Chapter-V

Phat Bihu: Politics of Celebration and Identity Formation

Introduction

Culture does not involve only cults and customs; rather it is the structure of meaning through which men give shape to their experience. Politics on the other hand, is not coups and constitutions, but one of the principal arenas in which such structures publicly unfold. When we reframe the two thus, determining the connection between them becomes a practicable enterprise, though hardly a modest one. The reason the enterprise is immodest, or anyway especially venturesome, is that there is almost no theoretical apparatus with which to conduct it; the whole field is wedded to “an ethic of imprecision” as Geertz calls it (Geertz 1973: 312). The issues are multiple, involving questions of definition, verification, causality, representativeness, objectivity, measurement, communication. But at the base they all boil down to one question: how to frame an analysis of meaning which will be at once circumstantial enough to carry conviction and abstract enough to forward theory. We shall make an attempt here to draw broad generalizations out of special instances, to penetrate deeply enough into detail to discover something more than detail.

Politics Redefined

The political processes of all nations are wider and deeper than the formal institutions designed to regulate them; some of the most critical decisions concerning the direction of public life are not made in parliaments and
presidiums; they are made in the unformalized realms of what Durkheim called “the collective conscience” (or consciousness) (Durkheim 1893: 44).

When we define the word politics, we find that there has been a transference in its form with the change of time and space. At the beginning, it was considered as a branch of philosophy, history or law. Its chief function was to discover the conventions upon which human society should be based. Basically analytic and normative in character, it centered round ‘what concerned the polis’ or the state, and the academic study focused upon the organization and mechanism of the government and studied the art of government. In designing this kind of definition, the classical thinkers indicated that the state was the highest or most desirable form of social organization. But this kind of definition restricts politics within the jurisdiction of governmental activity as the sole authority in the society to enjoy power. So, there was another attempt to broaden the realm of politics by encompassing all types of public affairs making a distinction between the ‘public’ (politics, commerce, work, art, culture and so on) and ‘personal’ (family and domestic life). There was also another attempt to define politics as consisting of conflict and reconciliation of conflict where power became the ultimate word to describe politics. So, in a nutshell, politics in its modern definition was no longer confined to the state only but has been considered as a universal phenomenon to be found in every corner of society. This kind of paradigm shift therefore started looking at politics “as the activity through which people make, preserve and amend the general rules under which they live in” (Heywood 2007:21). Thus politics, as it came out from the arena of a state institution, other allied disciplines started linking themselves with the
study of politics and newer studies like Political Anthropology, Political Sociology, Sociology of Politics and Culture Studies were born. In the same manner, Folklore Studies as an offshoot of Cultural Anthropology also tried to bring within its periphery some studies on politics and both these disciplines came closer in order to meet certain demands.

**Politics, Culture and Identity**

Society and politics constitute the key determinants of culture in the present times. Theoretical debates assert the supremacy of analytical and political examination of the common practices over culture itself. In case of popular culture meanings are constructed at the moment of consumption. Such meanings become the locus of discourses on cultural and political values. As Hall argues, popular culture is an arena of consent and resistance in the struggle over cultural meanings. It is the site where cultural hegemony is secured or challenged (Hall 1989: 254). The questions of cultural or aesthetic value no longer concerns the judgments about popular culture; rather the power and the place of such culture within the wider social formation is what interests them more. Generally, popular culture circles around the power relations operative in a society.

Identity concerns with self-identity and social identity, that is, the personal and the social. It is about us, the people and our relations with one another. Identity is not a fixed thing that we possess but a becoming. The human self is made up of multiple and variable identities. It is understood as something fragmented and decentered. Cultural identity thus, is taken to be not a manifestation of an
established, innate condition of existence, but rather as a process of becoming within points of analogy and variance. Meanings continually make shifts and changes in case of such identities. They are enunciated and secured together by emblematic or implicative components that have been sanctioned by authority and customs. As such, the attributes of civil life that we take to be as compounded and continual can be judged as the distinctive, historically explicit, transitory stabilization or arbitrary closure of meaning. The apparent unity of identity is really the articulation of different and distinct elements that under other historical and cultural circumstances could be re-articulated in different ways. Thus, individuals are the unique, historically specific, articulation of discursive elements that are contingent but also socially determined or regulated. In the plasticity of identity lies its political significance. Discourses, identities and social practice in time-space form a mutually constituting set implicated in the cultural politics of identity and the constitution of humanity as a form of life (Barker 2008: 176). Therefore, the phrase "identity politics" will refer to collective sensibilities and actions that come from a particular location within society, in direct defiance of universal categories that tend to subsume, erase, or suppress this particularity. "Location," in this sense, implies a distinctive social memory, consciousness, and practice, as well as place within the social structure.

In this context, Assmann argues that the specific character that a person derives from belonging to a distinct society and culture is not seen to maintain itself for generations as a result of phylogenetic evolution, but rather as a result of socialization and customs (Assmann 1997: 243). The existence of a particular
community in the sense of a culturally reproduced class is an act of the cultural memory. Memory denotes the ways in which people construct a sense of the past. It is used to signify first-hand experiences as also the representation of the past through “vehicles of memory” (Yerushalmi 1989: 32) such as books, museums, celebrations etc., and thus transforming it into a shared cultural knowledge. It is a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation. The supply of knowledge in the cultural memory is characterized by sharp distinctions made between those who belong and those who do not. Access to and transmissions of this knowledge are controlled by a “need for identity” (Mol 1976: 89).

Cultural memory always relates its knowledge to an actual and contemporary situation and thus works by means of reconstructing---sometimes by criticism, sometimes by preservation or by transformation. As Guha puts it,

“…tradition is eroded by time not only in the long run. It suffers some loss even by being handed down from one generation to the next, and the modification this brings about gains in depth and scope as the inheritors set to work on their legacy with all the revisionist energies that belong to their own time and their own world---in sum, to their own life as distinct from that of their predecessors”.

(Guha1997: 77)

Memory and celebration can be understood both from a political and psychological standpoint. The political perspective contends that memory and celebrations are primarily related to a sense of connection and identity. It attributes festival observances as incentives affecting community sentiment. On the other hand, the psychological approach reiterates the individual and shared
urge of a society to transcend traumatic experiences through commemorative events. Only a combination of both the political and the psychological, can aid a better understanding of the phenomena of celebrations.

For Halbwachs, tradition is about ‘pastness’ and not just about the past. It is a metadiscourse which allows the past to cease to be a ‘scarce resource’ and allows it to become… a renewable resource. He contends that studying memory is not a matter of reflecting on the properties of the subjective mind; rather, memory is a matter of how minds work together in society, how their operations are structured by social arrangements: “It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (Halbwachs 1992: 38). Halbwachs thus asserted that it is virtually not possible for individuals to recollect in any coherent and persistent fashion outside of their group contexts. Group memberships supply the materials for memory and stimulate the individual into recalling particular events and into forgetting others. As has already been mentioned above, groups can even produce memories in individuals of events that they never experienced in any direct sense. Contemporary scholarship has even pursued a “collective psychology” approach to cultural history, which views the past as constituent of “the whole complex of ideas, aspirations, and feelings which links together the members of a social group” (Goldmann 1964:17). In Germany, many historians and social scientists have revived an older, philosophical concept of “historical consciousness” to guide analysis, linking it to concerns about “the politics of history”, which indicates both the role of history in politics and the role of politics in history. Yet another camp has employed the term mnemohistory,
which “… is concerned not with the past as such, but only with the past as it is remembered” (Assmann 1997: 9). Mnemohistory thus warrants for a theory of cultural communication that portrays history not as a chronological series of objective stages, but as a functional process of meaning making through time, which Assmann calls as the “ongoing work of reconstructive imagination” (ibid: 15). Similarly, the hermeneutic tradition, particularly German philosopher Gadamer argues that the meaning of life can be found in the constant making and remaking of self-consciousness through interpretations without end (Gadamer 1997: 11). There are diverse explanations forwarded by scholars concerning the ascending interest in the past. They have sought to expound memory, commemoration, nostalgia, and history in contexts ranging from consumer promotions, popular culture, interior and exterior design, and public space, as well as the rise of amendments, apologies, and other forms of reparations in domestic and international politics. Answers to these have included the decline of the nation-state as a carrier of identity, the end of faith in progress, the rise of multiculturalism, and post modernity more generally. Most famously, and most generally, the French historian and editor Nora has claimed that we spend so much time thinking about the past because there is so little of it left: where we earlier lived lives suffused with pastness— the continuities of habit and custom—we now live disconnected from our pasts, seeing ourselves as radically different than our forebears (Nora 1996: 45). Lowenthal voices a like opinion when he says that the idea of self-conscious adherence to past ways of acting (whether genuine or spurious) is itself a product of our distance from the past, which has come to be seen as “a foreign country” (Lowenthal 1985:
23). In Nora’s terms, where once we were immersed in *milieux de mémoire* (worlds of memory), we moderns now consciously cultivate *lieux de mémoire* (places of memory) because memory is now a special topic (Nora 1996: 7-25). In a similar manner, the Marxist historian Hobsbawm has distinguished between worlds of custom and worlds of “invented tradition” (Hobsbawm 1992: 98).
Since the late nineteenth century, not only have nation-states sought to shore up declining legitimacy by propagating fictional pasts and a sense of their institutions ancientness, but people have also invented the very category of tradition (as opposed to custom).

**The Politics of Celebrations**

Festivals, discusses the interconnections among social and political structures and the contingent histories that constitute a sense of national identity across local and regional affiliations, and investigates how live stage performances are directed at increasing the cultural representation of ethnic groups, and how festivals go beyond these cultural events and legitimise processes of cultural conservation, and enact and extend those cultures to the formation of identity of a nation. Anthropological research about festivals involves the study of cultural conservation, national identity formation, and the economic and political dimensions of cultural representation. Precisely because these festivals invoke tradition and modernity as sources of legitimacy, the significance of political strategies and cultural creativity becomes an important aspect of inquiry (Hannerz 1989: 21; Appadurai 1990: 13); how local cultural forms are transformed through commodification and folklorisation of stage events within
the framework of global conventions becomes a key area of inquiry. Karp argues that the specific “display” of cultural traditions presented in festivals, unlike museum exhibitions, are settings for unrestrained and sensually unrestricted experience, since they do not limit interaction between audience and objects (Karp 1991: 23-25). Hence in festivals, there is no physical barrier between the audience and the “display” or warning about violating space (Ames 1986: 186-187; Alpers 1990: 68-69). Instead, festivals invoke pleasurable, sensual experiences that more totally involve the person. This totalising participation encourages involvement in live cultural presentations and makes festivals vibrant, active and full of interaction. This means that festivals allow complete sharing of stage experiences among artists and spectators (Cohen 1982: 329). Festivals “stage culture” to indicate indigineity and identity through live performances (Stocking 1985: 102). Such sorts of studies on festivals and national identity formation have a functionalist position where in large measure they yield explanations about festivals either as events that showcase key symbols and commonly held values, thereby strengthening group cohesion and national consciousness or as daily breaks—a “time out of time” (Falassi 1987: 13)—that serve as a safety valve to relieve daily tensions associated with human interaction in multiethnic societies. Indeed, identity assumes such importance, in part, because what one can claim— and legitimate—as an identity is closely related to the cultural and political resources to which one can claim (Papanek 1994: 42). For Appadurai the ability of any group to assume control over those local practices and interactions in which constructions of identity are most likely to be constituted and authenticated is in many respects a factor of
differential access to the arenas in which national culture is produced and enacted through, among other things, festival (Appadurai 1987: 24).

Commemoration, as a “vehicle of memory”, is thus a way that keeps collective and historical memory alive (Hobsbawm 1992: 112). Each commemoration helps to strengthen the memory of the historical events: a past, which would otherwise be lost in time, is protected from the threat of oblivion through celebrations and commemorations. As Metraux puts it:

“Traditional feasts and festivals constitute symbolically, a way of recalling the origins---whether mythical or historical---of a community of men. They are occasions when cultural and national identity can be reasserted and feelings of self-awareness and participation in common experiences reaffirmed”.

(Metraux 1976: 67)

Celebrations thus transform places from being everyday settings into temporary environments that contribute to the production, processing and consumption of culture, concentrated in time and place. They are public spaces where indigenous people re-assert that they belong to a different and the same socio-political body and thus create a new ethics of cross-cultural engagement. Moreover, festivals also provide examples of how culture is contested. Indigenous cultural festivals are managed and run by indigenous or non-indigenous organizations, or individuals, to celebrate, share, and most importantly, maintain indigenous culture. In doing so, indigenous people demand not only the recognition of cultural difference but also are creating a public space for the negotiation of distinct and conflicting wills and sovereignty. These cultural spaces are not necessarily as good where historical
conflicts are resolved and we all live in reconciled harmony. Such festivals have traditionally been innovative and have always been controlled. In the recent times attempts by commercial interests to control festivals reflect a wider situation in which marketing agencies and managers are transforming culture into an industry. Today, promoting festivals is related to place promotion, and this encourages the so-called ‘safe’ forms. This underlines on an inherent strain between festival as art and economics, between culture and cultural politics. Celebrations in such situations become a kind of power play, a dramatic arena in which cultural politics assumes style, shape and significance. Festivals are often temporary, set up for special purposes and disbanded after the event. If they perpetuate themselves they do so not continuously but periodically. The “objects” on display in a festival, are usually not objects but mostly live performances. Therefore festivals frequently act as primary agents of cultural conservation, and stages for the construction and consolidation of national identity formation.

Having said thus, we can contend that identity is a fluid term. Any discourse on identity politics involves two important aspects---local identities shaped by global forces (Appadurai 1995: 11), and politics as "struggles over [cultural] meanings at the level of daily life" (Escobar 1992: 137). The key enquiry here would be the ways in which power is generated, applied, mediated, and thwarted by people in everyday settings. The process of renunciation or re-articulation forms a section of the response; how people come up with new ways to pronounce and accomplish together the pursuits and ethics that have traditional significance to the society as a whole. Celebrations, that have always
been a key component of community life, render prime groundwork for considering traditional performances of a community. There may be several reasons for this. Festivals are normally annual events, and so it gives one the opportunity to understand and examine a specific community’s cultural production through a time span of several years and consider the changes in their illustrative approaches.

Let us begin by quoting Manning,

“What constitutes celebration? Four central features of the genre emerge clearly…first, celebration is performance; it is, or entails, the dramatic presentation of cultural symbols. Second, celebration is entertainment; it is done for enjoyment---for the fun of it---however much it is tinctured, consciously or unconsciously, with ideological significance or pragmatic intent. Third, celebration is public. The word itself means *inter alia*, to proclaim openly and to achieve renown. Celebration socializes personal meanings, enacting them on the street, on the stage, in the stadium…Fourth, celebration is participatory. Increasing professionalism notwithstanding, celebration actively involves its constituency; it is not simply a show put on for disengaged spectators”.

(Manning 1983: 3-7)

Georges’ works initiated a transfer of attention from form and content to process and practice in folklore studies (Georges 1969: 14-46). Scholars throughout various analogous disciplines started addressing matters which involved aspects constituting performance in cross-cultural situations. As a result, the disciplines of ethnomusicology, folklore and other fields confronted new and dynamic concepts, aspects and elements of performance, which are
apposite to the matter of representation. According to Shay, the issues that were examined involved---

- The influence of context on the content and manner of performance,
- The dynamic and contingent relationship between the performer(s) and the audience,
- The performance as a framed event,
- The idea that performances frequently require special places and times,
- The presence of a high level of stereotypical behavior and,
- The evaluation and judgments of the audience members of the competence of the performers.

Shay further calls attention to the crucial role of the audience as active participants in any performance event that was initiated by Bauman (Shay 2006: 43-78). Bauman says,

“Performance…calls for special attention to, and heightened awareness of, the act of expression, and gives license to the audience to regard the act of expression and the performer with special intensity”.

(Bauman 1975: 30)

This concept added a valuable insight and the audience thus became a vital constituent of performance events. This is also because the representational performances are constructed specifically for an audience; the role of the audience is complex and diverse in the performances and they bring different levels of knowledge and experience to the evaluations of the performance. And ultimately, the members of the audience, and its composition, potentially bring influence to bear on the content and the manner of performance.
Phat Bihu and the Politics of Representation

The process in which the articulation and modification of power relations in celebratory rituals operate is our prime focus here. This analysis would require us to look into the political relationship between the “audience” and “producer.” In regard to Phat Bihu festival a vital correspondence pivots around the dissemination of power within the area of the festival rituals. The promotion of the festival as a major tourist attraction is a recent trend – an event celebrating culture, food and handicraft all laid out for those willing to taste and buy culture. The celebrations are a part of a larger campaign promoting Dhakuakhana as a tourist destination, and the emergence of a new imagination that constructs the place as a cultural hub encompassing everything there is to see and taste within the cultural territory of the region. The festival organization, to a large degree, claims to celebrate the “unity” in cultural diversity, and promote multiculturalism through the celebrations. The presentational strategies in which the various ethnic groups are displayed, demonstrates that the festival designs to showcase the community as marked or unmarked, as the performers are arrayed as exotic through the performance of ancient, untainted traditions. By unmarked here, we would like to mean a kind of absence in the mainstream which in turn leads to the construction of an exclusive marked identity. Thus, the celebrations involve both culture and politics, or rather cultural politics. This would mean the involvement of an antithesis; one is the politicization of culture, that is, the translation of cultural symbols, beliefs and values into political discourse and strategy. The second is the depiction of power machinations in
terms of culture. Dynamic celebrations like Phat Bihu are symbolic fields for executing power struggles, and achieving prestige and material objectives. When we look into the organizational structure of the celebrations, we would notice that the office-bearers are people who belong to the general castes of the area---mostly people belong to the Ahom and Chutiya communities. They are the ones who govern the decision making processes. Representation of people belonging to the tribes like Mising and Deori who are inevitable parts of the celebratory processes, are very less in number. So also is female representation which would take us altogether to another area, that of gender discrimination, which we shall not go into detail here. Therefore, those who command the celebration are also the people who influence the social order, and hence there is a tendency to ritualize that dominance in order to sustain and legitimize it.

Another aspect of the power play can be seen in a visible friction between the Ahom and the Chutiya communities. The politics of memory and history may be said to be in operation here. History does not only concern teaching about the past, but it also involves the use of public space to represent it. Manifestations of memory represent a subjective reconstruction of the past. There are two principal attitudes to the past: memory and history. Memory is based on identification with the past, whereas history is based on distance with respect to the past, on its treatment as an external object and not as a part of the self. And politics is not about the past but about the future. In Chapter I, we have already mentioned that Habung was the kingdom of the Chutiyas for a long time till it came under the direct rule of the Ahom king in 1512 A.D. Memory, being
based on identification, is always incurably egocentric. Thus, a kind of desire to control can be clearly discerned in the hostility involving both the communities. Another recurrent theme of celebration politics is the brand—branding of the festival and branding of the place. Such branding enables one to view the festival as fundamental to the host place and both in turn gets linked by a symbolic relationship. Thus, Dhakuakhana and Mohghuli Chapori are important as they contribute to the profile of Phat Bihu festival. This branding forms an important component of cultural politics as the identity of the festival and the region is consolidated in terms of its traditions or heritage. It exemplifies a form of resistance and attempts to re-appropriate the festival brand as expression of a unified exclusive identity.

In any study of cultural representation, the modes and manner, as well as the process of decision making concerning representation form core areas of enquiry. At first glance these areas may appear to be purely aesthetic in nature, but they are often conditioned by political, social and ethnic enterprises. “Those events that do have festival in their titles are generally contemporary modern constructions, employing festival characteristics but serving the commercial, ideological, or political purposes of self-interested authorities or entrepreneurs” (Stoeltje 1992: 261-262). Studies have revealed that the organizers and community leaders basically make political decisions regarding how members will represent ethnicity, class and gender, which most of the time appear to be garbed as aesthetic choices. “Our proposition”, like Bauman says, “is that the management of a folk festival is a political field in its own right, though with significant links to larger political arenas. The festival field is organized in
terms of power relations, structures of authority and legitimacy, and differential control over values” (Bauman and Sawin 1991: 290).

Let us advance the present discourse by looking at the symbolism of the play and ritual modes of celebration in Phat Bihu festival, in order to further consider the matter of their political implications and functions. Celebratory ritual is necessarily metonymical; it communicates meaning through the principle that a part is taken as representative of the whole (pars pro toto, Turner)\(^1\), where a limited number of highly condensed forms represent and integrate a wide spectrum of cultural data. The celebratory performances in Phat Bihu festival have a signifying composition and arrangement. The dominant symbols of the festivity convert the everyday existence into an alternate realm of symbolic communication. Its demonstrative emblems---uniforms, flags, other images of ideology and social structure---are what Ortner terms “summarizing” symbols; they affirm, unify, and soberly reinforce a broad field of conceptual and emotional significance (Ortner 1973: 1343). However, certain other aspects are to be considered too. For e.g., the Constitution of Phat Bihu lays down the mandatory dress code of ethnic garments for all the festival partakers. While Dhakuakhana is inhabited by a host of ethnic castes and tribes each having their own unique ethnic dresses, only those donning Muga clothes are allowed inside the main premise of the celebratory rituals. Muga being only one of the many materials used for weaving clothes in the Assamese community; other ethnic communities use various other materials for the same. Ritualistic celebration thus conveys only a version of the social order that is meant to be believed, or at least acknowledged and adhered to, and over which social powers exert control.
A celebration is a huge text---a creation of graphic artistry that spontaneously illustrates, enacts and appraises its social background. According to MacCannell the celebratory symbols are model(s) that incorporate the collective reality of the celebrants, ascribe a dramatic form to it, and convey subjective and evaluative impacts. He makes use of the term “cultural production” to argue that in modern societies it is cultural productions, not economic productions that have superceded traditional social relations as a basis of shared values and sensitivities. Cultural productions have become the generative basis of myths, lifestyles and even worldviews. Instead of social formations giving rise to symbolic expressions, it is now symbols that are creating social groups. Social entities arise, and often develop an amazing if ephemeral solidarity because they share interests deriving from television programs, movies, sports, entertainment and so on. “The modern world,” as MacCannell reflects, “has the capacity to organize itself around ideas of bourgeois idealists” (MacCannell 1976:85).

Paine similarly urges that metaphor works to stimulate change. It boosts the meaning of the content, applies one mode of perception to another, and supports the appropriateness of alternate interpretations and responses. Correspondingly, metaphor works among those who are somewhat ineffectual, and whose interests lie primarily in transforming the balance to their favour. Metonymy on the other hand, works in the opposite way, that is, to impede change. It clips and narrows thought to the mundane, incorporating it within concepts and practices that are already known. It thus has a closed format which is basically redundant. Metonymy therefore thrives among comparatively the powerful lot, people whose pursuits lie in maintaining the status quo (Paine 1981:474-476).
Such reasoning is evidently logical in case of festivals like Phat Bihu. Metaphorical celebrations command greater prevalence among marginal people—people who are in the borderline of not only the cultural axis of modernity, but also political power. But in considering this aspect we must also relate it to another angle. The aesthetics of celebration being subjective and fundamental, the practice involves the process of competing and reason. As community and participatory events, celebrations are remarkably susceptible to antithetical observations. Social rivals grapple for power, status and other directions within the festival situation as also outside of it. Therefore, corresponding to other cultural productions, a celebration does not plainly “reflect” the political field; it is integrally and influentially a part of it. Cohen in this regard, indicates that there is an ongoing dialectical or “two-dimensional” dynamic connection between symbolic expression and power relations, each responsive to the other (Cohen 1974: 547). He extends this notion in a discussion of how symbolic events are “contested” by sociopolitical opponents. He says that carnivals have

“…the potentialities…for articulating both hegemonous and opposition political formations. Both orientations are present in every carnival, thus in effect posing a contradiction within a unity of form. Like a grand joking relationship, carnival expresses both alliance and enmity, both consensus and conflict, at one and the same time. In other words, it is an ambiguous symbolic formation that camouflages and mystifies a contradiction”.

(Cohen 1982: 51)
Cohen continues with his contention that ideally there is an even balance between the two forms of expression. If the balance gets drastically interrupted, a carnival would get transformed into a totally different genre:

“If the festival is made to express pure and naked hegemony, it becomes a massive political rally of the type staged under totalitarian political systems. On the other hand, if it is made to express pure opposition, it becomes a political demonstration against the system. In either extreme case it ceases to be a carnival (ibid: 54).”

So, even though celebration stays in a state of ongoing mutability, an inclined dualism, however disproportionate, between dynamic and traditional groups, between the competitive vigor of somewhat passive social groups and their relatively influential adversaries, is always likely to be present. Celebration thus, not only embodies, but also boosts, dynamic political processes, including the rearrangement of assemblages and hierarchy within the community.

Another important approach reinforces a duality, not necessarily correspondent, between performance and practice. Whereas on the one hand, celebration is driven to the direction of ritual by modernist and hierarchical agents, the classical and egalitarian inclinations on the other hand, pushes the tendency of celebration backwards. If we consider Cohen’s observation to accede an analogous standpoint, celebration that is driven too far in the course of ritualism, tends to be decreased to literalism and expediency, casting not only its ludic traits but also its liminoid disposition. Similarly, celebration that is more performance based has qualities more of circumvention devoid of any substantial connection with the actual experience of the celebrants.
“The coincidence of opposites, then,” Manning says, “lies at the heart of celebration’s symbolic and political vitality. Celebration does not resolve or remove ambiguity and conflict, but embellishes them. It locates these basic and eternal social facts, as Durkheim might have called them, in a performance context in which they can be thought about, acted upon, and aesthetically appreciated. The celebrant’s hope is that the rhythm of performance will find an echo in life, if only for the moment”.

(Manning, 1983: 29-30)

Unification and separation are intertwined in signification processes produced in the realm of culture and politics. Cultural heritage as a special category of cultural values is produced by communities and reproduced in politics (Barnett 2001; Lammy 2006). In politics it is used to make the point of homogeneity or heterogeneity in different images of society (Amin 2004). Some stress the complex nature of society and presuppose value pluralism as a fact of life (Berlin 2002; Graham et al., 2007). Others believe in certain universal values in society that serves as a basis for intercultural understanding and stability (Raz 2003; Leonardi 2006). These contradicting views on value pluralism and value monism both are substantiated by referring to cultural heritage and stress its contribution to unification or its expression of cultural diversity. The opposition produces competing concepts of citizenship and identity, as citizenship focuses on value consensus which is again based on value monism, whereas the concept of identity lodges pluralist views on societal values (Graves-Brown et al. 1996; Tsaliki 2007). During argues that cultural heritage addresses issues of both pluralism and universalism and to understand these issues we need to explore
the production of cultural heritage values and its relation to the politics of identity construction. It is this politics of identity construction that uses cultural heritage to mark differences or affiliations with other communities. ‘United in diversity’, Europe’s motto, has strong implications for the way politicians frame culture and its legacies we call cultural heritage. Ideas on specific identities that are the products of specific regional life conditions give rise to identity constructs in which the geographical peculiarities of regions play a significant role. This idea can be easily combined with notions of wider scale identities such as national in which citizenship with its shared norms and values are presupposed (During 2011:453-466).

The strategies of identity formation involve the purposeful inculcation of a host of factors as essentially characteristic of a group. This has served to be a fundamental way of group management since olden times. This procedure has been used quite consistently by dominant forces for efficient rule. As soon as this policy becomes successful completely, every member of the community starts recognizing those elements as vital for their existence and identity. The group then tends to reject and resist, individually and collectively, any effort whether initiated from within or without, to remove the elements from the cluster. Thus, having a collective identity has obviously been an essential requirement not only for group solidarity, but also for formulating its essence as a discrete entity, which grants it a privilege and particularity from other groups.

There is a steady flutter in the dynamism in respect to which conditions of identity functions, and the creation of legacies as part of it, dominates in
different points of time. Therefore, it would seem relevant to contend that when a group is fluctuating in a crisis situation, the work of identity and the generation of heritage functions as critical means for ensuring its sustenance. But, this may work in contrary too; that is, when a community has attained a high level of concord, or when it is not exposed to challenges, the vigor of identity work may be lost, and tradition in such circumstances mostly gets condensed to commodification of the objects and images (including stories and memories) that are part of the already recognized repertoire.

Slater says,

“Cultural festivals are public spaces where indigenous people re-assert that they belong to a different and the same socio-political body. To ethically engage with one another we are responsible for our own flourishing whilst not depleting another’s life force. They are cultural –political spaces that challenge us to create a new ethics of cross-cultural engagement…they are public spaces in which indigeneity cannot be assimilated or appropriated but rather where ‘we’ work toward new forms of relationality” (Slater 2009: 53). She further argues that traditional welfare necessitates the creation of social spaces in which the lived reality of native lives can assert itself over and against the social construction of that reality by the mainstream. Cultural festivals are managed and run by indigenous or non-indigenous organizations, or individuals, who seek to celebrate, share and, most importantly maintain heritage. In the process, the community demands not only the recognition of cultural difference but also creates a public space for the negotiation of distinct and conflicting wills and sovereignty. These cultural spaces are not necessarily as good as people aspire, where historical conflicts are resolved and we all live in reconciled harmony (ibid: 60).
In recent times, the discourse about tradition and heritage in general, has been bounded by a condition of change. The native population is almost always characterized as disadvantaged or deficient compared to the mainstream. In a remote place like Dhakuakhana, the community is structured through comparison with the mainstream population involving data across a range of socio-economic indicators like health status, education and employment levels, income and housing etc. These comparisons awaken the community to vast inequalities, and demand an engagement of the mainstream with their lived experience and values. The recognition of gross social inequalities can prompt urgent action by the state and community. It also implicitly, if not deceptively, foregrounds the kind of social ideals state and community organizations should aim for: social norms based on non-indigenous, national ideals of experience and well-being. These assimilationist ideals pay out in kinds of policies, strategies, community groups and welfare services formulate and document at regional and local levels. This is another way in which cultural politics seek to function.

As we have discussed above, there are considerable socio-economic challenges in many communities and individual lives. However, the dominant discourse creates the impression that such communities are terminal places outside of rational, modern world; they are decaying and hence no dialogue is required. Arrangements that are being deployed reinforce mainstream values which in turn boost new structures of belonging that purposefully downplays culture and tradition. The play of modernity disregards cultural heritage as a contemporary force or power that must be negotiated, indeed harnessed, as a vital life force.
Therefore, the social/public space goes for a particular performance of subject-citizen and by embodying such a position one seeks to find their rightful place in the scheme of affairs.

Under such circumstances, festivals work like an in-between space which facilitates direct interactions. The potential for self and social transformation lies in what Turner refers to as, ‘liminal’ space—between belonging and not, home and anxiety (Turner 1969: 359). Festivals utilize, create and transform social spaces. While certain spaces can be specially recognized and reserved for periodic festivity, it is more usual for general spaces to be transformed by festive acts in which they are imbued with ‘the meaning and power of the occasion’ (Abrahams, 1987: 178). Thus, streets normally used as thoroughfares for public and vehicular access during the course of daily working hours are cordoned off and reserved for festive performances. Previous spatial functionalities become hidden and forgotten, signs become meaningless, directions reverse, boundaries cease to bound and the mundane is decorated and disguised and overtaken by different rituals and practices. The temporary realignment, and in some cases reversal of space and its uses is part of what Turner sees as liminality, moments (time) and places (space) of ambiguity where daily realities are suspended (Turner op cit). The festival audience is not at home in their ordinary world nor are they completely displaced. The festival participant and the tourist share this luminal condition not only as something that is merely transitional and marginal as van Gennep has posited⁷, but also as a time and space that is genuinely creative and desired; indeed, as a state that is increasingly cultivated by societies. Following Turner, Kleinert also observes
that cultural performances are not simply expressions of social systems, but rather they are also reflective: implicitly or explicitly commenting on social life and the way society deals with its own history (Kleiner 1999. 345-357). The recent shift of scholarly focus towards performance has helped to raise the profile of festivals as a significant academic site for cultural investigation and to open up channels for dialogue with other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. There is abundant evidence of the impact of poststructuralist and postmodernist thinking in mainstream festival literature itself. The issues of gender, social status, kinship, ethnicity and power have been addressed, as well as more reflexive concerns related to bodily experience. From an ethnological perspective, such contemporary aspects of study in relation to festivals may be examined diachronically, particularly in the performances where the past is perceived as being of key significance.

The festival history in case of Phat Bihu, like in others, has also a particular propensity to foreground cultural memory as embodied practice by virtue of its predominantly somatic modes of transmission. In the traditional displays, it could be argued that longevity of human memory is publicly enacted, demonstrating the ethereality of human existence and the continuity of human experience, as successive generations represent the performances. There are certain traditional forms of celebrations, where participants, as performers and audience alike, have celebrated as manifestations of cultural stability and continuity. In this study we have looked at the formation of Phat Bihu as a festival and have observed how individuals and ethnic groups developed these traditions through formal staging and performances for purposes of self-
representation to the outside world. The festival thus constitutes an ideal vehicle of representation, through songs, dances and folk performances, which becomes emblematic of ethnic identity, an instant embodied communal reference. These, because of their embodied character become an ideal vehicle for cultural representation. There is a continuous, dynamic process that links performative behavior with social and ethical structure: the way people think about and organize their lives and specify individual and group values; performance is the art that is open, unfinished, decentered, liminal. It is a paradigm of process.

Let us now focus on some other moot points relevant to our discussion---

MacCannell underlines the fundamental importance of “cultural productions” in the world. According to him cultural outputs are dramatic presentations which comprises of

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

In his terms, celebratory symbols are the prototypes that subsume the social experience of the celebrants, and cast it in dramatic form, and communicate cognitive and evaluative influences. Celebration articulates and modifies power relations and in examining these, the relation between the “producer” and the “audience” becomes crucial. (MacCannell 1976: 119-122).
The contemporary times evinces an accelerating zeal for ethnic recognition in individuals and groups, a search for ethnic identity, and a conscious exhibition of distinctive ethnic traits. This trend is evident in every society and is mainly brought about by a sense of cultural dislocation owing to precipitating structural change, social mobility and globalization processes. There is an urge in the people to search for a reassertion of their identities. The earlier symbolic enactments of rituals and festivals have lost their significance. In this disillusionment of modern existence---Kierkegaard says,

“Youth has the illusion of hope; the adult has the illusion of recollection…the youth has illusions, hopes for something extraordinary from life and from himself; the adult in recompense, is often found to have illusions about his memories of his youth”.

(Kierkegaard 1980: 66)

In the process a number of forces come into operation. Phat Bihu celebrations offer a kind of “official ideology” which is symbolically constructed by extending the past into the present, showing that one’s heritage is an ongoing timeless experience. The ability to understand and project this ideology, the way it is to be manipulated is crucial in cultural politics. The organizing committee remains the most important shareholder in the festival. The celebratory rituals have a metonymic structure and content that affirms, unifies and reinforces a broad field of conceptual and emotional significance through dominant symbols. Such celebrations conveys a version of the social order that is meant to be believed, or at least acknowledged and adhered to, and over which society exerts control. The celebrants are eventually returned to the wider society with
cultural resources that they may use either to resist external influences or, alternately, to negotiate and compete on behalf of local interests. The festivities are carried out as acts of reaffirmation of an ideal, unified past. The festival becomes a space in which different internal dynamics and oppositions come to life by the performance of distinctive narratives and values. During the days of the celebrations, visitors are friends and are extended a very warm hospitality, but the locals refer to them as “outsiders”. For the festival days, physically and metaphorically they take up their own social space, but they can never partake in the festival rituals or other decision making processes. In this way, they determine the ideal of a special social identity thus rejecting the influence of outside forces.

The festival days, filled with social interaction, feasting, and dancing, are in sharp contrast to the harsh subsistence realities of everyday life throughout the year. This extraordinary period calls for setting aside normal schedules and activities and represent social conditions when the sacred and the mundane domains of existence have no visible separation. While the logic of celebration is ideological and structural, the process of celebration has become competitive and dialectical. Like we have mentioned in the preceding pages, as a public and participatory phenomenon, the celebration is unusually open to conflicting claims. Here social rivals contend for power, prestige, and other objectives within the context of celebration as well as beyond it. Like other cultural productions therefore, this celebration does not simply “reflect” the political field. Rather it is integrally and influentially a part of it. Although the historical significance of the festival seems to be incidental and even artificial, as
something based on a deliberate (re)construction of memory, the symbolism nevertheless becomes an important diagnostic metaphor. A closer examination yields much ethnographic detail about the respective communities that facilitates a more precise historical placement of celebratory activities. In addition, the comparative examination of the structural components of the celebration lays bare the dynamic relationship between symbolism and power where memory becomes an important motive of cultural politics.

In the preceding sections we have seen how individuals within ethnic groups, and the various ethnic groups as collectives keenly desired and constructed means of representation in Phat Bihu festival that would show their respective communities in a positive light to the outside world. In addition to the inter-communal interaction and the festival directors, the media and other individuals from outside of the community also influenced the course of decision making not directly but discursively, thus augmenting the realm of contention between the members of the ethnic communities and the festival organisers. These individuals often demanded that performers from specific ethnic groups represent their communities in stereotypical and “authentic” ways, to be decided by the organisers so that it displays a particular kind of identity to the audience. Members of different ethnic groups often feel absorbed by these mainstream individuals in what they regard as a delicately masked attempt not only to dictate to them how they should be represented through the choices they make in their presentations, but more thickly, to cast them in an auxiliary and supplemental role.
The concerns of representation are imminent in this study as representation involves power, and is associated with political, social, and economic factors. Thus, issues of how a community is to be represented, specifically in its manifestation to the outside world, in contexts such as folk festivals, and who has the power to make the decisions that pertains to representation become central to this study. “Representations about how cultures are presented reflect deeper judgments of power and authority and can, indeed, resolve themselves into claims about what a nation is ought to be as well as how citizens should relate to one another” (Karp and Lavine, 1991:2). This observation applies to ethnic spheres too, for they often represent microcosms of the politics of identity of the homeland. Therefore, the various modes of representation that characterize performances reflect larger social changes occurring in both the specific ethnic community and in mainstream society. Following Rattansi, this study concerns itself with the way in which representation of ethnicity is constructed, challenged, and asserted:

“There is a shift, first, from an earlier period characterized by a struggle over relations of representation—taking the form of demands for access to the apparatuses and technologies of representation, and the contestation of gross stereotypes and replacement with “positive images”—to a politics of representation where the demands of the “positive” image are now regarded as suffocating the possibilities for exploring the huge variety of ethnic, sub-cultural and sexual identities pulsating in the minority communities. Moreover, there is an experimentation with modernist and postmodernist forms which break from an equally stifling aesthetic of “realism” imposed by the demands of the “positive image” (usually privileging middle-class hetero-sexuality).

(Rattansi 1994: 74)
When there are changes in modes of representation, it often signals a shift in self-perception of ethnic identity. In a study such as this which addresses the question of how groups of people, in this case specific ethnic communities, make and carry out decisions, there is a danger of essentializing. In discussing cooperative group efforts such as folk performances, one can forget that it is individuals who make decisions, create dances, and organize events within the context of their specific social and ethnic milieus. Within groups, individuals, as human actors, have agency, they interact with other people and make decisions that are accepted, sometimes modified, or rejected by the group. Identity politics hence deals collective sensibilities and actions that come from a particular location within society, in direct defiance of universal categories that subsume, erase, or suppress this particularity. “Location” in this sense implies a distinctive social memory, consciousness, and practice, as well as place within the social structure.

This study has addressed the way in which ethnic communities utilize tradition as a visual icon of their identity, especially in public forums, such as the events like the Phat Bihu festival, in which conscious decisions are taken regarding the mode of representation of a community, and the individuals within it, choose for self-representation. These choices frequently contribute to identity construction. Abrahams speaks of festive celebrations as occasions for the community to ‘boast’ reflecting a common observation, in both historical and contemporary circumstances, that the various economic, social and political elements and materiality of festivals are geared to deliberate display (Abrahams 1982: 161). Dance, embodied, colourfully costumed and saturated with
polysemic symbols of identity, constitutes an ideal vehicle for display in public arenas. Folk dance in particular has come to be regarded as a primordial identity marker of ethnic groups for over a century now. The dances that are performed in Phat Bihu are folk and as Arkin and Smith says, “a certain repertory of markers, then, was sufficient to function emblematically, reinforcing the spectators’ sense that they were somehow gaining access to the essence of a culture or nation…” (Arkin and Smith 1997: 34).

The many communities saw political, social, and economic benefits in preparing folk dance performances for the public arena, by providing visibility in the community at-large. As the various communities want to show themselves in the most positive way possible, and thus conscious decisions regarding community and ethnic representation become areas of contestation both within the community and between the community and the presenters.

This study identifies three periods of differing modes of representation of performances in the public arena of the Phat Bihu festival. During the first period, that started from the period after independence in the late 1940’s, individuals in communities prepared for the festival by staging whatever was at hand. The second mode of representation followed in the wake of the revival of the celebrations, beginning in 1976, which introduced a more formalistic and organizational aspect to it. The third mode of representation involves the present day festivities which are creating distinctly contemporary work, but in the process is challenging the hegemonic grip of the older forms of representation.
While the term “ethnicity” may be relatively recent, the concept of groups of human beings that self-identify and are identified by others as belonging to a unique ethnic group possessing a unique set of characteristics is not. Groups of people that possess perceived unique ethnic characteristics such as common historical origins, religion, language, clothing, music, dance, and other cultural traits, have existed since pre-history. Jenkins sum up the salience of ethnicity in human societies as, “It is not stretching the point to regard ethnic differentiation---the social construction of ‘us’ and ‘them’, marked in cultural terms---as a ubiquitous feature of sociability, and hence of all human societies” (Jenkins 1997: 46). Ethnicity constituted such a ubiquitous and “natural” dichotomy between “us” and “them” that it needed no special term to designate the concept. In the study of ethnic groups, the power of naming and representation constitutes an important element in perception and political strategy. In order to better understand ethnic identities, and how they change, it is important to take a postmodern stance to destabilize the notion of the primordial and fixed identity of ethnicity that many individuals hold. As Rattansi observes, “Both individual and collective identities are seen not as essentially given, but as constantly under construction and transformation, a process in which differentiation from Others is a powerful constitutive force” (Rattansi 1994: 29).

This being so, ethnicity is not a primordial identity; it is elastic and constantly undergoing change. It has most likely been a fact of life since the realization of an us-them dichotomy. We have focused on the decision making process and how and by whom decisions regarding communal representation are made. As a
framed event, that is an event with definite time and spatial frames, festivals like Phat Bihu constitute highly visible sites of choreographic and ethnic representation. The festival sites lend themselves to interrogation and analysis of issues of representation, authenticity and ethnicity.

As the festival expanded into a highly visible public event, an air of paternalism grew up around these activities. Issues of how ethnic and immigrant communities were to be represented through folk dance and who would make these decisions contributed to a growing arena of contestation within the politics of representation. The power to represent is indeed a formidable power, and the ethnic communities actively sought participation in the festive event. The festival is a highly popular event and in the past it constituted a primary vehicle for ethnic communities to show themselves to the outside world in a positive light. Once the festival moved into the highly visible civic space it occupies today, it followed the format of the popular exhibitions, in that it displayed colourful natives, and consciously or unconsciously, cast the ethnic groups on display as “folkloric,” “exotic,” and “other.” The audience, increasingly today, has developed a taste for sampling the voyeuristic delights of the exotic other. They have cultivated expectations of enjoying certain quaint and exotic representations when they attend the festival. The festival has created these expectations of providing such delights, and the presenters must cater to these expectations if they are to attract audiences to their event. Thus, there exists a vested interest for those who organize the festival to maintain the content of the festival in the popular format that was established in the later years of the twentieth century.
A major point of this study has been the representation is power, and it analyzes the tensions that occurred, and continue to occur, over who has the right to make the crucial decisions concerning issues of representation. Behind the scenes of the outwardly friendly gestures by the organizers, further tensions are created as the organizers, who often had, and continue to have their own agendas regarding authenticity and representation shape and manipulate the performance to fulfill their own representational concepts. The organizers frequently maintain authoritarian notions of how these groups should be represented, the level of proficiency to be shown, and the theatrical qualities of the performances to attract the crowd. These notions often clash with the community’s desires of romantic images creating an arena of contestation. The festival organisers sometimes take a folkloric preservation stance, protecting an imagined past Golden Age from contaminating modern influences in costuming or music. In Chapter III, it has been specified that Phat Bihu festival is a part of the Assamese Bohag Bihu festival, and so the songs that are sung are also the Bihu songs that sing of the different life phases of the people. However, some of the Bihu songs that sing of the Phat Bihu festival seem to be of recent origins. Let us take the following as examples:

Pokhila ura di ur o nasoni

Pokhila ura di ur

Rojaru aagor phatbihukhonit

Nepabi piritir oor.

Translation

Dance like a gliding butterfly, O my nasoni (female dancer)
Dance like a butterfly
You won’t find an end to love and affection
In Phat Bihu that has its advent even before the king.

Charikoriyar paarote bohage khelise
joubonor piriti khela.

Mohghuliloi ahiba, phato bihut nasiba,
patiba xompritir mela.

**Translation**

On the banks of Charikoriya, *Bohag* is frolicking in
the fun of youthful passion and ardour;
come to *Mohghuli*, dance in *phat bihu*
and revel in the fiesta of harmony.

*Mohghuli chapori ahiba lahori*

*Phat bihur botora paai*

*Mising ahibo deuriu ahibo*

*Aamar bihu bhaanguta naai.*

**Translation**

Come to *Mohghuli chapori* o’ my beloved
Receiving the news of Phat Bihu
The *Misings* will come, as also the *Deoris*
There’s none who can interrupt our *bihu*.

*Bihute boliya kune homoniya*

*Bihute boliya kun*
Bihute boliya Dhakuakhoniya

Kopalot mohare hoon.

Translation

Who is passionate about Bihu my friends
Who’s passionate about Bihu
The people of Dhakuakhana are passionate about Bihu
They have gold the size of a coin on their forehead.

The last song has another version that says,

Phatbihut boliya kune homoniya
Phatbihut boliya kun?
Phatbihut boliya Dhakuakhoniya
Bukut piritir joon

Translation

Who is passionate about PhatBihu my friends
Who’s passionate about PhatBihu
The people of Dhakuakhana are passionate about PhatBihu
The muse of love shines in their hearts.

Dimbeswar Gogoi, a local college teacher says,

“These Bihu songs have been created by some overenthusiastic people...even the word Mising was not in use till 1962. They were known as Miri as also history describes them so...There is nothing called Phat Bihu songs. The songs that are sung in Phat Bihu are the songs that are sung in Bohag Bihu...one will find mention of the social foundation of the area, its history and geographical aspects...of its rivers, birds and
insects etc. in these songs...The mention of the Charikoriya river also in the Bihu songs can be found in the new songs...the Korha river features more in majority of the old Bihu songs.”

Another interesting point to note is that the Mising and the Deori songs do not mention of Phat Bihu. The songs that they perform are the ones that speak of their everyday life and longing. Individuals and groups utilized and manipulated traditional culture for purposes of creating highly visible and embodied images and through which they created modes of ethnic and community representation. In fact, identities are choreographed by them. Also, the kind of dresses worn by dancers in the folk performance, stand in representation for the whole community.

The issues of what constituted folklore and who are the folk (and indeed who are not), and other contentious issues of authenticity and purity may offer a paradigm shift in modes of representation. Rather than casting individuals as folk, and therefore lesser, simpler, more primitive, the focus is shifting to the artistry, the creative process itself. This enables the participant, in the festival context, to assume her or his full humanity as a citizen of the modern world who just happens to be an exemplary artist of traditional dances. This study is above all an interrogation of the politics of authenticity, ethnicity, representation, and power within ethnic and immigrant communities and between those communities who often attempt to guide, manipulate, and shape the community’s representational destinies.
The politics of identity and ethnic representation, seen through public performances, is dynamic, contingent, and highly contested. The manipulation and use of culture as a vehicle for the visual representation of ethnic communities has changed through time and the traditions cannot be viewed as a primordial unchanging artifact of human life. Gillis reminds us,

“This core meaning of any individual or group identity, namely a sense of sameness over time and space, is sustained by remembering; and what is remembered is defined by the assumed identity… We need to be reminded that memories and identities are not fixed things, but representations or constructions of reality, subjective rather than objective phenomena”.

(Gillis 1994: 3)

“In the nineteenth century nations came to worship themselves through their pasts, ritualizing and commemorating to the point that their sacred sites and times became a secular equivalent of shrines and holy days” (ibid: 19). The years after the independence particularly demonstrated a search for identity; communities sought for occasions to construct glorious, romantic pasts and exoticized images. Many of these celebrations provided exotic sights, sounds, and tastes for those individuals who wished to sample the exotic. This consumption of the exotic should not be regarded as merely a carefree and innocent adventure into multiculturalism. “The process of exotification can constitute another kind of cultural cannibalism: that which is deemed different is consumed, its aesthetic forms taken up and used to construct a dream of the outside and sometimes of escape… Exotic images feed particular cultural, social, and political needs of the appropriating culture” (Root 1998: 30). Like so, in the projection of Phat Bihu festival as an exclusive cultural festival and in
the desire for recognition and acknowledgement of the ‘uniqueness’ in the culture of the community, may also be said to reflect a desire to ignore the present and live in a blissful past.

The phenomenon of ethnicity and its accompanying constructions, demands intensive theoretical analysis and deconstruction to elucidate what constitutes ethnicity in any given period and location and the ways in which ethnic groups situate themselves throughout history. As members of ethnic groups situate themselves, and reconstruct history, they often construct new images for purposes of self-representation. Identity is not stable, or primordial, but rather in a constant state of flux, even as they appear fixed and primordial to many. Further, identity is situational: it has more force in certain situations, while in others ethnic identity has less force.

Tradition constitutes “an ongoing interpretation of the past…There is no essential, bounded tradition; tradition is a model of the past and is inseparable from the interpretation of tradition in the present” (Handler and Linnekin 1984: 274-276). The modern world witnessed a rising wave of identity crisis in minority societies. As a result, enormous attention began to be paid to ethnic roots which in turn amounted to a great interest in the nuances of ethnic culture. The interest in a return to ethnic and community identity emerged from a feeling of emptiness, and traditions and ethnic identities came to be constructed and re-created through the presentation of traditional culture. The performances and visuals serves as a major source of iconic representation of tradition and ethnic identity. Dance and its accompanying costumes and music can be said to operate as an almost instant symbol of identity in many ethnic communities.
Traditional and folk festivals provide a fruitful arena for the interrogation of identity construction in ethnic societies as the groups perform their identities through the use of dances, songs etc. which are considered emblematic of their identity, images that communicate subtle and not-so-subtle semiotic messages to the observer. Festival organisers sometimes actively construct and reconstruct romantic, self-exoticized images of the societies and ethnic groups they represent. These stagings bring to mind Hobsbawm and Ranger’s concept of the “invented tradition.”

“Ideas---religious, moral, practical, aesthetic---must,” as Max Weber says,

“be carried by powerful social groups to have powerful social effects; someone must revere them, celebrate them, defend them, impose them. They have to be institutionalized in order to find not just an intellectual existence in society, but, so to speak, a material one as well…The struggle for the real, the attempt to impose upon the world a particular conception of how things at bottom are and how men are therefore obliged to act, is for all the inability thus far to bring it to workable institutional expression, not a mere chaos of zeal and prejudice. It has a shape, trajectory, and force of its own”.

(Weber 1983: 122)

In the contemporary context, societies face a type of crisis often implicitly referred to by the term ‘globalisation.’ Flows of people, capital, information and the increasing adoption of liberal economies and models of exchange have led, all over the world, to situations of increased individual mobility, demographic change and new work and life rhythms. In this context, former social nodes as expressed through social-symbolic systems such as kinship, social group, place,
nation, religion or history have either disappeared, or at least have been
transformed and have gathered different meanings. The psychological
difficulties expressed in relation to this crisis are articulated in particular
through feelings of ‘insecurity,’ ‘senselessness’ and ‘placelessness’. Festivals
seem an important part of the response that acts to reproduce and reinstall
normative social order amongst people, organizations, objects and ideas
(Handleman 1998: 56). As a period of concentrated reflection relating to
substantive questions of identity and direction, festivals would seem to offer
moments of stasis in a highly mobile world.

Festivity seems to accompany various forms of life crises. The concept of life
crisis is used here in a very broad sense to include all types of cyclically
returning or unexpected events that interrupt, challenge or terminate particular
micro or macro sociological spaces, temporalities or identities. In this sense, on
the micro level, often very short and transitional life crises are provoked by
situations of social interaction, or by the individual trespassing of spatial and
temporal limits or boundaries. These short, everyday life crises can be
distinguished from more collective life crises as a result from individual
deviation from the norms that define everyday life identities and roles, such as,
for instance, someone dying, coming of age, falling in love, being ill, being
jobless etc. Such crises challenge, in a more or less dramatic way, the ways in
which an individual conceives and perceives his or her being in the world, but
also how he or she is perceived by others.

Another form of collective life crisis is constituted by the cyclical turn of
environmental conditions, most prominently those of seasonal change and
associated cycles of agricultural production. In a broader sense, the birth, coming of age and death of family or group members, and even ritualized forms of war and conflict, can also be included here. A further form of life crisis concerns extraordinary and unexpected alterations of the social, economic, ecological or political environment, often leading to fundamental and lasting changes in the way that life is organized and conceived. These types of life crisis can be provoked by epidemics, natural catastrophes, famine, war and invasion, large-scale immigration, economic crisis, technological, geographic, medical and scientific revolutions. There is, of course, no cause and effect relationship at work here, but such moments of life crises, while not necessarily initiating festivity, as events of significance and shared meaning, can be recognized, marked and celebrated.

Considering social identities of communities outside the context of festivals in their everyday lives may reveal important links in determining how identities change and to what degree identities within both contexts are related. To a certain extent the social roles and ritual roles are connected. The social identities are autonomous facets for the construction of performed religious experience. The term ‘identity’ is understood as a term that represents or signifies group and individual perceptions and experiences as members of the community. In another way identity is considered to be differentiated, constructed, displayed and made explicit through performed behaviours.

Identity is performed on both the individual and collective levels of a culture. It indicates that identity is constructed through a series of ritual acts and symbolic behaviours and that identity formation occurs through performance. The belief
in Phat Bihu festival and participation in the celebrations play a significant role in the emergence of identities. The festival on the banks of the Charikoriya River shows how elements of separate cultures have been integrated and combined to form a new culture that is defined not by these separate parts but by its existence as an autonomous body. In particular, the rituals involving verbal and non-verbal interactions suggest that the construction of performed identities are to some degree determined by the ways in which people engage with each other.

In one way identity exists through affiliation on a collective level, where all the community congregants in the shrine hold the identity of the members. The collective notion of identity is the symbolic frame around which individual folk communities and their notions of identity get conceptualized. The individual identities are embodied in a form. These identities are constructed in given contexts and create meanings and their meanings are expressed through ritual enactment. All activities that are done in the sacred place are connected to individual identities and it is from individual performances of these identities that the collective profiles of the annual ritual festival are constructed. In a ritual, identity exists as a temporary condition within a definite time frame and this will be explored with reference to Victor Turner’s concepts of liminal conditions. This will lead to the concept of “liminal identities” which means that they manifest through ritual performance and exist only during this activity. Identity formation is identified to occur through the performance elements of the annual rituals.
Celebratory performances are the platforms for expression of identity. It means identity is an expression through belief and enactment in the annual festival. The larger frame of the annual festival creates a space for contact between communities who share the same performance space. In the view of Goffman, a performance may be defined as the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence any of the other participants (Goffman 1959: 15). In addition to it, Schechner says that ‘performances exist only as actions, interactions and relationships’ (Schechner 2002: 24)

In a way the experiences of one community become shared with other community through the act of witnessing and participating in the entire festival. The creation of shared responsibility signifies a collective ethos within and outside the communities where each community is interconnected to another community through the festival performances. The ritual performances of each community and the combined actions of the total festival manifest the identity of the people in a collective way.

The politics of identity construction uses cultural heritage to improve the social cohesion of their image of a society with a single core. Politicians of course position themselves in the middle of that core. Practice however shows that cultures can produce their identity rather independently from politics. These self made identities are highly positional and relational. A focus on achieving value consensus, embedded in an accepted form of identity, is destined to fail because more complexity is needed in societal models, value pluralism and identity construction. The unmanageability and pluralist character of identity construction should be taken as a point of departure for societal policies.
Consequently, cultural heritage should be treated as expressions of cultural diversity, whereas citizenship should not be conceptualised on value consensus but on shared norms embedded in democracy.

Identity policy as the deliberate inculcation of a cluster of elements and an inherent representative of a group, has been an indispensable procedure in group management since time immemorial. Dominant forces have been using quite consistently this procedure to rule efficiently. When this policy is successful, optimally every single member of the group takes that cluster of elements as their personal property. The group would then reject, individually and collectively, attempts at eliminating elements from the cluster, whether initiated from within or from without. Being in possession of a collective identity has evidently been a primary condition not only for keeping a group together, but also for legitimizing its existence as a separate entity, which allows it privileges and distinction from other groups. The function of collective identity as an asset, both endogenously and exogenously, makes it a symbolic capital that allows for the group's status claims, namely justifying its existence as a separate entity, political or otherwise, and the exclusion of others.

The valuation of identities is thus part of the everlasting intergroup competition over prestige and status, which in the final analysis means competition over access to resources. An intergroup stock-exchange of such assets has been determinative since antiquity in hierarchizing the various ethnic and political groups vis-à-vis each other, allowing some to have more say than others. To win the competition, “better elements” always had to be shown as pertinent to
the claimant group, and therefore the repertoires of elements quickly
crystallized to encompass a variety of components: from impressive buildings,
to claims about freedom, quality of life and wealth, better justice, personal
security, and any possessions or principles that happened to be highly valued at
a time. This basic repertoire provides powerful tools for groups to exercise
identity formation. To enhance and facilitate the inculcation of identities, a
variety of procedures has always been used, among which boasting about
achievements in the form of rituals such as memorizing events and raising
monuments have become to be the most popular. A collective memory
indispensably had to become part of the repertoire shared by the relevant group.
These memories, stories told from one generation to the next, thus become
common legacies, patrimony, an indispensable baggage to never be forgotten.
Monuments, whether constructions or sites – sculptures, paintings, buildings,
artifacts – work on the one hand to inscribe events and persons as part of the
group’s identity, and to display the splendor of the group’s assets on the other.
“Legacy work” may thus refer to the two aspects of identity work, namely the
creation of cohesion and the display of valuable goods.

There is a steady ebb and flow movement in respect to which aspect of the
identity work, and the creation of legacies as part of it, dominates in different
points of time. Roughly, it would seem justified to maintain that when a group
is unstable, whether in a state of emergence or in crisis, identity work and the
creation of legacies become major tools for securing its maintenance. In
contrast, when a group has achieved a high level of cohesion, or when it is not
threatened by adversaries, identity work may lose its intensity, and legacy work
is mostly reduced to commodification of the objects and images (including stories and memories) that are part of the already recognized repertoire.

Conclusion

Ritual is a specific mode of behavior exhibited by almost all communities in the world. Through a ritual performance people defines and establishes one’s own identity in a society. The term usually refers to actions that are stylized, excluding those actions that are arbitrarily chosen by the performers. A ritual may be performed on specific occasions and according to the discretion of individuals or communities. It may be performed by a single individual, a group, or by an entire community and they are performed in explicit places, places especially reserved for (public and private) or before specific people.

The purposes of a celebratory ritual are varied. They might be due to religious obligations or ideals, satisfaction of spiritual or emotional needs of the practitioner, strengthening of social bonds, social and moral education, demonstration of respect or submission, stating one’s affiliation, obtaining social acceptance or approval for some event or, sometimes, just for the pleasure of the ritual itself. Alongside the personal dimensions of worship and reverence, rituals can have a more elementary social function in expressing, fixing and reinforcing the shared values and beliefs of a society. They can aid in creating a firm sense of group identity. Humans have used rituals from time immemorial to create social bonds and even to nourish interpersonal relationships.
Ritualistic performances are repetitive and reinforce the values and beliefs of the group that perform them. Generally, communities are defined by the rituals they share. Affiliation of such performances with a socio-cultural context is instrumental in shaping individual and group identity. It means performance reinforces identification with a socio-cultural context.

The promotion of the Phat Bihu festival facilitates its “unity in diversity” policy, and creates communal interaction and cohesion among its peoples. The regional festival provides a ground for interaction between local communities and the state in which local communities expect economic benefits from the state and, conversely, the political agents attempt to popularise its policies of cultural pluralism or tolerance to multiculturalism by encouraging the articulation of local cultural traditions in terms of national integration. The staging of local culture therefore always has a national dimension, even when the expressive and material culture is of local origin, and can be an important factor in cultural conservation and national identity formation. Phat Bihu festival provides an important occasion for the overt exhibition of political power in particular demonstrated by the practices of spectacle, play and gifting.

Contemporary festivals imply and manifest various forms of political relations of authority between the participants or particular networks of participants. The way in which celebration articulates and modifies power relations has been our special focus here, which involves examining the political (in the broadest sense) relationship between “audience” and “producer.” An important correspondence in this regard centers on the distribution of power within the
orbit of celebration. When those who control celebration are also those who dominate the social order, there is a tendency to ritualize that dominance in order to sustain and legitimize it. Dynamic celebrations like Phat Bihu are symbolic battlefields for waging competitive struggles for power, prestige and material objectives. Here the celebration is both culture and politics, or, better perhaps, cultural politics. The phrase implies two converse processes; the first is the politicization of culture, the translation of cultural symbols, beliefs and values into political discourse and strategy. The second is the rendering of politics in cultural terms. Although celebration remains in continuing flux, there is always likely to be a duality, however asymmetrical, between progressive and conservative forces, between the competitive strengths of relatively powerless social elements and their relatively powerful opponents. Celebration in this way not only represents, but also promotes, dynamic political processes, including the realignment of forces and interests within the body politic.
Notes:


3. *ibid*

4. *ibid*

5. *ibid*

6. *ibid*


8. Personal interview with Mr. Dimbeswar Gogoi, Associate Professor of Assamese, Dhakuakhana College, at his residence on May 10, 2013.

References:


