The intimacy between nationalism and festivals very often becomes the focal theme of most of the seminars, discourses and symposiums of social science these days. Being a composition or synthesis of genres like oral literature, material culture, rites, rituals and various practices; a festival is better to be compared with a mirror of a particular community or a race or sometimes even of a nation. Nowa days, apart from its devotive and ritualistic paraphernalia, an extra emphasis is laid to exaggerate the racial glamour and elevate the economy in the celebration of some festivals. Here, an effort has been made to see the interdependence of the Rongali Bihu (the spring festival of Assam) with Assamese nationality.

All the four broad categories of folklore namely – (i) Oral literature, (ii) Material culture, (iii) Performing folk art and (iv) Folk customs contribute to the formation and acceleration of nationalism in various degrees and it is the festival which encompasses most of the genres of the four categories.

“The word festival is derived from the Latin Festas (of a holy day) and from the Indo-European dhes or dhesto the root of several words linked with religion ........................................ Feotas and Feoterals are major events reated by an entire community is symbolic and active form to show the essential life of that community at once the distillation and typification of its consporate existence. At a festival the culture of a group is brought to its fullest expression and is consciously deployed in the public view. Thus, festivals constitute a prime act of reflexivity, whereby a society extrudes an arm at of itself, as it were, with an eye at etc end and looks at itself".
Devotion was the main concern in every festival along with elaborate paraphernalia. Now a days, festivals have been undergoing a sea-change by shifting its functions from ritualistic hegemony to the testimony of a community's identity. Assertion of ethnicity or looking back to one's glorious past has become a widely debatable burning question these days. The mono culture evolved due to the processes of modernization as well as globalization has become a matter of threat to the distinct vernacular cultures.

Karl Marx has made two distinctions of classes – classes in itself and class for itself in reference of cohesiveness. There are some sort of unifying factors which bind each member of a community. At least one threat of commonness is required whether it may be a festival, a ritual, a custom or any other ancient or current tradition. Among these, festival deserves special attention as it conceives a series of paraphernalia including customs, rituals, rites and a harmonic juxtaposition of folklore genres like material culture, oral literature (sermons, holy songs, chorus) and performing folk arts (dance, songs and dramas).

Let us take the Bohag Bihu (the spring time festival) celebrated in Assam. This festival is pragmatic with both cultural and economic ethics as it was mainly an agricultural festival or a festival of peasants where production and reproduction are the hidden mantras. Ploughing, weaving, poultry farming are the central economic issues concerned with it. Though, the modes of livelihood have gradually shifted from agriculture to other spheres like business, government services, large and small scale industries, the primitive urge for the festival remained.

This festival which was celebrated amidst natural abundance and spontaneity, now-a-days, impulsed to be arranged artificially covering a wider horizon and subsequent addition to suit some socio-political issues.

A thrust has been enthrusted to make the paradigm shift. A seasonal festival from mud, aromatic with folk observations like rituals, rites, taboos
and relevant customs has been dragged into the mosaic floor of a society which has already been flourished in the main stream of modernisation and partial westernization. It has become the life line of the Assamese nationality.

Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, an eminent humanist cum singer sings like –

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Bohag eti matho rita nahay} \\
\text{Nahay bohag eti mah} \\
\text{Asamiya jatir e ayush rekha} \\
\text{Gana jivanar e sah.}
\end{align*}
\]

(The Bohag is not only a season or month but also the life line, valour of the Assamese nationality)

Now-a-days the Bihu songs and the Bihu dance which were performed during the Bihu days have become no more calendric. It has lost its occasional and contextual significance and has become free of time and space jurisdiction. It is performed in abroad either as a part of cultural exchange or as a marker of Assamese identity. A dramatic change of viewpoints has been observed. This festival considered a few decades ago as full of vulgar and erotic appeal by few elite scholars acknowledged unquestionably as the chief spoken person of the Assamese culture.

Not only in performing folk arts and folk customs, but also the material culture associated with this festival has traced to the central core of identity as well as nationality. The floral towel “Gamocha” specially woven by the womenfolk to hand over to the dearest one during the springtime is now-a-days exhibited in any part of the world to justify the skillful hands and artistic minds of the Assamese stock. “Bihu songs and dances which were originally confined to the upper Assam regions, they have now been accepted almost as the hallmark of Assamese culture and are freely performed by all sections of the Assamese youth even in the lower Assam areas. Also such traditional items of physical folk life as the Assamese hand woven towel called gamosa, the Assamese tray called sarai have come to occupy special places as symbolizing Assamese distinctiveness and are being dramatically displayed in public”\(^2\)
Not only is the spring time Bihu of Assam witnessed this paradigmatic shifting of role, but these parallels in others states also. The Ganesh Chaturthi had been observed in 1927 firstly in Maharasthra under the patronage of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, a luminary of pre-independent India. Cohesiveness among the nationalistic sulkiest was the main motto of this observation.

The Durga Puja culmination in Vijaya Dashami also suggests good over evil. In Maharasthra the hero Sivaji became the symbol of the festival. *Sivaji ki jai* (Victory to Sivaji) was a greeting on this day.

Similarly the Durga Puja celebration in Bengal and in Assam by the Bengali clerks and officials after the British annexation gave a new fillip to the nationalistic movement a pan-Indian significance during the nineteenth century. To imagine India in the form of Goddess Durga, Bankim Chandra’s depiction of the Bharatmata (mother India) in the form of Goddess kali in his famous novel “Anandamath” were the driving spirit for most of the patriots in colonial India. Even today also, in Hindu nationalism, formation of various wings of *BJP* (Bharatiya Janata Party) like *RSS* (Rastriya Sayang sevak Sangha), *Vishwa Hindu Parisad* etc are based on Hindu mythologies. Goddess Durga was created by gods to kill the tyrant demon *Mahishasur*. She is the most beautiful goddess with ten hands and weapons in each and rides on a lion. The pre colonial Indian imagined him or her as Durga and the British as the demon whose killing was supposed as their *swadharma* (religion). Again to kill the oppressors of Bharatmata has also been conceived as the ethics of Hindu religion resembling the smashing of *Mahisasur*. Anja Kovacs in her article “You donot understand, we are at war! Refashioning Durga in the service of Hindu nationalism” depicts this in a very lucid manner.

Festivals have a magnetic fascination. Persons of a particular community, caste or state sprade in nook and corners of the world might come to enjoy the festivity or might feel some deep sensation of togetherness with his fellow members. Now adays, the springtime Bihu is celebrated by the natives and immigrants with the same urge. Circulation of compact disk and cassettes full of Bihu songs and dance, gorgeous celebration of the festival even thrills a child born abroad.

Though most of the scholars claim the Satriya culture as the chief identity along the Vaishnavite tradition of Assam, the strict codification and
ritualistic complexity do not allow the peasantry to be easily swallowed. It is extremely polished or elect to be digested easily except the intelligentsia and persons with religious overtone.

But the Husori songs are quite indebted to the Vaishnavite tradition for the devotional incorporation.

The Bihu songs are the mirror of the physical features of the land, the charm of green hills and dancing rivers. There is a breath taking attachment of the Assamese people with the mighty Brahmaputra (Burha Luit), the sole bearer of Assam’s history and culture.

It thundered up in the hills,
It rained in the plains,
Like water from a breached dam
my mind was breached.
There was none to console me
On the bank of the Brahmaputra
Is the barhamthuri plant,
There did we collect firewood,
O God Brahmaputra, do not wash it away,
Else you lose them who offered you areca-nut

We observed here that when a festival comes to be used as the cultural identity or milestone of nationality of particular community, then automatically the material part or folk instruments or folk items associated with the festival get symbolized, and as a consequent, decontextualized and again recontextualized. For example, the Eri and Muga silk worn during the Bihu performance, the areca nut and betel leaves, the gamosa (towel), the tray (sarai), the weaving tools (Ugha, mako ....) associated with the spring time bihu celebration have become entities and manifesto of the grater Assamese society.

“In recent times there has been a sea-change in the nature and significance of the spring time Bihu. With the spread of modern education, urbanization and to some extent, industrialization, the festival is fast losing its old functional character. For the educated Assamese, it has now become a
“national and cultural” festival and a song like the following, which refers to muga, an exclusive silk of Assam, is symbolic of Assamese patriotism:

So dear is the muga reel
Dearer is the shuttle
Dearer still is the Bihu of Bohag
How else but to hold it? 5

One mechanism by which an ethnic or national group awakens to a consciousness of identity is the perception of a threat to the group by a force external to it. Frequently, economic interests of actual or potentially dominant strata are directly or indirectly involved in movements asserting such identity of which these strata becomes the dominant and decisive carries. These movements typically engender articulate, vociferous and charismatic leaders capable of mobilizing masses of people to organized action. They could also engender literary and other artistic figures who weave the themes of group identity into their creative work and religious and moral figures who blend religious fervour with identity. Economic and power interest of the dominant strata of the group could thus get camouflaged, submerged in, or blended with passions of identity of the group as a whole. In such contexts whatever “facts” are known of the past are intermingled with myth and fantasy, and a new perception is created of a past that is glorious, pure and exclusive. New customs, traditions, festivities, rituals and so forth are invented in keeping with these perceptions.

The various ethnic groups of Assam have been asserting their distinctive cultural identities by regenerating the folklore materials, by shaping their own history. The Bodo of Assam, a dominant tribal community, has been celebrating the Bathou Puja festival amidst pomp and gaiety. The Bodo movement have been receiving uncountable feedback from the oral concluded that literature and Bathouism. Similarly the Ali-Ai-Lrgang, a spring time festival of the second largest tribal group, the Mishing, celebrated on the first Wednesday of the month of Phagun is no more merely a celebration of the peasantry and illiterate people. It has become the symbol of Mishing nationality. Formation of Student Union, Sahitya Sabha and other literary organizations are the outcome and are pillars of further socio-political issues.
The celebration of Medam-Me-Fe and the proliferation of Tai-language emphasize the ethnic consciousness of the Ahoms. Similar consciousness and reassertion of ethnic identity have been observed in other groups of Assam as well as of the other north-eastern states.

So it can be concluded that the process nationalism in Assam has been breeding in two ways parallelly. One is in wider perspective- greater Assamese nationality, amalgamated with various ethnic groups celebrating a common spring time’s festival with names Bihu, Baisagu, Baikhu, Bisu, Ali-Ai-Lrgang etc. A common platform is artificially created for greater Assamese nationality despite of too much variation in manners, styles and presentation.

The second one was underground for long days and recently has crept forward either for the fear of losing its own identity or for some economic and political benefits or for both. These are the ethnic groups residing in Assam who also are ingredients of greater Assamese nationality. The early Ali-Ai-Lrgang of the Mishings, the Baisagu or Bathou Puja of the Bodos, the Karam puja or Tusu puja of the Tea tribes, the Meh-dam Me-Fi of the Ahoms are national identity of each community forming at the same a composite Assamese nationality by the symbolic manifestations of the spring time Bihu.
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4. Birendranath Datta and others; A Handbook of folklore material of North-East India (Guwahati: ABILAC, 1994), 63

5. ibid, 65