The kind of focus on the doing of folklore, that is, on folklore performance, is the key to the real integration between people and lore on the empirical level” (Bauman, 1972: 33). Ben Amos says, “In sum folklore is artistic communication in small groups” (Ben Amos, 1972, 13). Essentially, the event, setting and the group in which a folklore action happens form the parameters of context.
Songs and music have occasions when they are performed. Although such conditions may have other purposes, like keeping folklore to recreation and ritualistic pursuits, they also make a division of the art from nonart in cultures that usually lack a complex segregation of time, space and labour. In a sense, they provide a spatial, temporal, and social definition for folklore in culture. Thus, the performance situation, in the final analysis, is the crucial context for the available text. The particular talent of the artist, his mood at the moment of his recital, and the response of the audience may all affect the text of his performance.

The thrust on context seeks to interpret folk ideas, customs, tales and songs in their integration with the life, thought, language, and action of the people that perform, observe and act upon them in their own society and time. A valid interpretation, therefore, is an interpretation of a text in context. The contextual approach does not assume an opposition between text and context; rather it supposes that folklore exists in a contextual state. Each situation is a unique integrated whole and the entire context is the text. While no two contexts are alike, people follow cultural rules and social patterns that are discoverable and that reveal the dynamics and poetics of folklore in society.

The significance of performance theory lies mainly on meaning in a specific context and a specific culture. As such, it puts less stress on the text. Both the historical study “across time periods” and the comparative study “across cultural boundaries” are replaced by descriptions of folklore performances in their present setting. The performance theory locates stories to a specific event and accredits the narrator who undertakes responsibility for the performance. Each performance is distinguished, and hinges on a performer’s assumption of liability for the emergent event. Folklore
becomes in this way not a disembodied "text" but rather a rich convergence of performer, situation, setting, audience, and society. Bauman notes, "Oral literature (until now) has been conceived of as stuff – collectively shaped, traditional stuff that could wander around the map, fill up collections and archives, reflect culture, and so on" (Bauman 1986:2). He further recognizes that the symbolic forms we call folklore have their primary existence in the action of people and their roots in social and cultural life. The texts we are accustomed to viewing as the raw materials of oral literature are merely the thin and partial record of deeply situated human behaviour. One’s concern should be to go beyond a conception of oral literature as disembodied super organic stuff and to view it contextually and ethnographically, in order to discover the individual, social, and cultural factors that give it shape and meaning in the conduct of social life (ibid:23-24). Divorced from the context, texts become insubstantial, incomplete and less meaningful, so goes the argument. A text is like a fabric, entwined together with the situation of a given performance, the audience, the performer, the social group, and culture of the performer and the audience. Performances are patterned in culturally-specific and cross-culturally variable ways (Fine 1994:69). Thus, the meaning of a particular performance can only be understood by studying it in context, integrally related to its immediate social, psychological, and physical surroundings.
Chapter III

History and Tradition of Phat Bihu

Festivals have always formed an important part of social and community life. They represent a greater component of the traditional expression within the community and are largely made up of a complex of folkloric phenomena. Festivals are periodic times for people to come together and interact ceremonially and festively in celebration. The celebration may be for the change of one season to another, one stage of life to another, or simply a successful accomplishment.

Festivals in India
The civilization of India is predominantly Hindu in character, while the religion described as Hinduism is an assortment of beliefs and customs traceable to many sources---Aryan and non-Aryan, Indian and non-Indian, modern and ancient. It has been characterized as a series of locally or tribally different cults that never integrated or fully harmonised, conscious and tolerant of one another, resting on common assumptions and similar in content, everywhere in accord with tradition and usage, resistive to organization into a larger whole but tied into a certain unity through reflecting a more or less common civilization. Hinduism is thus absorptive and has an outlook which is found expedient in dealing with people with various grades of development---from those believing in a super soul to worshippers of stones and trees (Goswami 1967: 19-27). The Indian way of life has certain features which have deeply penetrated into the culture of the land. Festivals in India are not only means of reprieve from the daily grind, but are imbued with deep inner significance that characterizes a multifaceted celebration. Predominantly an agricultural country, the manners and customs, habits and usage, the religious rites, songs and dances etc. of the rural agrarian populace constitutes the main elements of a traditional celebration in India. The collective life, civilization, culture, and religious traditions are so entwined with the festivals that it reflects the social life of the entire community. And it is beyond any dispute that festivals and celebrations have their birth and growth in the changes in nature, religion, the ever changing circumstances of human life, and the joy of agriculture and production.

**Bihu Festival in Assam**

Assam is situated in the north-eastern part of India. It is largely a hilly territory with plains on either side of the river Brahmaputra, which figures prominently in the
folklore and mythology of the region. Historically, the people of the north-east are considered closer in culture to south-east Asia including Thailand and Myanmar, than south Asia including the Indian sub-continent. The culture of Assam is traditionally a hybrid one, developed due to cultural assimilation of different ethno-cultural groups under various politico-economic systems in different periods of history. Like in every society, in Assam also there are different specified time-frames for festivities. The celebrations have been grouped and divided based on many factors; like the changes in seasons, evolution of life cycle, commemoration of historical events or the birth and death of great saints and personalities, socio-cultural tradition, geographical location, populace, lifestyle etc. The state has primarily been an agricultural society known for producing paddy, tea and jute. Though Hinduism is the predominant religion, Hindu and Vedic thought intermixes with tribal ways of living to create the distinctive folk forms of Assam. As in the other parts of the country, folk festivals here too are rooted in agriculture and productivity and are associated with the beginning and the end of the planting season.

Like many such community festivals, Bihu is the main marker of the cultural pattern of Assam and is linked to the annual agricultural cycle of the region. The rituals and traditions of this festival are related to the fertility rites and are observed either in the pre-harvesting or post-harvesting period. Based on this, Bihu is of three types:

- the festival associated with the beginning of the agricultural season in spring is the **Bohag or Rongali Bihu**,.

- the festival observed during autumn is known as the **Kati or Kongali Bihu**, and
that celebrated at the end of the harvesting season in winter is the *Magh or Bhogali Bihu.*

Bihu as a folk festival was actually a community celebration created by various agricultural tribes. Under the patronage of the *Ahom* kings and royal officials it became the national festival of Assam. All the three kinds of Bihu are associated with agriculture and productivity and each of them recognizes a different agricultural cycle of the paddy crop. The accompanying beliefs and rituals show the relation of the festivities with the pre-harvesting and post-harvesting times: *Bohag Bihu* with the onset of the harvesting season, *Kati Bihu* for the growth in agricultural production, and *Magh Bihu* at the end of a fruitful harvest. Astronomically, *Bohag Bihu* is associated with Vernal Equinox, *Kati Bihu* with Autumnal Equinox, and *Magh Bihu* with Winter Solstice.

**Phat Bihu Festival of Dhakuakhana**

Phat Bihu festival is a traditional celebration of Dhakuakhana. It is a regionalized form of *Bohag Bihu* which has its own individual characteristics. Like *Bohag Bihu,* Phat Bihu was also celebrated during the first seven days of the Assamese *Bohag* month in earlier times. But nowadays it is normally celebrated towards the end of the *Bohag* month. There are no historical records as to the origin of this festival, but the celebrations are generally traced back to the days of Ahom rule. According to local perspectives, the festival got widely propagated during the Ahom rule, but it has its origin even before that. As this Bihu song says:

*Pokhila ura di ur o nasoni*

*Pokhila ura di ur*
Rojaru aagor phatbihukhonit

Nepabi piritir oor.

which means,

“Dance like a gliding butterfly, O my nasoni (female dancer)

Dance like a butterfly

You won’t find an end to love and affection

In Phat Bihu that has its advent even before the king.”

There are numerous opinions offered by the local people as to the etymology of the term *Phat*. Given below are some of the prevalent views---

- It is said that during the Ahom times, thousands of people gathered on the banks of Charikoriya River to celebrate the Bihu festival. Due to this huge congregation, there used to be cracks (known as *phat* in the local language) on that land. So, it is known as Phat Bihu.

- Some say that, a section of the people segregated (*phat* which in Assamese means to separate) themselves from the high-caste society and started celebrating Bihu separately. That is why it is known as Phat Bihu.

- Yet others say that during the merry-making of Bihu, the drums used to crack, the clothes worn by the dancers used to get tattered, and voices of the singers broke due to continuous singing. Hence, the term Phat Bihu, *Phat* in Assamese also bearing the aforementioned meanings.

- The name of the British official Sphat Green is also associated by some with Phat Bihu. They say that when Green visited Dhakuakhana he was welcomed
with *Bihu* performances. Thereafter, the name Sphat transformed into *Phat* and from that originated the term Phat Bihu.

- During the Ahom rule, a group of Bihu dancers went to *Rang Ghar*\(^{17}\) in Sibsagar to perform *Bihu*. But they were barred from performing there, and so this group from the north bank of the Brahmaputra segregated (*Phat*) from the others and started celebrating Bihu separately. Later on this Bihu came to be known as Phat Bihu.

- It is also contended that once there was a draught in the area. There were cracks (*Phat*) on the fields and there was no production of crops. So, in order to appease the rain Gods the people from the various communities gathered and together performed their respective songs and dances associated with fertility and production. Subsequently, this came to be known as Phat Bihu.

- Considering the symbolism of fertility and productivity associated with majority of the folk festivals, the implication of sexual connotations also in the word *phat* cannot be completely ignored.

- The origin of Phat Bihu celebrations is also linked to the *Haarhi* temple\(^{18}\) near Dhakuakhana. The caste and tribes of all the nearby areas were closely associated with the temple. The people who came from faraway places to visit the temple mingled with the local populace and they used to indulge in dance and merry-making sometimes together and sometimes apart. In this way the tradition of Phat Bihu originated according to some local views.

- Another widely accepted view says that the term *Phat* is a *Tai* (language of the Ahoms) word, and according to *Ahom Lexicons* and also the *Hemkosh*\(^{19}\), it literally means a place near river banks where people assemble for trade and commerce as well as royal collection of duties. During the olden days, people
from all communities assembled on the Charikoriya river bank for routine business and payment of royal taxes (as water transport was the only means of communication then), and during Bohag or Rongali Bihu, they celebrated the festival together. Consequently, it came to be known as Phat Bihu, i.e. Bihu celebrated on the phat or river bank.

Eminent litterateur Homen Borgohain says, “Phat Bihu is a distinctive festival of Dhakuakhana. We heard of Phat Bihu from our father when we were small children. There are numerous Mising villages in and around Dhakuakhana. Every year during Bohag Bihu the Miri (Mising) youths came in groups to celebrate Bihu on the banks of Charikoriya. Thousands of people from nearby villages assembled to watch the performances. This Phat Bihu went on for seven days and seven nights. Not only the Mising, but also the other castes and tribes of Dhakuakhana like Ahom, Chutiya, Koibartta etc. participated in this community festival…” (Borgohain 1995: 79-80).

Dimbeswar Gogoi, a local college teacher, opines in this connection that during Rongali Bihu large groups of young men and women gathered on the Charikoriya Phat to celebrate Bihu. And hence it came to be known as Phator Bihu (Bihu of the Phat). As the rural illiterate folks have the tendency to simplify things, so in pronunciation the ‘r’ sound got omitted and consequently it came to be known as Phato Bihu among the local populace (Gogoi 1999: 42). Jitram Kalita, another native of Dhakuakhana says in a similar vein that since Dhakuakhana is a low-lying area, inundation by floods has been an annual event from time immemorial. The only means of communication during the early days was the boat. Before the Ahom rule, because of such reasons there was no stable agricultural society there. The flood-affected people, who sought shelter on the raised land by the river bank, were a heterogeneous mix of people from all sections of the society and were mostly
refugees. And during Bohag, they celebrated Bihu and indulged in dance and merry-making together forgetting all the sorrows and the individual and collective differences of religion, caste, creed, tradition and language. The Ahoms called this Bihu as Pha-tai Bihu. In Ahom terms Pha meant people from the hills, and it also meant ‘refugees’. Tai on the other hand meant ‘people’. As the people of the region like the Ahoms, Deoris, Chutiyas, Mising, Khamtis, Koibarttas etc. were temporary residents and they participated in Phat Bihu in large numbers, we can assume that the history of the celebrations goes back to the years before the 16th century, but the term Phat Bihu gained coinage in the 16th century A.D. (Kalita1999:19-21).

Evolution of Phat Bihu

There are no records as to continuity in the celebration of Phat Bihu. Nevertheless, it is widely assumed that this Bihu gained much popularity during the Ahom reign. However, in the course of British rule in India, there was political turmoil in the entire country which affected this small region on the north bank of the Brahmaputra also. There were intervals in the celebrations during the turbulent times due to many reasons, be it political, social disturbances or natural disasters as floods and earthquakes. It was only from 1976 onwards, owing to the efforts of many enthusiastic people, that it is being observed in Dhakuakhana at fixed intervals every year and in due course has taken the present day form.

Celebratory Features

In earlier times, Phat Bihu was celebrated for seven days and nights as it is just another form of the Saat Bihu. The present form of this Bihu is a three-day extravaganza where one can be a part of a huge gathering of thousands of people from all sections of the society, in Mohghuli Chapori on the banks of Charikoriya River.
Earlier it used to be held on the 7\textsuperscript{th}, 9\textsuperscript{th} or 12\textsuperscript{th} day of the month of Bohag, but nowadays the celebrations normally start on the second Friday of the month of May and continue till Sunday. On the first two days, there are on stage performances by the various Bihu groups---children, maidens and married women, men---from all tribes and communities. These are judged and the best ones are awarded on the final day. The third day starts with a cultural procession, which is of course a more recent addition to the festivities. The procession comprises of a portrayal of the multi-coloured rich Assamese culture. After the procession, there are performances in open surroundings under the trees, which is known as Mukoli Bihu\textsuperscript{22}. Each group performs surrounding a tree each. Before the performance starts, obeisance is paid to the trees by wrapping a Gamusa\textsuperscript{23} around it. Performances take place in a completely natural environment, and all people irrespective of caste, creed, and religion wholeheartedly participate in the celebrations thus obliterating all forms of boundaries. One can see spontaneous, natural, whole-hearted and harmonious participation of a heterogeneous mass of population. This is the main attraction of the entire celebratory process and is the symbolic representation of the original Phat Bihu festival. After that there is an open meeting, and in it the winners are awarded with prizes. With it, the three day festivity comes to an end.

The subsequent sections discusses the composition of the Phat Bihu committee, the significance of the Phat Bihu songs and dances, the cultural procession, the fair and the market, the relationship of the Mising and Deori communities with Phat Bihu, and ends with a comparative analysis of this festival with a few other regional community festivals of Assam.
Chapter IV

Impact of Mass Culture on Phat Bihu

The term ‘culture’ is an all-inclusive term and broadly refers to the “language, beliefs, values and norms, customs, dress, diet, roles, knowledge and skills”, and all other things that people learn to make up the way of life of any society (Browne 2006:3). Although there are many aspects of everyday life which are shared by the majority of the members of a society, different conceptions and definitions of culture also
operates within the general approach. The differentiation lies mainly in the aspects of folk culture, high culture, and mass, popular or low culture.

We quote below extracts from Browne to distinguish between these various forms of culture---

“Folk culture is the culture created by local communities and is rooted in the experiences, customs and beliefs of the everyday life of ordinary people. It is ‘authentic’ rather than manufactured, as it is actively created by ordinary people themselves. Traditional folk music, folk songs, storytelling and folk dances are passed on from one generation to the next by socialization and often by direct experience” (ibid: 17)

“High culture is generally seen as being superior to other forms of culture, and refers to aspects of culture that are seen as of lasting artistic or literary value, aimed at small, intellectual elite, predominantly upper class and middle class groups, interested in new ideas, critical discussion and analysis and who have some might regard as ‘good taste’.

High culture is seen as something set apart from everyday life, something special to be treated with respect and reverence, involving things of lasting value and part of a heritage which is worth preserving. High culture products are often found in special places like art galleries, museums, concert halls and theatres. Examples of high culture products include serious news programmes and documentaries, classical music, the theatre, opera, jazz, art films, and what has become established literature, such as the work of Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, or Shakespeare, and visual art like that of Monet, Gauguin, Picasso or Van Gogh” (ibid: 62-63).
“Mass culture, sometimes called popular culture or low culture, is generally contrasted with high culture. This refers to everyday culture---simple, undemanding, easy-to-understand entertainment, rather than something ‘set apart’ and ‘special’. Mass culture is seen by many as inferior to high culture. Such aspects of culture are a product of industrial societies. They are aimed at the mass of ordinary people, but lack roots in their daily experiences as in folk culture, and are manufactured by businesses for profit rather than created by community itself reflecting its own experiences of daily life” (ibid: 77).

The so-called cultural practices that expose the bare lifestyles of a population, more so in the socialist nations, through modern communications and electronic media, are illustrations of mass culture. A mass culture is carried to individuals, rather than arising from people’s daily interactions, and therefore lacks the distinctive content of cultures. It has been largely responsible for the transmutation of culture and traditions in the present times. These are registered in the consequential social and cultural trends. This chapter focuses on the inclinations of materialization that has insinuated the festivity of Phat Bihu, and examines its consequences affecting the age-old tradition.

The chapter starts with a general discussion on culture, then making a distinction between folk, high and mass culture. We then proceed on to a discourse of the process of tradition, globalization, culture and commodification. The following sections deal with the transition of Bihu from amidst nature to the modern surroundings, the historical context of the contemporary Phat Bihu celebrations, the festival organization and management, the changing nature of its celebrations over the years,
further establishing its link with tourism, tradition and cultural identity. This ensues with discussing more aspects of the commoditization of culture linking all to the celebration of Phat Bihu.

The overview of the historical context from which this festival has originated, highlights the existence of a particular imagery of the region, which, is still in use and is driving the projection of Dhakuakhana’s identity in its relation to outsiders as a place of cultural homogeneity. The traditions fabricated in the recent times enacted through festivals, “rather than being merely commodified and spectacular events geared to tourist consumption are instead loci of dialectics where distinctive narratives and ideologies come to be expressed through performative enactments” (Picard & Robinson 2009:6). Finally, from the analysis of the intersecting imageries of this festival, it becomes clear that Phat Bihu is a powerful symbol, which far from producing a unifying narrative, mobilizes the different imageries and meanings, being able to communicate different things to different people.

Phat Bihu: Politics of Celebration and Identity Formation

Popular culture today is not concerned with questions of cultural or aesthetic value; they are rather more interested in power and the place of such culture within the wider social formation. Broadly speaking, it encompasses the power relations operative in a
society. Celebrations transform places from being everyday settings into temporary environments that contribute to the production, processing and consumption of culture, concentrated in time and place.

The chapter opens with a general discussion of culture, politics and identity. The context of memory and commemoration is brought in thereafter, which can be understood both from a political and psychological standpoint. The political perspective contends that memory and celebrations are primarily related to a sense of connection and identity. It attributes festival observances as incentives affecting community sentiment. On the other hand, the psychological approach reiterates the individual and shared urge of a society to transcend traumatic experiences through commemorative events. Only a combination of both the political and the psychological, can aid a better understanding of the phenomena of celebrations.

The way in which celebration like Phat Bihu articulates and modifies power relations has been our special focus here, which involves examining the political (in the broadest sense) relationship between “audience” and “producer.” Conscious decisions regarding community and ethnic representation become areas of contestation both within the community and between the community and the presenters. This study identifies three periods of differing modes of representation of performances in the public arena of the Phat Bihu festival. During the first period, that started from the period after independence in the late 1940’s, individuals in communities prepared for the festival by staging whatever was at hand. The second mode of representation followed in the wake of the revival of the celebrations, beginning in 1976, which introduced a more formalistic and organizational aspect to it. The third mode of representation involves the present day festivities which are creating distinctly contemporary work, but in the process is challenging the hegemonic grip of the older
forms of representation. Conscious decisions are taken regarding the mode of representation of the community, and the individuals within it choose for self-representation. These choices frequently contribute to power play and identity construction. Although like all festivals, the celebration of Phat Bihu remains in a continuing flux, a duality, however asymmetrical, could be observed between progressive and conservative forces, between the competitive strengths of relatively powerless social elements and their relatively powerful opponents. The festival in this way not only represents, but also promotes, dynamic political processes, including the realignment of forces and interests within the body politic.

Chapter VI
Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore the various layers of meaning transmitted through the celebration of the annual festival of Phat Bihu in Dhakauakhana. The
survey of the historical substance from which this festival is regarded to have originated focuses on the existence of a kind of an idealistic representation of the place, which still prevails and projects Dhakuakhana’s identity in its relation to outsiders as a place loaded with hardships and environmental hazards, and simultaneously, that of a harmonious unified existence. Furthermore, we have also contended that even though the practices portrayed through Phat Bihu today are significantly commodified and events displayed for tourist consumption, but these traditions are also very much the sites of deliberation where stimulating narratives and aesthetics are communicated through the performances.

We have attempted to look at memory and commemoration both from a political and psychological prism. The political perspective asserts that memory and commemoration is connected primarily with a sense of community unison and identity. This refers to commemorative activities as specific societal agendas influencing public opinion. On the contrary, the psychological approach stresses on the individual and collective urge of a society to overcome past traumas through observation of memorial days and commemorative events. A compound of both these two factors, the political and the psychological, gives a better understanding of the phenomena of celebrations.

In the present study we have sought to describe how a historic festival event can contribute to a continuing sense of community identity in the face of pressures of change associated with the condition of post-modernity. It has been observed, that the collective identity depicted in Phat Bihu is not a mask, or a cosmetic feature that is only used for socio-economic gains during the festival. Although, we may agree that one dimension of it as commodity has been exploited for economic gain which obviously have been enhanced by aspects of globalization, but other dimensions are
very much a part of this cultural resource and is a site of their life struggles. This work has shown that the festival has been used as a way of defining the community’s continuity in ever-changing circumstances, and as a way to confirm identities and legitimacies in the current process of transition and restructuring of the society. Phat Bihu originates spontaneously as an authentic expression of a living local community possessing a special value and cogency.

Another aspect of this research was to explore the influence of mass culture on the festival in the context of globalization, developments that have taken place specifically with a tourist audience in mind. Although debates relating to authenticity and artistic integrity continue apace in the academic literature, it is clear from the discussion that the socio-cultural impacts of festivals and their role in regeneration might currently be the most significant issues for those directing or participating in the festival and its management. Changes in society have always resulted in changing the ways of the practices. Like any other event, Phat Bihu has also been always exposed to a relative degree of influence from different interest groups. In such circumstances, there is always a mediation and remediation within the performing community. In case of the performatory rituals of Phat Bihu, we have found that an implication of place is built not through legend or reconstitution of the ceremony, but in a resolute endeavour to endure the celebration as a channel to bring in an emblematic arrangement of a continuum with the earlier days.

To conclude, Phat Bihu festival of Dhakuakhana has endured through good and bad times in the community. The theme that binds the celebrations together is their recreation of a legendary past. In the present times, the celebration has lost some of its
inherent importance, the reasons for which are varied. Nevertheless, the festival is a space in which different internal dynamics and oppositions come to life by the performance of distinctive narratives and values thus affirming the role of communicative performance as integral to the complex of creations and conventions which are fundamental to the existence, perpetuation, and survival of humans as social beings. The festivities become a huge text and carry with it a multileveled context in which a large number of social correspondences and subjectivities could be observed. The festival has been the basis of all social identity and development, and the cultural heritage is the endowment that each generation has received and passed on. Protecting and managing this cultural heritage jointly with the communities has contributed to the extension of group solidarity identity, and legacy.

Notes:
1. The festival associated with the beginning of the agricultural season in spring is the **Bohag or Rongali Bihu**. It is associated with Vernal Equinox and the rituals and beliefs are related to the onset of the harvesting season.

2. **Kati or Kongali Bihu** is associated with the Autumnal Equinox and is celebrated for the growth in agricultural production.

3. **Magh or Bhogali Bihu** is associated with Winter Solstice and is celebrated at the end of a bountiful harvest.

4. **Boishagu** is the springtime bihu of the Bodos. They worship the supreme deity **Bathou** or Lord Shiva during this festival. The festivities go on for many days.

5. The **Misings** have their seed-sowing festival known as **Ali-ai-ligang or Ligang** in short. They begin their cultivation during the winter, on the fertile river banks thrown up by the rivers, but they observe the **Ligang** festival in the first week of **Phagun** month (i.e. mid-February), several weeks before the Assamese **Bihu**. The Misings start **Ligang** on a Wednesday, the day being associated with the Goddess of Rice.

6. The **Deori** tribe calls their bihu as **Bisu**. Like the Misings, they start their festival on a Wednesday and the festivities involve a period of seven days of unlimited joy and merrymaking.

7. **Baikhu** is the harvest festival of the **Rabha** community celebrated during spring. The worship is observed to please the goddess for a good harvest and it symbolizes hope and desire.

8. **Bhateli** is an ancient festival associated with pastoral productivity celebrated in parts of Lower Assam. Although there are many beliefs associated with the origin of the celebrations, they concur in that it is a type of ritual connected with the sky or sky God Indra (Hindu God of rain).

9. **Barechahariya Bhaona** (Vaishnavite plays) is performed in the Jamugurihat area of Sonitpur district, and has a history of more than two hundred years. It is celebrated every five to six years, and is a cultural marvel wherein around twenty one plays are staged simultaneously and watched by a crowd of more than a hundred thousand drawn from various parts of Assam and beyond.

10. **Shuwonri** is same as **Bhateli** and is celebrated and called so in the southern Kamrup area. The rituals are similar but with a little variation.

11. The **Joonbeel Mela** is a three-day community fair held at the weekend of **Magh Bihu** at a historic place known as Doyang Belguri, five kilometers from Jagirroad in Marigaon district of Assam. During the occasion a huge market is held. Communities and tribes like Karbi, Khasi, Tiwa, and
Jayantia come down from the hills with products and exchange their merchandise with the local people in a barter system.

12. The Tai Ahom people are the descendents of the Tai people who came from Mong Mao in the present day Yunnan Province. A small group of people accompanied their prince Sukapha into the Brahmaputra valley in 1228 and ruled the area for six centuries.

13. Mohghuli Chapori is the present location of the Phat Bihu celebrations. A Chapori is a large belt of alluvium on both sides of the banks of a river.

14. Chaang ghar is a house built on stilted bamboo poles and raised from the ground. The Mising and the Deori tribes are mainly found to reside in such houses as they inhabit the areas near the river banks.

15. Muga silk is the product of the silkworm Antheraca assamensis endemic to Assam. The larvae of these moths feed on som (Machilus bombycina) and suolu (Litsaea Polyantha) leaves.

16. Eri silk is the product of the domesticated silkworm, Philosomia ricini that feeds mainly on castor leaves. Ericulture is a household activity practiced mainly for protein rich pupae, a delicacy for the tribal people. Resultantly, the eri cocoons are open mouthed and are spun.

17. Rang Ghar means the house of entertainment. It is a two-storied building which served as the royal sports pavilion for the Ahom kings and nobles. It is situated in the Sivasagar district of Assam, the erstwhile Ahom capital.

18. The Harhi Thaan or Gokhanighar as called by the locals is a historical temple located at Harhi, five kilometres east of Dhakuakhana, and was established during Ahom days.

19. Hemkosh published in 1900, is the first etymological dictionary of the Assamese language compiled by Hemchandra Barua. It is still published by Hemkosh Printers and is considered to be the standard reference of the Assamese language.

20. One of the many meanings of Phat in Assamese is the bank of a river. Charikoriya Phat is the riverside by the Charikoriya River.

21. Rongali Bihu celebrates the beginning of the Assamese New Year according to the Hindu calendar and also the sowing season of rice. It starts on the domahi (the junction of two months) of the Assamese Chot and Bohag months, and is celebrated for seven days involving seven phases of celebratory rituals. Therefore, it is also known as Saatbihu.
22. *Mukoli Bihu* is the gathering of young men and women in the open fields during the *Rongali Bihu* celebrations for performance of Bihu songs and dances.

23. *Gamusa* is a traditional Assamese cotton towel offered as mark of respect.

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