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**A STUDY ON THE GUSAI ULIOWA UTSAV –THE CARNIVAL OF
THE GOD AND THE KINGS**

Gayatri Baruah*



Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University
Guwahati, Assam

**Research Scholar, Department of Mass Communication, Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University,
E-mail : gayatribaruah84@gmail.com*

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PREFACE

This is an endeavour to encourage research in diverse areas of human interest in the context of the community and society. This research activity underlines not only latest academic excursions into the world of ideas but underscores its pragmatic possibilities and applied relevance. While poverty is a pan-Indian reality, it is discrimination and inequality which demand proactive measures. These things can be addressed by different media and there is an intrepid exemplar in an Assamese fortnightly Prantik, a socio-literary journal that has stood the test of time and created a niche in the popular Assamese mind. Education exploiting the available technologies with a view to making it accessible to all is the thrust of technologically equipped societies. This necessary emphasis is highlighted in papers dealing with, among others, our own institution of open education, KKHSOU.

The focus of the papers ranges from alternative journalism to distance education to ethical media exploitation and the ubiquitous discriminations practiced in the Indian scene and the inequalities which continue with different faces. Reality in India continues to be religious and communal by and large. The divine juxtaposed with the carnivalesque can definitely yield fresh insights into our reality. Even after owning the persistence of discrimination and inequalities, the identification and appropriation of spaces in the context of ethnic assertion and identity have also been adequately looked into in one of the papers. This is quite close to the existing exclusivity of even trade union organisations in certain sensitive areas like tea estates. The sad annals of tea and its commodification in Assam by the colonisers had only been added to by native planters till certain initiatives taken by the government. In the perspective of the socialist democratic polity, all organisations especially dealing with labour must be entirely inclusive. This aspect is also emphasized in one of the papers.

The papers are distinct because of a holistic exploitation of the available means of education and learning and the faith that informs them is accessibility and inclusivity. This is no utopian wish but a pragmatic reality in institutions like ours which challenge discrimination and not only advocate but practice accessibility. This is a humble step which I believe is in the right direction. While acknowledging the individual efforts of the researchers, I also would like to congratulate them on their emphasis on realities which are not merely academic but which inform our very existence as individuals and as members of the community.

*Dr. Arupjyoti Choudhury
Dean (Academic), KKHSOU*

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A STUDY ON THE GUSAI ULIOWA UTSAV –THE CARNIVAL OF THE GOD AND THE KINGS

Abstract

Assam is a land of various indigenous tribes, a land of plural culture. The tribes, especially the plain tribes of Assam have played an important role in the formation of the great Assamese culture and society. The Tiwas are one of the indigenous tribes of Assam and they have a very vibrant cultural legacy. In this paper, the Gusai Uliowa Utsav , a festival ,which is celebrated in the Plain Tiwas dominated areas of Assam has been discussed. In this study, the rituals of the festival- both past and present and the ways of its celebration in the different places also documented. The result of the study helped to understand the impact of change in the society on the rituals of the festivals and vis-a -vis.

Key words: Gusai Uliowa Utsav, the Tiwas.

Introduction: The aim of this paper is to study the Gusai Uliowa Utsav of Assam. This festival is celebrated primarily in the Plain Tiwa tribe dominated districts- Nagaon and Morigaon districts of Assam. As the name depicts itself, the Gusai Uliowa Utsav can be considered as the carnival of God .This festival is reported to celebrate since 16th century AD. The Gusai Uliowa Utsav is a century old custom and therefore, there are many stories related to the origin of the festival. According to some sources, it is celebrated as the mark of friendship between the Koch king, Naranarayan with the Sato Raja and Pacho Raja i.e., the Seven Kings and Five Kings of middle Assam region. While another source stated that it is the imitation of the festival that was celebrated at the time when the Mikir king, Dhadhi Singh embraced Vaishnavism leaving his tribal religion and reopened the Borduwa Satra after the death of the Vaishnav saint Srimanta Sankardev. In the meantime many scholars claim that it is an another form of Ghunusha utsav of Daul-jatra which is celebrated during the Holi festival.

Whatever the reason behind the celebration of this festival, the Gusai Uliowa

Utsav is indeed a very illustrious festival of the Five Kings of Assam. The territories of the Five Kings are scattered in the parts of Nagaon and Morigaon districts of Assam. These kingdoms are-

1. Topakuchi, Nagaon
2. Charaibahi, Morigaon
3. Barpujia, Morigaon
4. Phulaguri, Nagaon
5. Kakomari, Nagaon

The festival and the rituals: The first Sunday of Bohag month (Mid April) of the Assamese calendar is the starting day of the celebration. As the king of Topakuchi is the eldest king among the Pacho Raja, every year, it is first celebrated in Topakuchi area of Raha, Nagaon district. From then onwards on every Sunday of Bohag month, chronologically at the other four locations the festival are been observed.

It is one of the celebrated festivals of people of Plain Tiwa community of Assam. The Tiwas is a native tribe of Assam which is originated from the great Bodo tribe of Assam. The Tribe has two sub groups- the Hill Tiwas and the Plain Tiwas. The Plain Tiwas mainly reside in the Morigaon and Nagaon districts, while the Hill groups reside mainly in the Western Karbi Anglong district of Assam. Although this festival is celebrated in the whole middle Assam region but at Charaibahi and Phulaguri, it is celebrated with great prompt. Therefore, these two places are selected for the study. The study is based mainly on primary data. However, some secondary sources such as related books and newspapers on this issue were also used. The observation and participatory observation method were applied in this study.

The Charaibahi is the home of the second king of the Pacho Raja. At present, the king is Milan Rajkumar. The Bura-Gusai Than of Charaibahi area is situated in Nij Charaibahi village and it is a century old than. The than is a religious institution of Assamese Hindu's and usually establish in memory of a religious saint. Nij Charaibahi is the land of a sweet scented flower named Bakul flower (*Mimusops elengi*) and is popular for the legacy of the Baro Baithang i.e., the twelve armor

keeper. Similar to the other four kings, the King Milan Rajkumar is from the Koch community and his army is from the Tiwa community. His Baithang is Anupam Pator. The key attraction of the *Gusai Uliowa Utsav* of Charaibahi is the dance and fight among the Baithang and Baruwati i.e., the army of the King. In Charaibahi mauza of Morigaon district the essence of the rituals of this festival and the fight are kept intact. People from very distant places come to observe and enjoy this fight.

In Charaibahi, in the first day of Bohag bihu i.e., mid April (the last day of Chaitya month of Assamese calendar), permission is taken from Bura Gusai by offering a betel leaf and an areca nut in the than to celebrate the festival. On the festival day, the celebration starts with Usha-kirtan or morning prayers and lighting of earthen lamps. Then the statue of Bura Gusai, the temple Lord is bathed and prayers are held. After that, the king enters the Gusai-than with Baithang, other officials and his Baruwatis. After the prayers, the king felicitates and coronates his officials. Then four young men named as *Bhari* take out the idol of Bura Gusai from its establishment and take seven circles of the Bura Gusai than. These seven circles symbolize the seven heavens of Hindu religion. Then the crowd rallies from the Bura-Gusai than to a nearby field where a fair is held. In the entire journey, the Baruwatis dance and sing in the rhythm of dhol and the rally halts in front of every household to give blessings. In the place of fair, the idol of the deities of the nearby thans and temples like the Laru Khuwa Gusai of Heera village, Bura Gusai of Borbhagia Village and God of Mayangia Village are also brought.

Then the cultural program starts with the war dance called the *Dhal-Baru Nritya* by the Baruwatis. After this, the event ends and all the deities are rallied back to their native temples. Since 2012, a modern cultural function is also organised at night in the premises of the Bura Gusai Than of Nij Charaibahi but it does not have any historical link.

The Gusai Uliowa Utsav of the Phulaguri of Nagaon District is celebrated differently. The Gusai than of Phulaguri is situated in Jamuguri Village, which is situated at a distance of three kilometers. Sri Debakanta Borah, the pathak¹ of the namghar² of Jamuguri village narrated the story of the starting of this

1. One who reads the prayers in namghar

2. The cultural institutions and religious centers of Assamese Hindu society.

festival in their village,'Long years back, one night, the Gusai i.e., the God of the kingdom of Phulaguri was appeared in the dream the King of Phulaguri. The Gusai told him that from that time , he would be started staying at the Jamuguri namghar. Therefore, the king needed to bring the idol to his kingdom for once in a year for the prosperity of his kingdom. According to the instruction, the King with his subjects and officers came to take the Gusai every year to Jamuguri village. The subjects which were from the Tiwa community danced and sang all the way with amours in their hands for the amusement of the locals. The song they used to sing was: "*Tan-khiti nikhi tai sabi buria*". After reaching Phulaguri, they performed puja of the Gusai and at the evening again took back the Gusai to Jamuguri. The people of Jamuguri before sending Gusai of their namghar, performed a *naam-kirtan* i.e., prayers and took seven circles of the namghar with the idol.' This was the method of the celebration of the festival till 2013, but in 2013 the Tiwa people of Phulaguri refused to come to Jamuguri as they no longer consider the King of Phulaguri as their king since he is not from the Tiwa community. There are some other factors for their reluctance:

- Due to the distance between Jamuguri and Phulaguri, they did not want to come to Jamuguri on foot as they did in the past.
- Because of the modernization, the youth of the Tiwa community hesiated to dance and sing in the traditional way to amuse the non-tribal communities of an other village.

Therefore, in 2013, the present King of Phulaguri, Prabhat Singh Deka and the people of Jamuguri decided to celebrate the Gusai Uliowa Utsav only in the Jamuguri village.

The characteristic that made the Gusai Uliowa Utsav unique is that, the festival itself and the mela or village fair which observed along with this festival. The specialty of this fair is the selling and buying of sweet potatoes along with the other things. The main attraction of the fair in Jamuguri village is selling and buying of Cheni dia but or popularly known as Dumini cheni which is specially made by Scheduled Caste people and is nothing but a Assamese version of a jaggery made North Indian sweet called Chiki or Gud ki peti. The people from

Koch, Mikir (Karbi), Nath Yugi, Heera communities are also involved in this celebration and the confluence of these communities and their harmony is being observed during this. The importance of the fair held during this festival has increased as people starts calling this festival as Gusai Uliowa Mela rather than Gusai Uliowa Utsav. Also, in some other places which do not have any history of their own , the festival and the fair are organized.

Present day issues relating the festival: Although the Gusai Uliowa Utsav is a celebrated festival of middle Assam region, but these festival also cannot get rid of the contemporary issues. Some of these issues are:

- The conversion of people of Plain Tiwas to Vaishnavism affects this festival, as it is related to idol worshipping and Vaishnavism prohibits it.
- Because of lack of proper documentation, some of the Kings forgot about their legacy. This creates emergence of many self proclaimed Kings.
- India is a democratic country and therefore, the kings and their officials get less importance from the society. The examples are the King of Phulaguri and the King of Topakuchi. In Topakuchi also the king is not felicitated because of the difference of thoughts within the communities.
- The Baithang of Charaibahi have to provide food and *zu* (local rice beer) to the Baruwatis on the festival day. These expenses have to be solely carried out by the Baithang. Since Anupam pator, the Baithang of Charaibahi does not have any regular source of income, it is difficult for him to arrange it.
- The increasing fair centric nature of the people diverts the attention of the people from religious ceremonies to modern material things.

Conclusion: The abundance of tribal culture and heritage made the North East always the center of attraction for foreigners as well as people of other Indian states. If proper media coverage of this Gusai Uliowa Utsav is done, certainly it will attract the rural tourist. Here is a list of some potential beneficiaries and the benefits after the popularization of the festival through media -

- The Baithang and the King - Financial aid from the government and other sources.
- Scholars - Cultural studies, anthropology and other related domain.
- Local people - Economic benefit through trade.
- Pilgrims - Devotes may visit these thans and Namghars.

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