Chapter-IV

Impact of Mass Culture on Phat Bihu

Introduction

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).

Handoo defines,

“By mass culture we mean modern mass produced artefacts, a kind of industrial renewal of old traditions shared and circulated in an industrialized society by written, oral or other means of mass communication”.

(Handoo 1998: 5)

Popular culture thus involves mass-produced, standardized and short-lived products, sometimes of trivial content and seen by some as of no lasting ‘artistic’ value, largely concerned with making money for large corporations, especially the mass media. Popular culture might include mass circulation magazines, extensive coverage of celebrities, television soaps and reality TV
shows, dramas and thrillers, rock and pop music, video games, blockbuster feature films for mass market, etc. Such culture is largely seen as passive and unchallenging, often fairly mindless entertainment, aimed at the largest number of people possible.

Within this broad context of culture, scholars have attempted to deal with the difference between modern urban culture, which is highly changeable and influenced by technological developments, and the traditional, long-standing customs of populations which are only minimally affected by urbanization. The transition from producer to consumer capitalism has strikingly redefined the ways and means of human life. In this scenario, it becomes important to differentiate between the fast growing popular mass culture and traditional folk culture. Let us begin by examining the nuances of tradition in human society.

The Process of Tradition

In this discourse of tradition we have taken the cue mainly from Cashman *et al* who contends that tradition is an ever changing phenomenon involving a continuous process of creating and recreating. Elements of the past are used to meet our needs in the present and our hopes for the future. In the course, tradition becomes our own, leaving our marks. Art, craft, communication, performance, and folklore--- all these may be taken as the marks of tradition, but at the same time they are autobiography, a manifestation of the self as constructed in the shaping and reshaping of tradition. Thus, the fundamental concern of culture is the relationship between the individual and tradition,
implicit in any study of humanity, and most explicit in the contemporary study of folklore.

In the course of time tradition has been defined in many ways. Our focus here would be on two characterizations---tradition as process and tradition as resource. Tradition as process is, in Glassie’s terms, “volitional, temporal action” and “the means for deriving the future from the past” (Glassie 2003:192). Such a formulation foregrounds the agency of the individual and frees the notion of tradition from its associations with stasis. The antonym of neither change nor creativity, tradition as process depends on both and “flowers in variation and innovation” (Glassie 1993:9).

In addition to tradition as process, we also need to be able to talk about tradition as the accessible raw materials, the handed-down knowledge and ways of knowing, with which an individual may go to work. If tradition is a process not unlike recycling, tradition as resource comprises those things available for recycling. Again, tradition does not force itself upon anyone---some will make more extensive or more competent use of the collective resource than others---but the resource is as pervasive as it is malleable (Cashman et al 2014: 6-7).

Glassie points out that the English word “tradition” denotes, through its Latin etymology, a handing on of an object from one person to another. This brings in the problematic notion that any alteration in the object during or after the transfer amounts to tradition breaking apostasy. If this were true, there would be two choices for the individual---that between the faithful but repressive path of replication and preservation, or the liberating but irreverent path of rebellion.
and deviation (Glassie 1993: 34). For T.S. Eliot, tradition cannot be reduced to mindless repetition, nor is unprecedented novelty the highest goal; inspired creativity is only possible through working within a tradition, both a process and a resource that is not inherited but acquired only through great labour. The poet or artist serves as a catalyst introduced to established elements, recombining and transforming them in such a way that the existing order is altered, proportions adjusted, even if only slightly (Eliot 1948: 232-234). For Noyes, the work-around for the limiting implications of tradition is a reconsideration of what is handed from one generation to the next. The most important transfer is not of objects or property, but of responsibility, in conscious reference to Richard Bauman’s concept of performance as assuming responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence. “That hand-to-hand transfer we may take as a metaphor for the transmission of metaknowledge along with the practice itself: what it means, how it is to be used, everything that is shaven off when it is packaged as a product or an entry in a database” (Noyes 2003:248). Here is a performance-inflected vision that reconciles tradition as a process and tradition as a resource.

Glassie finds both Eliot and Noyes’s formulations agreeable, but he stresses more on experiences with folks from fieldwork and takes their accounts as the guiding principle. For example in Turkey the word for tradition is gelenek, and for the Turkish artisans it works as “not of passing things along, but of breathing in the air.” Glassie explains this sense of tradition as follows:

“You live in a cultural environment, and the air you breathe circulates through you to emerge in actions that are yours alone but can be called
traditional because you created them out of the general experience of life in some place. Your works will be like those created by others who breathe the same air. Generally I find Turkish artisans acknowledging their masters reverently but saying they taught themselves, taking in the air of instruction, then exhaling in their own way, refining their art through self-directed practice. The Turkish concept feels freer, kinder on the will, being centred, not on the act of transfer, but on the act of creating unavoidably in the atmosphere of influence”.

(Glassie 1993:529)

Inhaled, exhaled, and transformed, tradition is thus both a resource used by the individual and a process enacted by the individual.

In this consideration of tradition so far, we find that the individual is an artful recycler who constructs new possibilities out of available handed-down raw materials, meeting present needs; individuals thus shape tradition, performance by performance.

Cashman et al argues that with both individual agency and the collective atmosphere of influence in mind, another conception of the individual we may wish to pursue is that of a proposed and performed subjectivity in contrast to the conception of the individual as a unified, natural, essential entity or category. In this conception of the individual, there is no self except in relation to others, to past precedent, and to ambient discourse. The individual self is a discursive construction subject to variation depending on context, a recursive but changeable negotiation that depends on handed-down resources and models for expression---texts and ways of creating texts, both verbal and nonverbal. Just as we have come to appreciate that, say, ethnic identity or indeed gender is neither
essential nor fixed but subject to ongoing negotiation through interaction, it follows that the performed self may be the only one there is and probably the only one any one of us will ever get (Cashman et al 2014:5)

Globalisation, Culture and Commodity

The complexity of the social structure of a society sets in a greater need to establish oneself culturally as being integrated to varied hierarchically constituted classes within society. Culture, in such a footing, has always situated itself as an agency to institute perceived difference on the basis of inclusion and exclusion. Serious or high culture as opposed to mass or popular culture simply transforms the variations existent in modern societies that, while supposedly classless and egalitarian, nevertheless are highly hierarchically built. For example, having an inclination for certain forms of music or expressing a preference for certain films still distinguishes one as belonging to a kind of cultural elite, the political and economic elite, the rising or descending part of the middle classes, or the working class.

Our daily lives—including the thought processes—are so much governed by our culture that it becomes very difficult to detach ourselves from it for an empirical exploration. The interpretation of “popular” as something “known by the people, and applauded by them” would not suffice this discourse. The traditional folk culture has to be distinguished from modern day popular and mass culture. In today’s time, traditional culture sustains itself comparatively only in limited societies that have not been touched by global mass culture in its distorted form as tourist attraction, and, also in societies which have made
conscious attempts to resist the attractions of mass culture. Such folk cultures are often revived as a purposive attempt to regain some form of cultural identity after they had all but yielded to global mass culture.

As Horn observes, while certain respectability is accorded to folk traditions, popular and mass culture has been denoted as something unproductive and primitive, unworthy of any intellectual or critical attention until recently. The typical ‘elite’ reaction to mass culture has always been deprecatory. The marginalization of the intellectual elite and their concept of ‘high culture’ results in the increasing dismissal and contempt of traditional culture. It was in the 1970’s that the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham instituted a course of action for the recognition of popular cultures and youth subcultures. They emphasized on the creativity and subtlety of popular culture. At the same time, Neo-Marxism also registered an exploration of the oppositional quality of popular cultural forms and their disruptive apportion of aspects of the capitalistic commoditized culture, in obvious opposition to the reticent and often hostile attitude of official cultural policy towards many forms of Western popular culture in the communist countries. Nevertheless, the examination of mass culture in the sixties, mainly by neo-Marxist critics, was at once drawn to what was perceived popular, and highly critical towards what was perceived as manipulative and disempowering in a predominantly American film and pop music culture. Both these attitudes have become even more pronounced as mainly American culture began to dominate the global scene. The question that they attempted to answer was: To
what extent is our ‘mass culture’ one of manipulation and shallowness, or one of choice and contentment? (Horn 2009: 113-114)

Horn goes on to contend that manipulation has been a key feature of ‘mass culture, but one should not overlook that those who are supposed to be manipulated often find very creative ways of using the material offered by ‘mass culture’ in a way not intended by those who may want to manipulate them. Based on our knowledge of these social phenomena, it is both possible and necessary to determine the use to which they are put by groups or individuals (ibid: 116). As colonialism played a part in its own disruption, the advent of modernity subverted many of the values which fostered it. The tremendous growth of leisure in contemporary societies produced one of the more obvious contexts in which celebration started flourishing. In the modern sense leisure carries a particular connotation: it implies the interval that is set apart from work, spatially as well as temporally, and over which the individual rather than society exercises control. Modern leisure is regarded as the premium for work and is thus held to be the right occasion for expending and enjoying income obtained from work. This understanding of leisure points to another contemporary phenomenon—the transition from producer to consumer capitalism (Manning 1983:6).

The florescence of celebration in contemporary societies is truly striking and is the focus of our investigation here. Throughout both the industrialized and developing nations, new celebrations are being created and older ones revived on a scale that is surely unmatched in human history (Manning 1983:14).
Celebrations are established on an inexplicable abstruseness, its dynamism in the modern world therefore comprises an additional contradiction. Manning remarks,

“The celebrant takes ‘time out’ from practical affairs and ordinary routine, and does so openly, consciously and with the general aim of aesthetic, sensual and social gratification. Yet such conduct flaunts both the hallowed Western work ethic and the many kindred ideologies, political as well as religious, advanced elsewhere in support of development and modernization” (ibid: 28).

Cultural critics across the globe assert that they have strived to create a uniform thinking in this regard. The flourishing of the global economy has taken culture into its stride that has lead to the creation of a worldwide commodified culture. In the recent times, festivals have lodged in a remarkable place as constituents of structured domestic and international mass consuming, to such proportions that one can clearly see the emergence of a phenomenon called festival tourism. Festivals thus, whether as traditional moments of social celebration or as constructed and highly orchestrated events, have been incorporated into the sweeping reserve of products that people want.

Picard et al states,

“Since the late 1960s, a steady increase in the number of newly created festivals in all continents has been noted. Some with long histories have been rediscovered, reinvigorated and reinvented while others have been created, often as a response to a myriad of social, political, demographic and economic realities”

(Picard et al 2009: 9).
The explanation for the recent proliferation of festivals is complex, but in part relates to the response from communities seeking to reassert their identities in the face of a feeling of cultural dislocation brought about by rapid structural change, social mobility and globalization processes (De Bres & Davies 2001: 333). Moreover, as Long et al have suggested, for growing diasporic communities, festivals, carnivals and melas provide important moments of visibility and occasions of concentrated celebrations of identity beyond the confines of their ‘host’ communities. Simultaneously, the proliferation in the number of festivals also indicates the sense of crisis in conditions where recognized systems of symbolic progression are tested by the harsh actualities of current social, economic, and political situations (Long et al 2004: 5). Commoditization hence, as both an operator and an upshot of globalization, have a consequential role to play in the re-fashioning of social relationships, producing new economies, audiences, communicative networks and structures for the processes of exchange as practiced within a festival context.

In the recent years the correspondence between culture and celebrations have chiefly pertained to a mechanistic and even theoretical way, and in general, have held back from analytic examinations. The discipline and discourse of economics has been the main impact and dominant themes have been adopted from it to look into the management and economic effect of festivals. In this sense, Picard et al remarks,
“... festivals (often as a sub-set of events) are described and discussed as ‘products’ that can be ‘purchased’ and ‘consumed’ by festival visitors and participants. The web of social relations on which the festival organization is based is mainly conceived of from a management perspective: how to involve volunteers; how to market and image festivals; how to deal with health and safety issues; how to ‘produce’ social coherence; how ultimately to make an ‘economic impact’ and generate ‘profit’. While there is a certain social relevance, and indeed, inevitability, regarding such approaches, it is important to recognize the capitalist, neo-liberal ideologies and contexts from which these emanate. Despite the dominance of such models in contemporary academic festival literature, human relations---the essence of any festival---cannot (or should not) be reduced, nor confined, to a consequence of political action and to a utilitarian model of individual behavior. Such approaches are more akin to a political programme seeking to mould social relations in terms of societal and economistic ideals rather than establishing an epistemology that aims to understand what is going on when people celebrate festivals”.

(Picard et al 2009: 17-19)

Beside managerial and economic literature on festivals, various anthropological and sociological schools have for a long time been involved in studies of various derivable festive situations including cultural performance, ritual, sacrifice, celebration, pilgrimage, play and war (Picard et al 2009: 19). Approaches to these experiences share the necessity of having to define a limited time and space frame in which a multitude of social interactions, aesthetic signs and narrative discourses can be observed. Within this however, defining festivals and their typology with any precision is problematic, and to an extent will always fall short of corresponding realities (Falassi 1987: 72). The understanding of these observations often sways between two theoretical
poles. One, based on Durkheim’s idea of collective consciousness (Durkheim 1976: 92) enacted through festive play and rhythm, and the other stressing the multivocality of ritual performance (Turner 1982: 45), and the polyphony of voices in power relationships manifested through the festival frame (Bakhtin 1984: 98). The basic notion of festivals as an unifying and practical event ---or form---for examining human behavior have been more appealing; but nonetheless on a deeper level, it is a contextualized concept, directed internally and externally by other social interactions, economic systems and communicative networks. Celebrations thus, not only embraces the inner worlds, but also spreads out to the outside worlds to encompass their multiple dimensions thereby facilitating a greater understanding by taking into consideration the different realities of these outside worlds.

But,

“Many studies of festivals, 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. Fewer studies have sought to position festivals in a context that is fluid, open to different scopes of (transnational) society and cultural vectors, and that resonates with the realities of ongoing change, and the rise of popular culture and commercialism. The condition of post-modernity has great impacts upon the local meanings of festivals and events. The omniscient gaze of the media as well as touristic consumption also leads to a loss of a feeling of community identity. Such issues need to be addressed to examine the significance of local narratives, festivals and events in the making of cultural identities”.

(Picard et al 2009: 23-24)
Nonetheless, research into the forms of celebrations in association to or as an indication of ‘social life crisis’ is not experimental (ibid: 26). However, little work has considered the appearance of festivals in relation to contexts or processes of rapid change that has affected most societies. The condition of post-modernity has greatly impacted upon the local meanings of festivals and events. In this chapter we seek to understand how the processes of event organization, the attitude of the locals and their sense of ownership and community belonging, work to maintain a historic festival in its traditional form along with coming to terms with the increasing processes of change. When we use the term ‘traditional form’, we do not intend to mean an absolute stasis. The argument instead is that the ritualistic designs of a celebration furnish the axis around which divergent social transmutations hold on to. As such, it becomes probable to justify how communities can both change with the times, but at the same time contain a significance of their individuality thus characterizing a strong community identity.

**Bihu: From the Meadows to the Rostrum**

The culture and tradition of the Assamese society are based on nature and productivity, and associated with these are their beliefs. The folk festivals have religious inclinations, through which a bountiful harvest and general well-being of the community is sought. Along with the rituals that are performed, songs and dances accompanied by instruments are also enacted for agricultural fertility and beneficence. The *Bohag* or *Rongali Bihu* of Assam is also one such festival linked with the spring fertility cult. Like all other festivals, *Rongali Bihu* also has two aspects—the religious and the other is that of amusement.
The latter dimension involves all the activities involving the youth---performances of songs, dances, games etc. which adds an extra significance to the celebrations. In case of *Bohag Bihu*, the recreation aspect takes a more important position, and that is why it has transformed into the cultural marker of the greater Assamese society. A noteworthy feature of this festival is that no ethnic community has created it singularly. Every tribe associated with cultivation has contributed towards its origin.

These rituals had their origins at a time when people were completely dependent on nature for their survival, and believed that the nature gods could be appeased by performance of such practices. As such the ceremonies connected with the festivals were naturally carried out in the fields amidst natural surroundings. However, with the advent of science and technology, the desires of the people which seemed to be fulfilled symbolically, were made possible by technological innovations. The Industrial Revolution ushered in a tradition where farming practices took a backseat, and people no longer had to depend solely on agriculture for livelihood. But, the beliefs and the practices of the people did not disappear altogether or were not rendered useless; these in turn got converted to cultural assets. And with the rise of nationalism people felt an urge to preserve their culture and tradition. The resultant was the advent of a new heritage---the modern form of *Bihu* that was exhibited not amidst natural surroundings, but on artificial constructed spaces. Thus, *Bihu* got transferred to the rostrum from the open fields and with time took a completely modernist shape in its presentation. Here begins the commoditization of the festival that we are going to deal with in the subsequent discussions.
The Context of Phat Bihu

The Phat Bihu festival, often regarded as the identity marker of the greater Dhakuakhana community, is held annually during the Assamese *Bohag* month. As has been mentioned in the preceding chapters, the celebrations have a history of centuries. The earlier days witnessed this festival more at the local social level---a small-scale, grassroots, localized, voluntary, multicultural event. By the 1970s, Phat Bihu festival assumed a formal, institutionalized structure, and towards the end of the century it had grown enormously and changed radically, becoming a multicultural mega-event attracting thousands of people from all over.

The Historical Context of the Contemporary Phat Bihu Celebrations

Dhakuakhana is a historically renowned area covering the Himalayan base in the north to the *Kherkota* river source in the south, from the mighty *Brahmaputra* in the east to the *Subansiri* River in the west. Till 1839 it was a part of the kingdom of the last *Ahom* ruler Purandar Singha. After the Treaty of Yandaboo and a subsequent agreement, the administration of Dhakuakhana, along with the other parts of Assam, was transferred to the British. Henceforth, it came to be an important seat of administration, subsequently becoming the sub-divisional headquarters of the Lakhimpur district in the post-independence era.

Since the earlier times, the topographic and economic conditions and realities of the place have largely been dependent on natural forces. They were related in particular to the geographical location of the area. Surrounded by rivers on all
sides, Dhakuakhana is flooded most of the times during the year which has largely affected the socio-economic development of the region till date.

In this context, Dhakuakhana gains importance for a diversified ethnicity, religion and culture, that has further contributed to a kind of cultural harmony. Although economically an undeveloped region, it is much more advanced in areas of education and literacy. It may be noteworthy to mention that this educational development is primarily owing to the efforts of the local people and not the outcome of governmental patronage. The destiny of the region is still largely dependent on external innovations in the transport, communication and agricultural sectors. The long time marginalization and struggle led to the appearance of a collective fellow feeling and a unique community identity which got manifested in celebrations like Phat Bihu. The idea here is to understand the recent boom in the festivities which is being organized in situations of estrangement, transition or alienation. As Picard et al states,

“…cycles of festive re-enchantment have been observed in various historical contexts characterized by social and cognitive rupture and revolution; contexts in which common sense failed to provide symbolic continuity and metaphors to make sense of everyday life relationships. In such contexts, festivity is thought of as a complex phenomenon of social concentration enabling individuals and social actors, at different social and symbolic levels, to test, adapt and recreate forms and narratives adding sense to their being in the world”

(Picard et al 2009: 17).
Festival Organisation and Management

We have already referred in the earlier chapter that till the year 1976, there were no formal organisers of the Phat Bihu festival. Initiatives were taken by local individuals in its celebrations. It was in the year 1976, when a formal celebration committee was introduced along with the publication of a souvenir which is known as *Bihuwan* today. The organization at that point of time contained limited role specialization and had not grown to match the present day mega-event. In the face of rapid globalization and societal change, the festival planning, management and logistic issues needed to be connected to and embedded in cultural constructions of reality together with accompanying issues of ideology, identity, the agendas of participant organizations and political and social discourse. As a result, the 1990s witnessed the efforts and leadership of natives who gave it a modern form and character. Apart from the Organising Committee, a Permanent Committee was also formed, the composition and function of which has already been stated in the previous chapter.

The Phat Bihu constitution states a few aims and objectives of its celebrations which have also been specified in Chapter III. For our convenience let us state those again in the following lines:

- To preserve and promote Phat Bihu festival as a treasure of Assamese tradition and culture.
- To unite all people of Dhakuakhana irrespective of caste and creed and make conditions for them to be more artistically inclined.
- To institute the distinctive culture of the Dhakuakhana, in Assam as well as other places of the country, through the local tribes of the region.
• To take every measure to protect culture from falling into degeneration.
• To promote the Phat Bihu festival premises into a tourism hub.
• To take measures for the socio-economic development of Dhakuakhana along with its culture.
• To take every initiative to prevent the operation of group politics in Phat Bihu celebrations, although all cultured people irrespective of caste, creed, religion or class can be associated with it.

In the present discussion, we shall take into account these objectives and particularly the fifth statement, i.e., “To promote the Phat Bihu festival premises into a tourism hub.”

The commoditization of culture and the rise of cultural tourism are ultimately dependent upon emphasizing those features and characteristics that define a place and its people as unique and on generating interest and translating this into tourist demand. Britton defines cultural tourism as occurring ‘where cultural sites, events, attractions and/or experiences are marketed as primary tourist experiences (Britton 1991:12). However, tourism’s employment of culture as a selling tool involves selectivity and ‘competing constructions’ rather than absolute truths (Seaton 1998: 34). The very idea of genuine representations of culture and historical events is notoriously problematic. Places, peoples and pasts are part of a symbolic economy that trades on cultural identities and markers of histories, and as such they are contested and negotiated by those who produce and consume them.
The fame and distinction of Phat Bihu festival, in the present times has gradually unbonded itself from its regional locales and have reached the diverse parts of the world. With the extension of media communications and information systems, the members of the community have taken new initiatives to recapture their composite identity and make it a marker of cultural pride. During the past few years, Dhakuakhana has experienced a proliferation of visitors from far off places, and in the recent times Mohghuli Chapori has graduated into one of the foremost tourist destinations during the Phat Bihu celebrations. The events in the festivities have also increased dramatically in size and scope, attracting greater numbers of visitors every year.

Phat Bihu festival is planned and managed by the members of the committee. It is promoted through newspapers, websites, and other electronic media at both the regional and national levels and the festivities are even broadcasted on television. A significant part of the celebratory schemes aims to establish the traditional image of uniqueness of the festival as a mass tourism destination. The Phat Bihu constitution aims to promote the distinctive tradition and culture of the region in the global framework. Visitors are given the opportunity to experience the “unique” and fascinating celebration of culture, folklore, integration and harmony which is hardly found in other places. Similar discourses are maintained by the media, which stresses on the singularity of the festival in terms of its history, content and the way it is enacted. Visuals of people clothed in traditional attires locally woven, the display of the indigenous cultures, the integrated performances of dance and songs, and the showcasing of a unity in diversity conveys the message of a spectacle worth seeing for the
outsiders. This serves as the imagery that the locals seek to identify with and to promote to the external audiences. The organizers distinguish it as a formidable celebration of an exclusive culture, and everything is carefully designed to sustain this portrayal.

According to Hobsbawn *et al*, such functionalist approaches seem to be common to many festivals and rituals originally created during the 19th century romantic nationalism stream (Hobsbawn *et al* 1983: 40). Geared to display national attributes and symbolic meanings, to legitimize power and historical grandeur, these events appear strongly disciplined relying on repetition to create the perception of immutability and continuity with the past. Although expression of regional identities, this festival is similarly constructed, being designed as a highly controlled performance, as an incorporating ritual which tries to justify certain values and meanings ‘by linking back to a suitable historical past…by borrowing and using ancient rituals and symbols and strictly adhering to them’ (*Ibid*: 82). Furthermore, the progressive mediatisation of the festival and the increased presence of tourists have contributed to enhance the need for a controlled performance, transforming Phat Bihu festival into a spectacular event meant for consumption. Nostalgically on display are then all the folkloric aspects of the greater Assamese culture, which may be easily understood and consumed by the spectators. The presence of tourists thus transforms a communal rite into a consumer product.

Although Phat Bihu celebrations got a structured shape in the 70’s of the 20th century, it was still very much the grassroots, voluntary based approach with a
strong sense of group solidarity. It was only in the 90’s that there was the emergence of a festival that grew to match the celebrations as the mega-event it had become now. This is particularly reflected in the structure of the committee. As we had stated in Chapter III, the composition of the committee is an elaborate one with a general assembly comprising of members from across the globe. They formed an umbrella group that united other associations but with limited role specialization. From among the members of the general council, the office bearers for the Phat Bihu Committee---that is, the Permanent Committee and the Organising Committee are selected/elected. Members of these two committees are local, influential people and in practice they run the entire event and exercise control over its management. They seem to form an elite group and are responsible for the planning, decision making as well as the construction of ideologies and agendas for the celebratory rituals.

**The Metaphor of Change**

The re-creative and regenerative aspects of tourism involves a certain analogy of escape, which in turn adds on to the festival experience as the revelers discover themselves in a completely different frame of space and time. The celebration is a kind of a transformative event for both the outsider and the locals, as they together discover not only a structure for restoring or returning to a communal feeling, but also a reinstitution to an enchanting past. If we consider this aspect of a festival, then it introduces into the celebrations, the idea of a commodity---a product to be consumed by tourists.
Festivals are instances of spectacle, constructed around aspects of both production and consumption. However, the images created are not meant simply for display, but they also mediate crucial social relationships (Debord 1973: 18). Thus, spectacles play the role of commodities, and the commodity in turn becomes a powerful means to seize the community life to an extent where “the world we see is the world of commodity” (*ibid: 29*). But the creation of spectacles cannot just be regarded as something derogatory. One has as well to consider that it is a vital means of social communication, significant in acknowledging and celebrating identity and collective consciousness. Festivals thus become moments of gaze for the tourists to perceive the host community in their time and state of social continuation.

As festivals have come to associate itself to a wider connectivity and transformation of space, aesthetics, politics etc, the notion of change becomes operative here. Picard *et al* reiterates,

“…the shifting vectors of globalization have created new relations between the local and the global, the religious and the secular, that constantly challenge traditional concepts of place, identity, the sacred and the just milieu. In this context, the festival needs to be linked to the wider sociological, economic and political context of change, as a site to adapt, reconstruct and re-enact meaningful narrations of the collective being in the---globally enlarged---world”.

(*Picard et al 2009: 28*)

Thus, celebrations do not involve static adherents, spectators and spaces but embrace changes in accord with the evolving socio-economic surroundings of production, consumption and political scenarios.
This being so, meanings of festivals apparently rooted in societies, are constantly being challenged by the ‘rootlessness’ of an inter-connected ever speeding world (Caillois 2001: 114). It is crucial therefore, not only to consider festivals as specific and stationary events, but also as an unsettled occasion susceptible to propagation, considering larger social and political changes.

**Phat Bihu: Changing Nature of its Celebration over the Years**

The post-independence observance of Phat Bihu festival was initiated in the year 1948 with a formal celebration at the grounds of Dhakuakhana Government Middle School. After a break of a few years in between, it was held under temporary structures owing to the efforts of some of the local people. However, there are no written evidences about the celebration of the festival till that time; the facts are based only on oral information. In an article by Borgohain, we find the mention of an old man born in 1889 who says,

“After the first three days of the Bohag month, the youths of the region would rush to the Charikoriya riverside and would indulge in dance and merriment forming various groups under the trees. This Bihu would continue for fifteen days. There was no division of caste, creed, tribe or religion in the celebrations. Tribes from faraway places would also come and join in the festivities. The celebrations were there during the times of our forefathers. In our times however, this has dampened. Another important fact of the celebration was that it had no organisers…”

(Borgohain 1985: 10)

Probably the first written record that we have regarding the festival is the publication of a news item in the 11 May, 1959 edition of the *Notun Asomiya* newspaper, which informs about the celebration of a certain ‘Phat Bihu
Festival’ in Dhakuakhana. With breaks in between, the celebrations resumed in a regular manner from the year 1976 onwards. It was during this time that the festival underwent changes and slowly made advances towards its present form.

During those days, the festival was organized at the grounds of the Government Middle School or at the premises of the Muga estate. It was from 1996 that Phat Bihu festival got a permanent place and a structure for its celebrations. With this, the festival got transferred to the stage and took a further leap towards modernity. It got a more concrete shape with the introduction of a constitution defining the organizational structure, policies and programmes, rules and regulations. With the turn of the century, efforts were accelerated to establish the position of Phat Bihu festival at the global echelon. And in the subsequent years the festival attracted attention internationally owing to the operation of the mass media. New additions were introduced within the celebratory features; the market grew to larger dimensions. So much so that, The Phat Bihu Committee which boasts of their efforts to promote only local cultural artifacts, have business establishments from across the country now. The performatory features which had the individuality of the region embraced a more glamorized nature to meet the growing consumer demands.

**Principles of the Festival and its Management**

The social connectivity, at both the individual and group levels, is an important aspect of any kind of festivity. The celebration of Phat Bihu festival apparently has lost the earlier significance for the people of Dhakuakhana. It has lost its appeal for them chiefly because of modern form it has taken and the transitions
that it has undergone in its course as a result of the intrusion of the new educated middle class. Nevertheless, the festival ideology is still seems to be rooted in, and reflect, its original grassroots, loosely structured and tightly knit social organization. Viewing the festival from the perspective of the local people, they are proud of the festival, its ideologies and the large numbers who attend the festival. But at the same time they also rue the fact that it is being commodified in the present times. Jagadish Gogoi, a noted citizen of the region and also an advisor of the Permanent Committee of Phat Bihu echoes the resentment of the community,

“The new generation who are more inclined to consumerism have been administered with the responsibility of the festival management…they are opportunists, a business minded lot not in any way connected with nature or agricultural activities. If Phat Bihu is organized and managed by such groups, it is easily conceivable what would be the celebrations like after a decade from now.”

Noted litterateur of Assam Homen Borgohain observes,

“Bihu is solely the creation of nature. The tradition of nature and its offspring, the agrarian masses, has collectively celebrated this amazing secular festival since time immemorial. The people of Dhakuakhana have been able to establish a specific position for Phat Bihu not only in the cultural arena of Assam, but also in the entire country. This Bihu can never be a consumable product like the Bihu that is observed in other areas of Assam. If my presumption about Phat Bihu, that it is transforming into a commodified cultural product instead of being the medium of joy and rejoice for the masses, comes true, then I would definitely wish the death of Phat Bihu.”
Observant viewers from other regions have also forwarded their opinions on the changing nuances of the festival. Below we quote some of the observations ---

• “It has been alleged that there has been transformation and the play of power politics in Phat Bihu celebrations. One has to save the festival from the grasp of the stars with outward glitz and glamour that turns culture into a business commodity. Phat Bihu is the festival of the masses; it is the spontaneous demonstration of the liberated populace who break the barriers of caste, creed, religion and class. Therefore, if a handful of individuals try to control the festivities, it will lose its very essence.”

• “Many have opined that the singularity of the Phat Bihu celebrations for which it attracted people from all over the world, has lost its distinction owing to many new inclusions in the celebratory rituals. In the present day festivities (particularly after 2005) actors and actresses are invited to inaugurate the cultural procession. This practice has dimmed the glory of Phat Bihu to a large extent and has converted it into a cheap observance. People should come to see the performances of the various tribes, or listen to the productive discourses of the distinguished invitees. But it’s a matter of regret that now people in Dhakuakhana come to Phat Bihu only to watch these celebrities…As an ardent admirer and well wisher of Phat Bihu I would like to appeal that the organising committee should refrain from such unworthy activities. Phat Bihu should be dignified to a new height with the efforts of the distinguished scholars of Assamese culture.”
• “This year seeing the miserable condition of nature in the Phat Bihu premises many have expressed very distressful remarks. There are very few trees now; the condition of the ones that are there is also very pathetic…I also noticed that most of the business establishments were eating joints. Behind these small shops there were open buying and selling of wine. Empty bottles of booze could be seen lying even behind the committee office. One or two honest office bearers admitted that some were drinking even in the dining area of the guests.” 

• “Until recent times, the cultural procession of Phat Bihu comprised of Bihu troupes who showcased their respective cultures lead by a Bihua (a male bihu dancer) blowing a buffalo horn pipe riding on the back of a buffalo. This time we didn’t see any such thing, instead we witnessed a strange celebrity centric procession which is in no way connected with the festival. And instead of a buffalo, the organisers lead the procession riding on an elephant back. This might be termed as the distortion of Phat Bihu... Even the dance performances were disheartening...The influence of the modern flimsy dance could be clearly seen. In the Mukoli Bihu, one or two Bihu groups sang Bihu tuned songs...all these led me to believe that Phat Bihu has also been engulfed by glitter and glitz of modernity. If this is Phat Bihu, then what is the difference between this Bihu and the modern stage Bihu? I leave this question to the organisers of the present Phat Bihu.”
Wood lays down that the argument of ‘inauthenticity’ and commodification, although very intriguing, does not take into account the potential that the revival, reconstruction or even the invention of festivals holds in terms of replenishing traditions, re-negotiating communal identity and strengthening group solidarity (Wood 1998: 226). Kaeppler furthermore enunciates that as festivals are naturally arenas where symbolic knowledge is continuously created and recreated, challenged and opposed in dynamic ways, where the message communicated may vary, from the one sent by the organisers to the one actually interpreted by the spectators (Kaeppler 1983:125). Thus it becomes imperative to take into account the responses and interpretations of the performers, locals and tourists to the official imagery of the festival.

For the performers Phat Bihu festival apart from being a formalized and spectacular event full of glamour, is also a moulding space in which distinctions are created, identities re-appropriated and narratives contested. The locals when interviewed admitted that although they regard this festival as specifically embedded in their culture and historical memory, they reject the romantic imagery portrayed as lacking any emotional connotation. For the majority of the audience from other regions, Phat Bihu festival is an important celebration which allows them to reconnect with their cultural past, though briefly, providing at the same time easily consumable and entertaining elements.
Tourism, Tradition and Cultural Identity

The basic thesis for the continuation of the Phat Bihu festival is that it is embedded in tradition, something that is distinctive to Dhakuakhana and has been observed from time immemorial. Although there have been transitions owing to modernity, the tradition of its celebration is unique to the place and is the driving force for its continuation.

The local people have enjoyed a reputation for hospitality and friendliness for centuries. This reputation extends to the present day, when the annual influx of tourists making their way to the Phat Bihu festival, is mostly welcomed by the local people.

Despite the changing nature of the festival, the media portrayals and coverage as well as the souvenir issue dwells on the heritage and tradition of Phat Bihu festival. This provides a reference point for local people to connect memories of the past and also to relate their present to an enduring and mythical tradition. Through the performance of the Mukoli Bihu, it links the historical context of the festival to the continuing community participation in it.

Cultural commoditization is ultimately dependent upon emphasizing on the features and characteristics that define the place and its people as unique. The interest must thus be generated and translated into a tourist demand. And as the town succumbs to the forces of post-modern social conditions, the spontaneous participation of the people is hardly to be seen today. The groups have to be invited to participate in the performances. Even the Phat Bihu constitution has
provisions where it accords the responsibility of inviting and training these groups on the Coordinating Secretary of the Permanent Committee. Every event is a contest with a prize attached to it. The research suggested that the groups participate more because of the glamour and prestige that is associated with the festival than the sentiment related with the community identity. Greenwood’s argument holds true here when he says that anything and everything that is consumed assumes the form of an object, culture included. However, because culture is not anyone’s personal property, the merchandising of cultural productions to outsiders is a like an appropriation of the entire community. In the process, the true nature of that culture is lost; it is ‘altered and often destroyed’ and ‘made meaningless’ to its people (Greenwood 1977: 133). In this case the Phat Bihu festival has transformed from a provincial, authentic and meaningful practice into a public display for visitors, which has led to a fall in local interest. The transformation of a local cultural practice into a consumer product by the organisers has stripped the festival of the meanings that were linked with it and which the community used to organize their lives. Like in Greenwood’s words, “The ritual has become a performance for money. The meaning is gone” (ibid: 136). Peoples, places and pasts become part of a symbolic economy that trade on cultural identities and markers of histories, and as such they are challenged and mediated by those who produce and consume them.
**Festivals---Symbolism and Production**

In the present day setting, there have been an ever more mobilization of identity patterns situated on global norms to reinterpret social boundaries and new ways of human entity. Baudrillard’s approach of the consumer society comes in handy here, where he observes that ‘culture’ is mobilized as a concept to produce signs and symbols to differentiate one social entity from the other and make them globally visible (Baudrillard 1998: 279). Culture thus gets converted into a kind of ‘social discourse’ constructed on a series of arbitrary signs to define the self and the other, which in turn becomes a part of a global system connecting spaces and people through globalised forms of production, exchange and consumption (Featherstone 1990: 13). The multitude of signs and discourses performed during a festival assumes a kind of a value during the celebration times, but how they relate to or operate in social realities beyond the festival time and space is what becomes important to examine.

**Commodification and Authenticity**

As we have mentioned above, the commodification of culture brings with it a problematic notion of ‘authenticity’. Authenticity in the post-modern context is a superfluous concept. According to McKean cultural tourism can trigger a revival of local interest in traditional cultural forms, thus strengthening cultural bonds and providing local actors access to material benefits (McKean 1989: 125). But this assertion infers that local actors thus are in a position to categorize between what is ‘sacred’ (and not open to tourism) from what is ‘profane’ (and hence open to commodification) (Picard *et al* 2009: 21).
On the other hand, commoditization also opens the possibility of erosion in the aesthetic quality of cultural products and traditions owing to demands. The argument therefore is that, while a renewed interest in traditional arts and social practices among local craftsmen and others is a condition of cultural commercialism, the market demands to achieve a certain mark rather than a genuine interest in cultural products (Mathieson et al 1982: 165–169). Errington has argued that this kind of a situation results in what she terms as ‘New Age Primitivism’ – a situation in which objects come to signify a purely imaginary ‘other’, one that is no longer tied to any specific context, geographical, historical, or otherwise (Errington 1998: 147–149), a ‘reciprocal misconstruction’ (Lanfant 1995: 25–26) – or what MacCannell has referred to as the ‘postmodern emptiness’ of idealized primitives performing for the cultural consumers (MacCannell 1994: 67). The objectification of culture and ethnicity thus explains the present day gross consumption of identity merchandise both by outsiders and local insiders, whose view of themselves is thereby distorted by the outsider’s gaze (Linnekin 1997: 216–217). To put it in other words, the monetary value of rituals and tradition renders it to be insubstantial for the local inhabitants (Harrison 1994: 243–244). The consequence is that the more the locals indulge in the objectification of their cultural practices, the less genuine they become and hence less desirable for consumption. As MacCannell puts it, commoditization as cannibal ultimately consumes itself (MacCannell 1994: 596).
This appears to stand true in case of Phat Bihu festival where we can witness a rapid change in its presentation every year, more aimed at merchandising the community culture rather than a genuine representation of its identity and integrity. The spectacles on display are staged cultural performances, implying that all ‘authenticity’ is effectively constructed. Nonetheless, authenticity is a subjective characteristic and a relative concept. We may here consider Wang’s argument that most authenticities are symbolic, and is largely projected and constructed by tourists rather than bearing any absolute value (Wang 1999: 363). In this connection, Lanfant contends that the moment tradition is transformed into a product, its cultural worth also gets transformed to commercial value, a process which in turn stimulates a reinvention of the past, leading to what Eco terms as hyper-reality (Lanfant 1992: 36). Culture and authenticity thus are not consistent notions, but can transform rapidly and tourism is only one of many factors within the broader process of modernization.

**Some Other Aspects of Cultural Commodityization**

Halter refers to the intricate account of culture and consumption in the United States. She argues that the society is a salad bar instead of the traditional notion of a melting pot. Ethnicity is a huge trade in the States where billions are spent on marketing ethnic products and events which aids people to express their heritage. She makes a further postulation that the business of ethnicity and identity is vital to our present day lives as it substantiates our needs to reconnect with our origins (Halter 2000: 189).
Yet another feature of ethnic merchandise can be found in Rath’s article on immigrants and the tourist industry. Here, he first reflects on what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett mentioned about the high marketability of festivals as culture at its most accessible and concentrated form. Rath concedes that ethnic merchandise helps both the visitors as well as the local inhabitants. He says, “The tourist industry is not just a sector of the knowledge economy, but one of the fastest growing ones. In some cases, its contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has surpassed that of any manufacturing sector. The tourist economy constitutes a potential interface of immigrants from all strata with the wider economy. In a globalizing world, local difference and place identity become more important. Heritage, cultural diversity and urban tourism then become crucial components of the cultural capital of post industrial society” (Rath 2002: 6-17).

Originally, the celebration of Phat Bihu festival was a matter for the local community only, an occasion which provided an opportunity to relive the experience of the past and strengthen feelings of belonging to the greater Dhakuakhana community. But as the celebrations increasingly involved a broader public, once an underdeveloped, underprivileged region and a place to avoid, Dhakuakhana nowadays attracts a host of regional as well as national and international visitors. Rath’s contention that under specific conditions, the commodification of tradition helps in promoting the emerging economy holds true in this case.
Picard et al observes,

“…the link between festivals and complex, dynamic social contexts is not new or unique to the contemporary era. In different historic contexts, festivals, carnival and public play have always been permitted, or have been politically used to mediate rapid change and to re-embed modified social realities in forms of symbolic continuity. Most major social crises, ruptures or revolutions in human history have been accompanied or closely followed by festive events or periods. Similarly throughout history, during times of significant political and militaristic revolution, festivals have been used to create a sort of mythical superstructure formulating/re-formulating the origins and compositions of nation and empire, and at the same time, providing and preserving social continuity and traditional structures of power through the use of codified symbols and ritual”


However, it is a matter of discourse as to the extent to which such expositions portray celebrations as progressive experiences, as true revolutionary moments of social transformation. As Eagleton points out: ‘Carnival, after all, is a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off’ (Eagleton 1981: 148). The implication is, as we have discussed earlier, seemingly this ‘rupture of hegemony’ is generally authorized rupture and thus ineffectual. Eco et al. has also mentioned of the limitations of festivals and their capacity to promote hegemonies, positioning, as he does, the modern mass festival as being bounded by limited spaces---limited by authority (Eco et al 1984: 134-156).

Thus, the notion of festivals as limited and ‘permitted’ contraventions, rather than time-fixed incidences of whole-scale revolution, emphasizes the point that festivals exist and resonate within broader contexts and structures. It also tells
us that what once established as occasions of real struggle, conversion and contravention as Bakhtin lauds, celebrations now have been socially and physically dislodged and politically weakened. In part, this shows the new political, democratic and economic stabilities in the world, and an apparent leveling of hierarchies. New spaces have also evolved to absorb social needs (Bakhtin 1984: 387). We shall deal with this aspect in a more detailed manner in Chapter V.

**Commoditized Culture and the Dichotomy of Original and Copy**

It is important to consider that the concept of authenticity or non-commodification calls for a rejection of the difference between original-as-natural and copy-as-degrading. In case of traditional practices and productions the replica cannot be degrading as the continuation of that particular culture depends on its faithful representation. Culture becomes corrupt when they deviate from the authentic sphere and goes into a superficial arena. We may term this as the deviation from the use value to the exchange value. But the question here is who will decide which is original and authentic and which is a copy? Because culture is like a flowing river; nothing remains original in its path. It takes turns and changes in its course and in the process embraces all that comes across its way. What is regarded as original now might be a replica of an earlier original version. And what is considered a copy now would become original and authentic at a future time.

In other words, this journey is regulated by what Smith refers to as “double discourse of value.” The cultural or the aesthetic value communicates separately
and distinctly from the economic value. However, Smith contends that these two discourses of value are connected with each other in a binary relationship postulated on giving upperhand to the cultural over the economic, a privileging which in turn is embedded in what she has argued is an extension of utilitarianism within the contemporary humanities. Thus, cultural value often is framed in everyday life as profound, transcendent, creative, intrinsic and an end in itself, Smith says, while economic value is framed as superficial, repetitive, instrumental, calculative, and a means to an end. One is good, the other bad; one is located in the temple, the other in the market (Smith 1988: 185-189).

The matter in question is how to differentiate the authentic, genuine, sacred sphere from the superficial, profane one by fixing a specific group to a specific place, distinct from commercial connections with the outsiders. If Phat Bihu festival is celebrated in some other region outside of Dhakuakhana and the performances are presented by other people from other places and communities, the outsiders in that case will not be able to connect with the festival. This is because, as Clifford puts it, just as all objects have a natural use value, so also culture and its practices have a natural association with particular places and particular people (Clifford 1992: 96–112). Authenticity of things are therefore connected with specific places and the most authentic productions are those that are faithfully represented in a specific locale by a specific set of people for specific purposes not in any way attached with a commercial value. The crucial point here is that authentic representation of cultural productions takes place within the domain of its natural use value and outside calculative market processes. What then is the status of a festival like Phat Bihu? What is its value
like in the present day? Can we regard the celebrations today as authentic representations or commercialized copies? What do we actually deal in when we represent culture as a commodity? Who owns the sold product?

**Commodification a Collapse of Culture?**

All through the above discussion we have dealt with culture as a commodity and commoditization as a ravager of authenticity. It is like a continuous quest---a search for an alternative, an urge to return to the roots---with a faith that what is lost can be retrieved in ‘others’ more ‘primitive’ and therefore more natural than us (Diamond 1974: 605). This quest puts a privilege on the space of the local community and the apparent homogeneity in which the culture operates.

Commodification corrupts culture; it transforms the pure and the sacred to something that is crude and coarse, an authentic into a spectacle. This kind of an observation masks the vital fact that this so called corruption by outward intervention is based on an implied supposition that these people at some point in the past has lived in conditions of cultural purity. Whereas in reality, as we have mentioned above, no culture is static and uncorrupted, and hence cannot claim to be original. Alternatively put, there is nothing called an original moment in history which is detached in time and space. Therefore the notion of authenticity is a tricky one. How do we decide the originality or the authenticity of a tradition? The question remains.

The material value of tradition is ultimately dependent on foregrounding those aspects and elements that characterize a place and the community as singular,
and thus trigger an interest to transform it into a consumer demand. How does the consumer benefit out of such merchandising?

A historical structure or a work of an artist as representatives of culture has physical entities that can be seen and touched by others although they cannot be owned by them except for the experiences as cultural products. It becomes a kind of a subjective material, an experience manifested through a service. The ownership of a cultural commodity therefore depends on the extent of the buyer’s engagement and his acceptance and acquisition of those products in a particular cultural context, the amount of the experience of which he wants to preserve in his everyday life. The satisfaction of the consumer needs could be found in his enlightenment---the enrichment of his outlook, expansion of horizons, development of skills, awareness and analysis, absorption or dismissal of information received.

The reproduction of festivals like Phat Bihu generates conditions where both personal and institutional interests receive a high degree of visibility. This in turn helps in strengthening and highlighting the features, themes and values associated with the place and transforms its perceived meaning and structure. A remote geographical location, economically undeveloped since ages, Dhakuakhana attempts to reposition itself for a global audience by celebrating and promoting the essence of its distinctive community identity through Phat Bihu festival. The singularity of the festival lies in the display of this homogeneity in diversity. As Keshab Gogoi, the President of the Permanent Committee of Phat Bihu says in his conversation with this writer,
“If you ask me what is unique about Phat Bihu, I can’t show you that in material terms or put it in words. To experience the distinctiveness of the festival, one has to be a part of it. This uniqueness is not to be viewed; it is meant to be felt…”

Thus, when we talk about the status and the significance of Phat Bihu festival, for the community it is the representation of a shared sense of homogeneous identity, a symbol of resurgence and integrity. As for the outsiders, the value of the festival is found in the official projection of the festival as the celebration of its unique ethnicity, a ‘purity’ to be reckoned with.

**Memory, Objects and Symbols**

The selection of objects and the performances within the festival serves as occasions where individual memories of the past could be recollected. The encounters with these objects or practices often initiated the narration and poetic reconstruction of earlier experiences and different life phases. This can be witnessed particularly in the *Bihu* songs, dance movements and the instruments that played a central symbolic role in the establishment of personal and social relations within the festival revelry. During the celebrations, people of the area, particularly the older generation, rediscovered these objects together with experiences from their past. The sharing of these experiences with the younger lot turns the festival into a space of individual reflectivity on and recreation of life histories. This further facilitates a “resignification of the past as a narrated space… (transforming) a collection of individual memories (of) the past…into a more structured narration contextualized within the contemporary social world” (Picard et al 2009: 15). Moreover, there is a shift in the symbolic values attached to the past. The spontaneity in the participation of Phat Bihu festival
during the days of yore was ample evidence to suggest the communal homogeneity which disappeared to a great extent with the exploits of modernity. In this sense, the history of the celebrations seems to have a diminished significance in the contemporary times. As such, the performances, objects and the symbolism attached to the festival seem to have become a necessary condition of resituating the past in the contemporary times.

**Narratives---Locating the Past in the Present**

The involvement of varied types of participants, engaged in different types of performances shapes a complex and multileveled context where a large number of social relationships and subjectivities function. For example, the *Bihu* performed by the children, the maidens, the women, the men, involving different forms of the different ethnic communities is an important aspect of the celebrations facilitating the introduction and communication of the new generation in the social space of the locality. The focus here is definitely on the historically located cultural homogeneity displayed by the participants amidst a host of diversities. These narratives acquire a greater significance in discourses involving recent social changes. Consequently, the performances do not primarily focus on nature and individual utterances, but functions as a narrative allowing people to articulate and make sense in a symbolical way of the recent transformations in the society. In this sense, the narrative of the past is enacted through the performances where the symbolism focuses on the current issues marking the social world of Dhakuakhana.
Narratives, Symbols and Symbolic Discontinuities

The narratives and metaphors generated during a festival and the conditions of broader constitutional adaptation have their implications on the place and the community.

On the social level, all the organisers of Phat Bihu festival were born in or have been residing in the region for years altogether, linked by different social networks and kinship relations. However, when it comes to festival organization, these people share different kinds of association distinguished on the basis of social and symbolic discontinuities like residence, gender, age groups or kinship. In the celebrations these networks operate at different levels; although members from other parts contribute in some way or the other towards the festival, only the local influential people form the powerful lot in managing the same. One can also see a different kind of a discontinuity based on age and gender in the distribution of tasks and spaces within the festival. Women get fewer or no representation in the higher ranks of the Committees which are mainly a male domain. Again, older and experienced people are less in number and almost ninety-five percent of the influential posts are seen to be held by young and middle aged adults who dictate the terms of the celebration.

The celebration of Phat Bihu festival used to be a regional affair with participants from with the geographical boundaries of the Dhakuakhana sub division. However, in the last two decades, this festival has largely grown in proportion owing to efforts of not only the festival organisers, but also the involvement of a network of outside public and mass media. As a result, the
private space of the locals has transformed into a public place revealing a significant category of social identities within the festival, opposing locals to outsiders.

**The Place Vs the Placelessness**

Postmodernism paved the way for widespread changes in social, economic, technological and political spheres, resulting in a dislocation of socially rooted notions as ‘place’ and ‘history’ (Harvey 1990:76). The earlier beliefs of the people in realities like ‘authentic existence’ explicit in the meta-narratives and the authority of respected institutions, have been supplanted by *simulacra* and notions of a ‘hyper-reality’ (Eco 1986: 67). The practices initiated by modernity have assumed a considerable force in recent times and the processes of globalization have resulted in effects which are evident in every sphere of human life.

The anxiety of the moderns about the absence of authenticity in the contemporary times has been the subjects of discourses in sociology and anthropology since the 1970’s (Cohen 1988; MacCannell 1976). The notion that life is artificial and lacks the genuineness experienced by our predecessors has given rise to a sense of nostalgia and longing among the industrial and post-industrial societies. The loss of a community feeling and an idealized existence which prevailed in the days of yore caused a feeling of negativity and yearning. Hence, “…the virtual, highly mediated and staged image came to be parts of our lived experience and…contemporary authenticity” (MacLeod 2009: 228).
The notions of ‘place’ and ‘community’ thus surfaces from the perception of authenticity. As MacLeod observes,

“The argument that postmodernism has brought about a rupture between people and their association with places has its basis in the physical and social mobility of individuals and the concomitant movement away from the places and communities they were brought up in…the notion of real places providing individuals and communities with a shared sense of identity appears to be just another aspect of nostalgia. (Therefore) the idea of ‘place’ has always been contested, holding different meanings simultaneously and over time” (ibid: 229-230).

Tourists and outsiders try to find a sense of community and participate in the social life of the places where they gather, apart from indulging in commercial exchanges and commodification.

The presence of outsiders initiates commoditization and consequently triggers social meaninglessness of cultural performances and productions. This further contributes to the growth of social isolation and the feelings of placelessness. At the same time, tourists may also serve as “catalysts for the innovation of new hybrid cultural forms and the revival of a sense of local pride in host communities (ibid: 235).

In MacLeod we find an in depth analysis of E. Relph’s concept of the ‘place’ and ‘placelessness’. We quote:

“…individuals have strong associations with the places of their childhood and the settings of significant life experiences…our sense of place is very much determined by our experience of ‘insideness’ and ‘outsideness’, which arise from our feeling of belonging and influences our perspective on place…(There are) four sub-divisions of ‘insideness’ and ‘outsideness’ to specify different levels of experience. An ‘existential
insider’ feels ‘completely at one’ with a place and understands symbols and significations of place that are often difficult to access as strangers. This first type of insider is opposed to ‘empathetic’ and ‘vicarious’ insiders who experience a place through previously known forms of literature and texts…the experience of ‘outsiders’ can be either ‘existential’ or ‘objective’, the first being alienated from the world and its meaning, and second experiencing a place with a geographer’s eye. Finally, an ‘incidental’ outsider experiences a place ‘as a little more than the background or settings for activities’, the place being subordinate to the activity…an authentic ‘sense of place’ comes from lived experience, an understanding of the intangible essence of place, the experience, an understanding of the intangible essence of place, the experience of being an insider, and a holistic production of place that is in keeping with human need and scale. According to this kind of discourse, the pre-industrial village with living, working, socializing, worshipping and festive spaces creating a holistic human environment is typically put forward as a prime example of such an ‘authentic’ place…”

(ibid: 232-233)

The knowledge and understanding of such an authenticity enables productive human interaction where both the action and the place are inseparably connected. And in the modern settings, individuals yearn for such imagined and idealized places---the ‘lost authentic places of their past’ (Walsh 1992:148). This sense of the loss of authenticity is, according to Relph, a consequence of ‘mass communications, mass culture, big business, powerful central authority and the economic system which embraces all these’ (Relph 1976: 90).

Authenticity of anything surfaces with time; it is not static and fixed, but remains in a state of flux. According to Cohen, it is not an absolute attribute of objects or places but instead is a socially constructed phenomenon (Cohen
1988: 373). As Massey puts it, “The identities of place are always unfixd, contested and multiple” (Massey 1994: 5). Hence, authenticity of a place is not a ‘real’ physical entity, but a hyper-reality or a simulation.

**Community Identity and the Sense of Place**

The post-modern and locally decontextualised concept of festival as an event is hosted for the consumption and recreation of the community and offered as an entertainment to visitors. This eventually may change the nature of the festival and its association with local place and culture. As Getz contends,

> “When festivals and other special events are consciously developed and promoted as tourist attractions, there is a risk that commercialization will detract from celebration; that entertainment or spectacle will replace the inherent meanings of the celebrations”.

(Getz 1994: 7)

Post-modern societies are characterized by the amount, pace and rate of mobility (Urry 2002: 263). In this information-saturated, service-rich, communication-laden capitalist society, the relationships between people and places are more transient than abiding (Lash *et al* 1994: 10). As societies move towards post-modernity, the conventional relations between ‘space and time’ become more abstract and devoid of meaning (Giddens 1990: 4). Such theories have profound bearings upon social structures of local communities which leads to changes in community identities (Urry 2002: 266). This has been succinctly summed up by Featherstone when he says that it is ‘often assumed that we live in localities where the flows of information and images have obliterated the sense of collective memory and tradition in the locality to the extent that there is “no sense of place”’ (Featherstone 1990: 33). However, these conditions of
post-modernity can be distinguished from the prospect of everyday reality, the practices by which the common people design their sense of community identity, and how these conceptions functions in the attainment and perpetuation of a fellow feeling within a community. The local narratives, festivals and events contribute significantly in the making of these identities—cultural, regional or local. In the case of Phat Bihu festival, the narratives of the celebration relate to the sense of being and belonging to the place which the members of the community continue to create and recreate. Notwithstanding, the changing cultural norms and values in post-modern societies have created occasions for communities to join together, locals, outsiders, migrants and tourists participating in an inclusive platform resulting in a kind of displacement.

The growing number of visitors in any event suggests a kind of outsidedness, and consequently place-identity becomes negligible in the process of consumption. For the visitor, the festival may only be a destination, rather than an attraction of place-based destination. What makes the festival special is centered on its distinctiveness, quality, and atmosphere. It would also be inaccurate to conclude that the host community’s sense of its own authentic culture and identity is being denied in the process of festival promotion. In an increasingly multi-cultural and displaced society, the definition of community and community culture becomes a problematic task. And hence, it would be too facile to say that host cultures are somehow being robbed by the wider processes of globalization. The local community consume the same products of global culture as much as the visitor, and although in Phat Bihu festival
commoditization of culture is clearly evident, the festival is still appreciated by
the host community as it continues to promote a positive sense of pride, kinship
and community feeling.

**Phat Bihu and Dislocation**

A sense of rootlessness and a transitoriness that governs a post-modern situation
causes the displacement of people from their temporal and spatial identities
resulting in a condition of placelessness (Harvey 1990: 56). Such kind of a
disruption creates conditions of merchandise and consumption. In the
celebration of Phat Bihu festival today, a wide range of consumer goods and
services can be seen to operate in order to generate recognition with a desired
way of life or community. The boom in the flow of tourists in the last decade or
more has played a significant role in recreating the community identity both
literally and symbolically. For the people of Dhakuakhana, the increasing
presence of the media, the popularizing of a ‘unique’ culture and heritage, the
representation of ‘authentic’ cultural products have contributed to the need of
establishing a ‘place’ amidst a feeling of ‘placelessness’. But, the processes
involved in this have more and more contributed towards consumption rather
than an understanding or knowledge. Consequently, what tourists find is a
landscape not inhabited by ‘real’ communities but by temporary allies of
outsiders and hosts. Thus the processes of globalization impacts upon the host
communities as well. Dhakuakhana today is marketed in terms of its
connections with Phat Bihu festival and its community identity displayed as a
cultural product that bears little relation to its social context. The organization
of cultural festivals is applied as a repetitive formula to facilitate destination
promotion and cultural regeneration schemes (Evans 2001: 84). Thus the policies and programmes involved in festival organization exhibits matter and essentials to appeal to a growing audience. As Waterman says, “The cultural facets of festivals cannot be divorced from the commercial interests of tourism, regional and local economy and place promotion. Selling the place to the wider world or selling the festival as an inseparable part of the place rapidly becomes a significant facet of most festivals” (Waterman 1998: 60).

**Spontaneity and Festivity vs. Management**

With regard to the planning and management of Phat Bihu festival, the growing concern has been over whether this occasion of celebration and spontaneity is being transformed into a corporate event. Attempts to rationalize and focus upon a regional mega-event for logistical and financial reasons have raised concerns about the purity of the event, the loss of its grassroots spontaneity and its loss of meaning. It is important that Phat Bihu festival should retain its celebratory essence not only because it is highly valued by the community, but also because it provides the region with such a unique event able to attract people from distant places. However, in attempting to retain the core, clashes have become inevitable between the participants and the organisers who have a duty to service and manage the event in line with the relevant legislation.

What is perceptible in Phat Bihu celebration is that the ideologies of the local folk come in confrontation with the management often. They resent the ways and means introduced by the organisers for the smooth functioning of the event. For example, the recent construction of concrete structures which serves as the
office building or the Guest House to accommodate tourists, the artificial stage instead of a natural, etc are things of dislike for the local people. Traders who come for business from faraway places is another factor of discontent for the locals who feel that such affairs would call for the death of the distinctiveness of the festival. Other aspects of displeasure include the involvement of celebrities from the entertainment sector, distortion in the dance forms etc which we have already dealt with in an earlier section.

Owing to the increasing resentment, the flow of spontaneity associated with the festival seems to have given way to an organized kind of an activity where ideologies, perspectives and demands come in direct conflict with each other.

The Rules and the Roles

Apart from the organizational rules, the constitution of Phat Bihu lays down certain regulations for the festival participants as well, the knowledge and observance of which determines a person’s legitimate association in the event. It bestows some kind of an authoritative credibility and power to the local people to take a position of belongingness to the festival space. The rules are meant to control the event and create a distinctive culture of Dhakuakhana. One such directive entails the participants to enter the festival premises only in regional ethnic outfits. People donning other clothes are barred from entering the festival space. An unwritten rule allows only people in Muga costumes to participate in the celebratory rituals. This provides a kind of a hierarchy to them and the significance of this hierarchy is to be understood by the people that there are certain specific rules to be followed and roles to play. These rules aim to instill
a sense of the tradition and also respect for the practice among the younger generation.

**Staging the Performance**

The structure of the present celebrations begins with the opening ceremony that includes the hoisting of the Phat Bihu festival flag in line with traditional and characteristic celebrations. The first two days witnesses various competitive performances with prizes that are organized for the participants. The events include *Semoniya Husori* (Group *Bihu* dance by children), *Toka Bihu* (Group performance by maidens and women), *Husori* (Group performance by men), *Mising Bihu* (Group performance by the *Mising* tribe), *Deori Bihu* (Performance by the *Deori* tribe), and *Gamusa* competition (contest of *Gamusa* weaving). The final day starts with the display of the multi-cultured procession which is today inaugurated by a noted celebrity of the state. The procession starts from the festival ground, takes a round of the town and ends at the festival venue. The *Mukoli Bihu*, the symbolic representation of the original Phat Bihu festival begins after that. This is a contest too for the groups; the winners receive material prizes and also an enhanced position in the community.

The importance that is given to the celebration surpasses the active participation in it. The event gets considerable media coverage, the reporting also upholding the idea of the special value of being a member of the community which in turn strengthens social identity.
The Market

The market that had developed around the Phat Bihu festivities is more of a recent origin. Although, historically the festival is linked to trade and commerce, the celebratory features in the post-independence era were more connected with the cultural heritage. The organisers of the festival have tried to bring in regional or local products to create the market as an integral part of festive event. When the market is designed as such, special events in the time limited programme and representations of regional traditions become important for the locals.

However, with the proliferation of business outlets, the ethnic authenticity of the products has been lost, and controversies regarding this have dominated the discourse on the loss of ideological values. The management boasts of promoting only local cultural products and the total ban of tobacco products or alcohol inside the festival premises. But practically this is not what is happening. We see the open business of such kinds of commodities and the displeasure of visitors regarding this has been quoted in the above discussion. More than local artisans we find traders from distant places, from different societies, who come for business in Phat Bihu festival today. As such, even if we take for granted that customs follow economic interests and the rules of showmanship already in traditional societies, there still lies a deep dislocation between traditional customs and their contemporary contexts.
The Collective Role

The three day festival has heterogeneous social functions to play. It enables the mobilization of the community which is suggested by the participation of the whole community in the revelry. Not only for the celebrations, but people also gear up to host the outsiders and cater to their needs involving the community culture and tradition.

The celebratory rituals perform a kind of therapeutic function too for the community. It provides them a break from mundane life which is reflected in the numerous events that comprise the festivities.

Apart from the above, there is another crucial dimension of the festival---that is, the integrative function. It especially seems to strengthen the feeling of togetherness and reinforcing the community identity. Phat Bihu festival can be regarded as an occasion that provides an opportunity to all members of the community to participate in the celebrations together and thereby confirm an acceptance of the traditional community and an affirmation of their identity.

In the festivities, the elements of celebration that are important to the community are being preserved; but nothing seems to be forced or imposed. Rather, they are reflections of the free choice of the local masses. The elements that are being carried over from the past are the elements of cultural and folk heritage that provided spiritual sanctuary to the people in times of turbulence.

Such retraditionalisation also indicates the references used by a certain society for the construction of its identity. The celebration of Phat Bihu festival can also be regarded as a reflection of the meaning of history and tradition in modern
society. The role of tradition in this celebration is to cater to an additional value--as a sign of endurance and existence. Through this festival, the tradition of folk festivities may be seen as being interpreted and presented as a heritage of the greater Dhakuakhana community.

The expansion of the festival to a wider level also provides multiple opportunities for ordinary people and communities to be involved and derive economic benefits. The possibilities of marketing their products open up to a global patronage and recognition, which may in normal circumstances, be difficult to target. This further enables one to strive for self-sustainability. However, in terms of the uniqueness of the festival, it is important to ascertain that the festival retracts its true essence.

The Media

The media has a seminal role to play in popularizing any event to a greater public. The press coverage of the Phat Bihu festival has been very extensive in the last few years, but mostly limited to local newspapers, with occasional articles in journals as well. The festival does not have an official website, but has recently created a homepage “Phato Bihu” on social media (www.facebook.com).

Just as the publicity and marketing aspect of media coverage is important, so also is the publication of critical reviews, which establishes the profile, credibility and status of the event and draws attention. These articles are however limited to the annual souvenir Bihuwan, that is published by the Phat
Bihu committee during the festival. Other sporadic articles are published in newspapers and journals mostly before or after the celebrations, which may serve as pre-production publicity articles. News channels are invited for the coverage of the event, but one doesn’t see specialized critics and professionals from the national level.

**Performing Ethnicity**

Festivals act as an effective means to mark one or more cultures to ‘other’ cultures. They have the capacity to stimulate political and social norms and generate beneficial opportunities for marginal communities making use of various artistic forms. By showcasing and performing elements that are connected with their culture, communities are able to assert their identity. Carlson voices similar views when he says that cultural performance can allow traditionally marginalized groups to explore relationships between self and society, as well as issues relating to objectification, exclusion and identity (Carlson 1996: 43). Candida-Smith also sees performance as a memory trigger, which is linked to memories of traditional ways of life (Candida-Smith 2002: 209). This is an important feature of post-modern societies where we find a strong sense of rootlessness. Therefore, the urge to connect through the reproduction of heritage arises through festivals which predominantly celebrate community cultures. Such celebrations are promoted to make more commercial sense to the audience. However, in the process of programming, interpretation and representation of art, appropriation of ethnic cultural forms is also seen. Audience development for cultural events thus can be contentious, and is a problematic issue as the desire is to retain a focus, but within a world context.
Hybridization can thus reflect national and global influences that predominance of which can be seen in community festivals today.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter was to examine the relation between contexts of rapid social, economic and global changes, and the transition of festivals like Phat Bihu. There is no doubt that the historic festival has contributed to a continuing sense of community identity in the face of pressures of change associated with the condition of post-modernity. There are inevitable tensions that arise out of the modernization process as visitors come in large numbers and media interest grows. In such circumstances one finds a kind of a continual negotiation and renegotiation within the community.

In case of Phat Bihu festival, a sense of place is made not through legend or recreation of events, but in a determined effort to continue the event as a means to provide a symbolic system of continuity with the past. Thus, authenticity is not the key issue here, rather the sense of belonging that helps to build a homogeneous community feeling. There is a continual flux in the society, and this is an accepted feature of the social life of Dhakuakhana during the event. Nevertheless, outsiders have a limited impact on the celebrations; they are largely welcomed and occupy a social space of their own during the festival days.

The traditional form of the festival, its characteristics, the features of the development of rules and roles together create a strong and sustained sense of community identity. Even media reportage illustrates a connectedness in the
making of this exclusivity where ‘locals’ are made distinct from ‘outsiders’. Festivals like these connect locals, diasporas and outsiders despite whatever discontinuities in social life occur beyond the game. Participation is the key to this strong community identity---participation in the celebrations, spectatorship, the organization, and participating in the ideal of a heritage event, connecting community to individuals in a real, inclusive fashion. This in turn has become a means of cultural, economic and cultural reaffirmation and political empowerment of the less privileged within the community.

The adoption and narrative adaptation of the ‘past’ as a format to formulate the being in the world is not an observation limited to the contemporary Phat Bihu festival only. Researchers of various strands have observed similar processes of mobilizing the past as a symbolic resource to generate and articulate elements of social inclusion and being in the world in a large range of other contemporary contexts (Appadurai 1981; Hobsbawn et al. 1983; Featherstone 1990; Dirks 1990; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). Although, as this chapter has shown, the symbolic contents individuals and groups create within this format are socially contextualized, it needs to be asked which processes generate and which types of authority legitimate its apparent global hegemony. It further needs to be asked which alternative forms or formats have been observed or are possible to escape from the process of packaging the world in standardized ethno-historic boxes and easy-to-consume (non-)cultures.

The overview of the historical context from which this festival originates has highlighted 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 the festival, “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 et al 2009: 14). Finally, from the analysis of the intersecting imageries of this festival, it becomes clear that Phat Bihu festival 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.

It is important to locate festivals within the much wider and constantly changing socio-economic and political contexts that they always operate and respond to---contexts that are historical and modern at the same time. Tourism is bound closely together with such contexts, feeding and challenging festivals with audiences that are increasingly transient and transnational, and with extended numbers of stakeholders and socio-political interests. “The presence of tourists at the periphery of festivity, and also at its centre, interrogates notions of ritual and tradition, shapes new spaces and creates and renews relationships between participants and observers, and between a festival and the conditions of its operation. We cannot dismiss tourists simply as value neutral and crass consumers of spectacle, or tourism as some inevitable commercial force. It is no longer appropriate to view festivals as somehow disjoined and framed instances outside of social, economic and political realities. Festivals draw our attention as participants, tourists and scholars precisely because they provide
moments of time and space to reflect upon our being in the world and questions of collective meaning and belonging” (ibid: 17-18). Tourism and festivals in the same manner, help us to ‘gain control over the conditions under which we struggle with the challenges of life’ and enable us to construct, re-construct and experience the world. The aspect of fluidity in their confines merely mirrors the adaptability of our own lives and ostensibly a perpetual want to connect with the continuum while engaging with change (Bauman 2001: 149).

Notes:

1. Interview with Mr. Jagadish Gogoi, an eminent local, at his residence on May 10, 2012.


7. Interview with Mr. Keshab Gogoi, President of the Permanent Committee of Phat Bihu, at the Phat Bihu festival premises on May 9, 2013.


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