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**JONBEEL MELA AS A SITE OF ARTICULATING TIWA IDENTITY:
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY**

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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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JONBEEL MELA AS A SITE OF ARTICULATING TIWA IDENTITY: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

Abstract:

This paper is an ethnography of a hill-plain relationship looking at how fairs and markets facilitate the interaction between Tiwa tribe living in two different geographical and socio-cultural settings in the middle regions of Assam. The paper examines how the historical festival called 'Jonbeel Mela', initiated under the patronage of the Ahom and Gobha kings purely on political-economic ground, acquired a cultural and social meaning over a period of time. The paper is an attempt not only to understand the historical trajectories of the 'Mela' but also to analyze the contemporary dynamics of it, especially how 'Jonbeel Mela' becomes a critical moment in the articulation of new Tiwa identity. The paper argues that 'Jonbeel Mela' has evolved as a fair of larger socio-political importance in Assam with the participation of other communities and with the re-articulation of the Tiwa tribe identity.

Introduction:

Assam, the land of red river and blue hills is the heartstone of a melting pot culture comprising of numerous tribes, each having their own socio cultural idiosyncrasies. It is often recognised as a land where several tribes embrace each other. Diverse with respect to its topography too, Assam is divided into hills and plains and accordingly some people reside in the hills and some in the plains (even though earlier they were migratory in nature). Further people from the same community are also seen to be scattered into hills and plains. The people of Assam drawn from diverse hives at different point of time have merged into a common harmonious whole in a rare process of assimilation.

This paper is an ethnography of the Jonbeel Mela of central Assam, which is

a thriving example of an inter-community relationship in the region. Though primarily associated with the Tiwa Community, the Mela is an assemblage of people from different socio cultural backgrounds and geographical setting. Apart from the Tiwas, the Khasis, Karbis, Assamese Caste groups and others also enthusiastically participate in the Mela. They barter different commodities among themselves. Even today, when the region is beleaguered by ethnic conflicts and violence, the Mela is celebrated with zeal and zest. Ethnic divergences and discords have not been able to hinder or prevent the participation and rejoicing of the people in the Mela. The paper makes an attempt to locate the empirical case of Jonbeel Mela in the context of the larger ethnic scenario in the State of Assam and analyse it in the light of contemporary ethnic issues.

Methodology:

The paper is based on both primary as well as secondary data. Primary data has been collected by an ethnographic study of Jonbeel Mela. The study made an attempt to understand the native's opinion on their culture, their way of life, significance of Jonbeel mela, significance of exchange so on and so forth. The secondary data has been collected from various books, articles, journalistic writings etc.

The Tiwas:

Tiwas, also known as Lalungs, are a plains tribe of Assam. Tibet region is believed to be the original abode of the Lalungs. However, due to the dearth of written documents, their immigration to the plains is ambiguous, contested and 'shrouded in mystery' (Thakur, 1985). It is assumed that they migrated to the plains of Assam sometime in the middle of the 17th century A.D. They are concentrated mainly in the Nagaon and Morigaon District of Central Assam. They are spread in Kapili, Mayang, Bhurbandha, Kathiatali, and Kampur Development block areas of Nagaon District and Nartiang Elaka of Jowai sub- division of Jaintia district of Meghalaya. Besides there are a few Lalung villages in Dhemaji areas of Dhemaji sub division of Lakhimpur district, Titabar area of Jorhat District, Sonapur areas of Guwahati sub division of Kamrup district. Further they are also found in some hilly areas or in the foothills of Karbi Anglong, Khasi hills and Jaintia hills. (*Ibid*)

The undulating topography and the varied ecology of the region have influenced the Tiwas so much so that certain aspects of socio-cultural life of the hill Tiwas became distinct from that of the plains Tiwas. Thus food habit, dress, pattern of houses, agricultural pattern etc., of the hill Lalungs are different from those of the plains Lalungs (*Ibid*). It is interesting to note that there has been tremendous impact of the Assamese culture and Vaishnavism among the Lalungs residing in the plains of Brahmaputra Valley. Infact a majority of them got completely assimilated with the Assamese Hindu population- adopting all Hindu customs and way of life. They even started taking up Assamese Surnames like Saikia, Bordoloi, Das and so on. However, in the post independence period we have witnessed a different scenario. Despite their progressive assimilation with the Assamese Hindu society, they got themselves entitled to the Constitutional status of the Scheduled Tribes of the plains and now they are trying their best to retain their identity as a tribe, and, for them, in a sense the rallying point of identity has been the term Tiwa- having already lost their matrilineal institutions, the old Tibeto-Burman language, the institution of Bachelor's Dormitory, and all the Vestiges of Shifting Cultivation. (Gohain, 1993). The Hill Lalungs on the other hand stands as a contrast to this. When British ascendancy led to the disintegration of the Jaintia Kingdom, the Tiwas inhabiting the Hill areas of Karbi Anglong and Jaintia Hills got separated from the body of their Kith and kin in the Brahmaputra Valley. Interestingly even after being away from the influence of Vaishnavism or Assamese Culture and upholding their traditional culture – their Matriliny, their Tibeto Burman Language, the dormitory institution, their practice of shifting cultivation, so on and so forth, they were not accorded the Scheduled Tribe Status. They had to fight a long standing battle of existence with the Karbis, who are the dominant tribe of the district and who enjoy the Scheduled Tribe Status. In the Jaintia Hills also, the Lalungs met with the same fate, because in Meghalaya also they were deprived of the status of Scheduled tribe status, though their political allies, the Jaintias, a much advanced community since the historical times, got themselves recognised as a Scheduled Tribe. Under the pressure of these circumstances a separate Hill Lalung identity is slowly but steadily emerging. (*Ibid*)

Origin and Significance of Jonbeel Mela:

Assam is a heterogeneous region with people inhabiting in different geographical terrains and having rich cultural heritage. Fairs, Melas, Haats (Markets) etc have been playing a significant role in the interaction of the people. They have helped in initiating and intensifying social relations thereby bringing social solidarity among people.

Jonbeel Mela is the harvesting festival of the Tiwas of Assam, held on the eve of Magh Bihu festival of the Gobha Mouza. The Mela is held once a year and is renowned for the traditional barter exchanges that take place there between the Tiwas (and indeed some other communities) residing in the hills and the plains. The significance of the Mela also lies in continuing with the historical legacy of offering tribute and loyalty to the Tiwa king, the traditional authority of the Tiwas. Initiated under the patronage of the Ahoms and Gobha Kings purely on political-economic ground it was formerly known as a haat (mart) where transactions were done mainly through barter system between people of hills and plains (Kakati, 2010). It bears a long history of the Gobha Kingdom which was the most powerful among many other kingdoms under the Tiwas. It begets great enthusiasm, love, feeling of fraternity, brotherhood among the Tiwas.

Jonbeel Mela is now being organised under the auspices of the Gobha-Tiwa Deo Raja Jonbeel Samiti and at the direction of the Gobha-Tiwa Deo-Raja Rajdarbar. It is held for three days in an area of 18 bighas (1 acre = 3.025 bighas), composed of land and water bodies. The Mela is started by offering prayers and sacrifices at 'deosal', a greatly revered shrine of the Tiwas of the area.

On the first day of the Mela people from the hills often referred to as 'mama-mami' by the plain Tiwas comes down with a variety of goods and starts settling down in the plains. Some make their temporary houses with reed and straw in the mela ground while some others reside in the houses in the nearby villages. Familial ties are not required to reside in these houses nearby. People in the plains embrace and accommodate them, make arrangements for them to settle down and in this way they establish a friendly relation. On the same day, traders and shopkeepers from different parts of Assam also get assembled at the mela

spot. The king of Gobha and other Tiwa States also come and visit the Mela. They all have a ceremonial place at this Mela. These kings do not have any administrative and political relevance now besides being deemed as descendant of historical figures and symbols that are socially recognised.

The second day is the most significant because on this day the unique and the most awaited barter exchange, for which Jonbeel Mela is famous, takes place. The people from the Hills procure pithas or cakes, dried fish, vegetables, medicinal herbs, and so on by bartering with ginger, turmeric, arum, leafy vegetables, yam, lac and such things which they themselves produce. However narratives reveal that the people from the hills not only bring with them whatever they produce but also those which they buy from others in order to exchange it in the Mela. The things that the hills people procure here are used to celebrate their feasts up in the hills. The Mela can be seen as a traditional gathering with Traditional Mode of trading. The bartering which takes place early in the morning is the primary attraction of the Jonbeel Mela, apart from cock-fight and other cultural events.

The Third day holds a General Mela, where a huge crowd gathers at the Mela spot for buying and selling things. Here monetary transactions take place. The Raj Durbar is held on this day, where all the Tiwa Kings, officials, representative of administration participate. Formal meeting is held and various issues are discussed. The kings are felicitated and given their annual Rajbhatta (Salary) Of 24000 (2000 per month).

Economic Significance of the Mela:

During the medieval time the Gobha kingdom was an open ground of marts and markets. Favourable geographical location endowed it with abundant fish, forests with valuable trees, bamboos, medicinal plants and animals so on and so forth. Due to the abundance of forests and agricultural products various crafts and industries like pottery, bamboo and cane works, weaving etc, also grew up which were in need of marts and markets to sale their products. Further hill Tiwas practicing Jhum cultivation and plain Tiwas practising settled cultivation were interdependent upon each other because they were not self sufficient and neither the people of the hills nor the plains could produce everything they need or want.

These made marts and markets inevitable. Thus, to fulfil the needs of the people marts and markets were gradually established. Further Gobha kingdom, as was subordinate to the Jaintia kingdom, did not have the authority to mint coin. Due to lack of currency system, people had to depend upon barter. Poor communication system also compelled them to depend upon barter system. (Kakati. 2010).

However in the contemporary time, the erstwhile existing constraints which compelled people to depend on barter have almost disappeared. Monetary transactions have begun to dominate market, and communication system has also developed to a certain extent. Yet economic importance of the Mela cannot be completely ruled out. Narratives reveal that both the people from the hills as well as the plains see the Mela as a hub, where they can, in a convenient way procure all their necessary things in one go and that too at an affordable price. In addition to this, the people involved in the Barter also try to get the best bargain out of this exchange. For them it is an opportunity to get things produced either in the hills or plains at a lesser cost.

Administrative Significance of the Mela:

There are many stories and narratives regarding the origin of Jonbeel Mela. According to many studies, Jonbeel mela originated from the coronation ceremony of Langbar. Langbar was coroneted as the king of Gobha at Phulaguri after one week of the Magh Bihu festival of Assam. During the time of king Jon Sing, however, the venue of this festival was shifted to a more convenient place situated amidst the kingdom where there was also a beel. From the name of Jon sing the beel and the mela got their names as Jonbeel and Jonbeel mela respectively (Kakati.2010).

Today the Gobha king is only of symbolic importance. He does not have much decisive role to play but the Tiwa society being a traditional society, still prefers to have a king in whose name decisions are taken. Even if they are under a democratic system, where an elected representative government rules, they have not completely given up their traditional system of administration and follow their

traditional authority. Their quest for autonomy can be attributed to the fact that they have always had their own system of administration and governance and they are not willing to surrender it even if the original power of the king has declined. Thus they enthusiastically participate in the Mela to pay tribute to their king and celebrate their Traditional Authority.

Ritual Significance of the Mela:

After bartering off their products in the Mela, they take fish, pitha etc, from here and offer a special prayer seeking for the well being of the members of their family and community with those things in the hills. Thus, though not very directly related to worship or religious life the things they take from the plains have ritualistic significance and therefore this barter is very important for them. Again, the Gobha king traditionally celebrate the 'Nowan festival' the annual feast after the harvest with the commodities and money that are collected as taxes from the Mela. This also makes the mela a significant event which continues even today.

Social And Cultural Meaning of the Mela:

Jonbeel Mela has been facilitating not only hill-plain interaction but also interaction among people belonging to different socio-cultural settings. It has played a significant role in bridging the gap between different groups and communities thereby paving the way for social and communal integration. More than a market, this Mela is a ground for celebrating love, brotherhood and loyalty. People are very enthusiastic about the Mela. The natives see it as God's Mela where they must go to pay tribute to the king and participate in the exchange. Furthermore the Mela also becomes a platform to showcase the richness of Tiwa culture in front of a larger audience as various traditional folk dances, songs etc are being performed in the cultural programmes organised during the Mela.

Political Singnificance of the Mela:

To analyse the political significance of the Mela, it is first necessary to have a brief understanding of the contemporary socio-political scenario of the region.

Assam, during the post colonial period, has witnessed several ethnic assertions by different groups and Communities. The tendency to develop an ethno tribal identity is rapidly gaining momentum among the different groups in the region. The groups that have once assimilated with the larger Assamese community are now trying to revive their own culture and traditional practices. Sanjib Barua in this context argues that the subnationalist politics that began in the middle of the nineteenth century have become rampant in Assam since the 1980s. Barua has referred to Benedict Anderson's idea of imagined communities in order to analyse the politics of Sub nationalism in Assam. Anderson describes nation as an imagined community, which is imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. In the words of Anderson, "it is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members meet them or even hear of the, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." ¹

Drawing Anderson's idea of Nation as an imagined community, Barua argues that within one nation itself, there can be several sub nations each imagining themselves as communities distinct from the others. So in a multi ethnic nation like India, there can be several imagined communities. For example Assamese is an imagined community and within Assam also there can be different subnationalist groups like Bodos, Tiwas etc who imagine themselves as communities distinct from the rest. Such imagination leads to binding of people into collectivity who share common origin, history etc and thereby unite them on communal lines. Barua argues that the "politics of Sub- nationalism is premised on a poetics about a homeland and its people. If nation and nationalities are imagined communities, it is a poetics that transforms the geography of an area into a primal, home-like or sacred space and transforms a people into a collectivity with imagined ties of shared origin and kinship" (Barua, 2005, pp: 126).

In this light if we locate the case of the Tiwas, they too come under politics of sub nationalism as they have a long history of struggle for autonomy. History shows that the Tiwas had a very strong and autonomous system of administration under few small kings or chieftains since ancient times namely Gobha, Khola Nellie, and Chahari etc. They even did not surrender to the Ahoms who were the most powerful rulers of the time and instead paid taxes to them in order to retain their autonomy. Even the Ahoms allowed them to enjoy their political right to have

self rule according to their tradition. Thus the Tiwas were very much concerned about their autonomy and in order to maintain that they devised a policy to establish cordial and friendly relations with the other kingdoms ruling in different parts of the State. And as a part of that policy, they established various marts and markets to enhance their relation with the other kings. Marts and markets also helped them to interact and communicate with their subjects and thus they could rule their subjects more efficiently. However in 1835 British annexed the Tiwa Kingdom and thus their sovereignty was lost. In the post independence period, when those among them residing in the hills were not granted Scheduled Tribe status and simultaneously Mikirs hills and the North Cachar hills (combined) Autonomous district was created in 1951, the apprehension of being marginalised crept into the minds of Hill Tiwas. Thus an aspiration for self rule emerged within the Tiwas. With the Formation of Lalung Durbar in the hills, to the signing of Lalung Accord and to its present state, Tiwa movement have emerged and evolved over time. With the demands of Inclusion of the Tiwas of Karbi Anglong District and Meghalaya State in the list of hill tribes, Creation of a separate Tiwa Autonomous District Council under the sixth schedule of the constitution, Introduction of Tiwa language as a subject in the primary schools of Assam, the Movement has been continuing incessantly till today. They have been constantly demanding for sixth schedule.

Now, coming back to Jonbeel Mela, the narratives reveal that the Mela has expanded in terms of its size and popularity. Its celebration has become more and more grand with every passing year and it has been able to capture the interest of the larger public as well as media coverage. The Mela though embraces and welcomes everyone irrespective of their socio-cultural background, yet the more and more use of Tiwa Cultural symbols brings to mind the inquisitiveness to know whether there is a latent motive related to their ethnic aspiration behind the celebration of the Mela and that too in such a pompous way.

During the mediaeval times Jonbeel Mela was a fertile ground for alliances and negotiations among the ruling groups namely the Ahom kings, Jaintia Kings and the Tiwa Chieftains. It provided a platform for political alliances. It facilitated in establishing cordial relations with other kingdoms, communicating with subjects, discussing and debating important issues of the time, integrating the hills and the

plains people etc. which in turn helped the Tiwa kings to efficiently administer their kingdoms and maintain their autonomy. The Jaintia Buranji narrates a number of instances where the kings of Gobha, Khola and Nellie pleaded the Ahom kings to open marts and markets even to unite together against foreign invasion. Thus the Mela played an important role in strengthening the political relations among the various ruling groups.

In the contemporary period, the Raj durbar which is held during the third day of the Mela resembles a political meeting. It is at the Raj Durbar, the officers of Gobha Raja raises several demands on the State vis-a-vis the land where Jonbeel Mela is held should be ceded to the Gobha king, Mauzadarship should be resumed in the name of Gobha King to empower him economically, Raj Bhatta's should be increased, Jonbeel should be taken as a tourist spot by Tourism department of Assam, there should be more efforts on the part of the government to Protect the encroachment of Jonbeel, preserving the Beel, so on and so forth, and the other challenges facing the Mela and the people.

If we analyse this empirical case in the context of the larger ethnic scenario in the region, we see that while demanding homelands etc, the ethnic groups try to suppress the internal differentiation and fragmentation. Anderson in this context argues that Nation is imagined as a community, because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each; nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that that has made it possible over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings. (Anderson, 1991, pp: 7). Similarly, there may be many internal differences and inequalities existing within the Tiwa Community or between the hill and the plain Tiwas, but this gets suppressed when the need arises to stand against the other.

Again, while asserting identity, the process of cultural revivalism gains momentum among the groups and same is the case in Assam, which even though witnessed the process of assimilation of different ethnic groups during the different phases of history, yet is today witnessing another force that is gaining predominance among the same ethnic groups to maintain their distinctive forms and identity. Those ethnic groups who once merged to form bigger association are now trying

to re-establish their original identity and retain their traditional practices. Here we can cite the example of the Bodos. A strong revivalist tendency is seen in the Bodo Movement. In their vent to create an alternative cultural domain of their own, some of the past Bodo cultural symbols, traditions have also been revived, albeit often with new meaning and significance. (Sharma, 2010) The similar is the case with the Tiwas also. Changing their name from Lalung to Tiwas, the construction of Samadi (Bachelor's Dormitory) on the Jonbeel ground, etc clearly testifies the fact.

Moreover it is seen in case of most of the ethnic groups that while trying to assert their identity, they use their cultural symbols in order to showcase their distinctiveness from the other groups and also make use of a common origin, real or imagined to mobilise the people. In that context Jonbeel Mela being a cultural heritage of the Tiwas both the hills and the plains; a symbol of shared common past, a common source of identity and interaction, and a ground where issues of the Tiwa people are raised and addressed, several demands as mentioned above which may not be directly related to their autonomy are made, this Mela becomes a crucial stage for articulating their identity and demands on the State. Sanjib Barua in his chapter titled 'society versus state in Assam' in the book 'Durable Disorder' described the songs of Bhupen Hazarika as constituting of Assamese National imagination. He analyses how Hazarika's song 'Bohag is not just a season' constructs Assamese Nationality as a collectivity- with a memory and a will'.² Barua further argues that the song extends the Bihu to the life of the people as a whole and imbues Bohag Bihu with the significance of a national day when the nation takes stock of its past and its future. In the same way we can see JonbeelMela being connected to the tradition and lives of the people. Further it becomes a very significant event for the Tiwa community as a whole because it is during the Mela that people from both the hills and the plains unite together to commemorate and glorify their past, and it also has its implication for their future as it provides them a common platform to raise their problems, discuss their issues; make their demands and voices heard in front of a larger audience. Moreover, since they are already demanding the Sixth schedule, in near future they might also demand self rule of the territory which they once exclusively controlled, and Jonbeel Mela being a common source of identity and interaction, and a ground where issues of the Tiwa people are raised and addressed, several

demands as mentioned above which may not be directly related to their autonomy are made, this Mela becomes a crucial stage for articulating their identity and demands on the State and in the light of the above arguments, it is yet to see if Jonbeel Mela in near future becomes politicised or rather be used as a political tool for raising larger demands of the people. The only arguments that can be provided as of now from the information gathered from the field are that the Mela is a source of their common identity amidst the hill plain differences and provides a fertile ground for integrating the Tiwas from both the hills and the plains, and becomes an important event for them to commemorate their past, their common history and showing their loyalty to the traditional authority. So given this, we can say that Jonbeel Mela has some larger political implications and we can see Jonbeel Mela as a bridge which binds the people of the hill and the plain together irrespective of their differences and showcase their common identity in front of a larger audience.

Further A. K. Baruah argues that "Identity is directly related to the emergence of educated elite in the concerned community." In the absence of any other major social force such an elite comes to acquire a hegemonic position in the community, perpetuates its hegemony and mobilizes the community on communal lines. If such is the case, can we also see Jonbeel Mela as a cultural symbol being used by the elites to mobilise people from both the hills and the plains to strengthen their ethnic aspiration. It becomes a symbol which indicates that they share a strong relation since time immemorial, follow one common traditional authority, and share a common past and common tradition. It gives them a space or a strong ground to imagine themselves as a community; distinct from the others. It becomes like an umbrella embracing the entire Tiwa community irrespective of the hill-plain divide, where they come together, cover their differences and stand as being unique and different from the others. Thus it strengthens the 'we' feeling among the Tiwas. Further this event, if seen in the light of the present ethnic scenario of the region, may provide them the platform to call for separate recognition and other larger demands. But these issues needs further investigation and intensive study.

In nutshell, we may say that Jonbeel Mela is an event which brings the Tiwas together irrespective of their internal differences to glorify their age old tradition,

remember and celebrate their common past, and offer their tribute and loyalty to the traditional authority. In this process their relationship gets further strengthened and a common identity gradually develops which sees themselves as distinct to the others. Thus Jonbeel Mela not only provides a rostrum for hill plain integration but also becomes a critical moment in rearticulating the Tiwa identity.

Notes:

¹Benedict Anderson; "Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread on Nationalism", London, 1991 pp: 6

² Sanjib Barua ; "Durable Disorder", Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2005, pp: 129.

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