

# Portraying Bihu Songs and Dances in Assamese Film: An Analytical Study

**Dr. Faguna Barmahalia**

Assistant Professor, Department of Bodo, Gauhati University

## Abstract

The Bihu Festival is the lifeline of the Assamese people that has been observing since the time immemorial. This festival is undergoing rapid change due to the impact of modern education and technology. The agricultural festival related to man and nature has been shifted to modern city bourgeoisies. Through the films, different kinds of thought, feeling, emotion, struggle, and even about the people's livelihood are seen. By exploiting different aspects of human beings and non-human elements the film-makers try to portray his dreams so as to attract the minds of the people. The film-makers incorporate *Bihu* and its music, dance, as either an integral part of Assamese culture or enjoyment. The aims of this paper are:

1. to highlight the Bihu festival and its importance in society
2. to analyze how the film makers are the exploiting Bihu dances and songs Assamese film.

**Methodology:** This paper is based on secondary sources. The relevant data is collected from different journals, magazines, books, and internet sources. This is a descriptive and analytical interpretation.

**Keywords:** Film, culture, society, festival, entertainment

## Introduction

Cinema is also known as film and movie. Today every one of us is aware of these terms "Cinemas, Films, Movies, Bollywood, actors and actresses, Hero and Heroines. I think, most of the people do not know about their tradition and culture but a five-year-old child can know about the cinema or film. It is indeed to say that these are deeply rooted in our society. It is that discipline that includes concepts, observation, research, script, camera, light, hero and heroines, costume, designs, makes up computers, etc. It is one kind of visual communication that utilizes sound and moving pictures to tell the stories. Cinema is a creative art form that draws themes from several earlier traditions such as oral literature, theatre, music, dance, etc. So, cinema can touch the heart of the people and has become one of the most indispensable parts of mankind within a very short period of time.

## Introduction to Assamese Film

The birth of the Assamese cinema is not very old that was started in 1935 when Jyoti Prasad Agarwala made a film named *Joymati*. The Assamese films are also known as Jollywood. Since the very beginning, the Assamese writers and film makers had tried to make a film based on socio-cultural figures men and diversities of Assamese people by exploiting and using the local folklore materials. In the midst of story different kinds of folk, songs and dances are put in their cinema for amusement and entertainment. Cinema has been playing a very significant role in

documenting time and society through the ages. Like other languages film in India and the world, Assamese cinema has passed through the years introducing the people of the state with its history, culture, important social issues, and tradition apart from simply entertaining them. Generally, in the Assamese film, a celebration of the festival, religious worship, Bihu song and dance, Marriage ceremony, and even ethnic Assamese dress, traditional communication, taboo, belief, superstition, fishing, Bullock Car, musical instrument, house, utensils, etc are mostly found. Apart from these, some of the films are made on myth, folk tales, and witch-hunting. By watching Assamese movies especially old movies, we come to know that no good communication was in the past. So, people used to travel by walking and boating over the river. Moreover, discrimination and domination over women are reflected through the Assamese films. Why do the film makers exploit folkloric elements in their film? Film and society have a close relationship with each other. Society is a product of certain groups of people. The film is also the product of a certain brilliant people's knowledge gathered living within their society. By drawing many important different parts of visible things from society with their experiences the filmmakers incorporate these elements into their film with the media technologies so as to enjoy and share us. Films may be based on religion, culture, tradition, and ultra-modern themes. So, cinema is not just the mirror of the society but also reflector of pain and sorrows of the society.

What is *Bihu*? Why it is so important in Assamese society??

The *Bihu* is the greatest seasonal cum agricultural festival of Assam's Assamese people. In general, there are three categories in which *Bihu* is celebrated in Assam such as *Rangali Bohag Bihu*, *Magh Bihu*, and *Kati Bihu* are noticed in various seasons. *Bohag* or *Rangali Bihu* commences in mid-April that begins with *garu* (cow) *Bihu* in which cattle are worshipped observing various rituals. Thereafter, this *Bihu* is followed by *manuh* (Man) and *gosain* (God). Music and dance parts associated with the festival are very attractive which is classified into *husori* performed by male dancers. *Bihu* is performed by both male and female dancers (*deka* and *gabharu*). Earlier, though all the performances were done in agricultural fields; now the observation of this festival is completely changed and performed on the proscenium stages spending a huge amount of money where popular artists are invited. *Kati* or *Kongali Bihu* is celebrated in mid-October. The term '*Kongali*' means 'scarcity of food' and money. The month of October i.e. *Ashin* is considered as the session of the scarcity of food and started growing paddy. During this *Kati Bihu*, the Assamese farmers worship the *Tulsi* plant in their courtyard and thereafter, give earthen light in the paddy field with certain rites and rituals in the name of God so that the crops become healthy and reap a good harvest.

The good celebration of the next *Bihu* called *Magh Bihu* depends on the good harvest. Whatever it may be, after reaping the harvest, the farmers are collected the crops and stored in the *Bhoral* (granary). That time is the time of having or rich. So, the *Magh* is called the harvest festival that is commenced in mid-January i.e. from *Sankranti* day and also known as *Bhogali Bihu*. The term '*Bhog*' means 'to take and enjoy.' The very beginning of the *Bihu* is called *Uruga* which has special importance in Assamese society. The agriculturalists celebrate this festival gorgeously with mirth and merriment to mark the successful completion of the agricultural cycle and fill the community at large with a sense of joy and fulfillment. Take delicious food publicly once a year by organizing a different program now.

Between these three *Bihus*, the *Bohag* or *Rangali Bihu* is observed mid-April also identified as *Rangali Bihu* and considered as the Assamese New year. According to the Hindu Solar calendar, it marks the first day and it is also known as various names in Punjab, Nepal, Kerala, Bengal, Manipur, Mithila,

Orissa, and Tamil Nadu. It is merriment, time of enjoyment, and feasting along with it continues for seven days. Farmers prepare fields for the cultivation of paddy and feel around. Women make various ingredients such as *Pithas*, *Larus* (traditional food made of coconut and rice) *Chira*, *Doi*, etc. and various rice beer such as *Jou* by Bodos, *Nam-lao* by Tai Ahom, *Chuje* by Deoris, etc. During the festival, the Assamese people prepare brinjal, bittergourd, turmeric, and pieces of bottle gourd, and preserve secure on the three-pronged bamboo sticks. They paste of turmeric and *mati kalai* on the foreheads and cattle's horns. Furthermore, they rub mustard oil on the horns and what leftovers of it, they rub on their bodies. The cattle are then brought to the river or neighboring pond for a wash. On their way to river or neighboring pond, the pieces of brinjal, gourd, etc are thrown on the cattle.

In this paper, It has been selected to study four Assamese films such as *Joymati*, *Siraj*, *Bowari*, *Juj*, and VCD films based on the *Bihu* festival. This paper is an endeavor to highlight how the old Assamese filmmakers are exploiting the elements of *Bihu* in film. In general, the *Bihu* was not the celebration of the Hindus it was the part of tribal culture. With time, Ahom King Rudra Singha gave it the royal patronage for the first time by allowing to perform in the courtyard of the *Rangghar*. Therefore, the popularity of this festival and its dance and song became popular and accepted by the people of Assam. As *Bihu* is the lifeline of the Assamese people it is also becoming one of the best means of communicating among the diverse group of people. People express their emotions, feeling, and thought through their music, dance, weaving, and reception during the festival. Many believe that people should forgive and respect during the *Bihu* festival. Consequently, it is the symbol of mutual love, forgiveness, and co-operation. As the *Durga puja* is the lifeline of the Bengali Hindus they celebrate it so gorgeously that people belonging to various communities also participate and enjoy during the festival. There are many Bengali films where the filmmakers are used *Durga Devi's* inner power as the symbol of the destroyer of enemies. As in Indian movies several mythical and legendary figures such as Siva, Krishna, Arjuna, etc. are using as a symbol of protector and destroyer of the bad human beings. Apart from these, in Indian cinemas, many folkloric elements are being exploited and incorporated into their film e.g. Like *Raksha Bandhan* is shown as the symbol of love and affection between brothers and sisters.

*Joymati*, the first Assamese film that was made in 1935 by Rupkonwar Jyotiprasad Agarwalla, a member of a non-Assamese businessman lived in a small town called Tezpur, Sonitpur district. In India, he was not just the first filmmaker in Assam but also from the whole north-east. So, he was considered the father of Assamese film and the icon of Assamese art and culture. Despite many problems and hurdles, he went ahead and made a film and chose a women-centric story for the first-ever movie in North East India region. The story of the film is based on the Ahom princess named *Joymati*, who was a wife of Ahom king named Gadapani. As she was a courageous and noblewoman and love her motherland, she never thought of offering the Ahom Kingdom in the hand of a selfish, anarchist, and an inferior king like *Lora Raja* (little king). For his chair, Lora Raja ordered his armies to kill completely the strong men in his kingdom so that no one can become a king. Hearing about *Lora Raja's* cruelty and barbarism *Joymati* advised her husband to fly somewhere for the greater interest of their people. At last, as the advice of his wife, Godapani flew away in the Jayantia hills. *Lara Raja* was captured and brought *Joymati* under his custody and tortured. After two straight weeks of physical torture, *Joymoti* dies without disclosing any information to him.

Here, the director was taken many Assamese folkloric elements like costumes, turban, rituals, *Japi*, and even *Bihu* song and dance. *Japi* is a traditional headgear made from bamboo is used while performing

*Bihu*. In the film, *Japi* is used in decoration in the *Rajkareng* i.e. the royal palace of the Ahom kingdom. Furthermore, *Bihu* dance is shown to be performed in the *Rajkareng*. The *Bihu* dance sequence is not shown in a single performance. Rather, there is a creative dance performed by both male and female performers and in the dance, some of the gestures of *Bihu* dance are used. D.Bezbaruah observes:

“Being the first-ever Assamese film, *Joymati* has impacted in the formation of popular culture. The film has influenced the practice of *Japi* dance performed as *Bihu* dance in a later period.<sup>1</sup>”

Most of the viewers see, originally, the *Bihu* dance was not performed using the *Japi*. But now as days, *japi* has become an integral part of the *Bihu* dance. Most probably, taking *japi* during the *Bihu* dance is the influence of film *Joymati*. Additionally, to these elements, there are tribal dances performed by Miri women in this film. Jyoti Prasad Agarwala, who fought and broke the traditional system prevailing in the society and made actual woman actors act in the character of *Joymati*. In the early days, there was a tradition that no women were allowed to act in the theatre. In *Ankiya Naat Bhaona* also men acted the role of women in Assam. Aideo Handique, a girl of teenage age at the time took a character of *Joymati*. Consequently, she was eventually ostracized by her village people in Upper Assam for acting in the film and remains unmarried.

In the year 1963, the film *Maniram Dewan* was directed by Sarbeswar Chakrabarty. The music direction was by Dr. Bhupen Hazarika. The film is based on the life and struggle of Maniram Dewan who fought against British rule and their exploitation and lastly, he was hanged by the British for conspiring against them. The rural life and socio-cultural aspects of the Assamese society are reflected through this cinema. There are *Bihu* songs and dances. The lyrics of the *Bihu* songs are:

“*Eti bhayankar rakhyashar karane*  
*Bhay nakariba, Bhay nakariba*  
*Amaru hengdang ase*”

(I.e. don't afraid, don't afraid  
For a terrific devil

We too have *hengdang* (sword)

Another *Bihu* song part in the same song is:

“*Ati nisthur kal sapar karane*  
*Bhaye nakariba bhaye nakariba*  
*Amaru mantra ase*”

(I.e. Don't afraid, don't afraid of an extremely brutal killer snake,  
As we too have the mantras, i.e. incarnation accents.)

“*Amare dusakute*

*Agani barasise, agani barasise*  
*Samarare sikha bur nase.*”

(I.e. Fire is sparkling in our eyes, fire is sparkling, and the flames of war are dancing)

Here, the British are connoted as devil and snake. Regarding this song D. Bezbaruah says;

“*Bihu* song part is not solely presented as a folk form of *Bihu*. Rather, the *Bihu* song part is associated with the total modern song with lyrics and music by Bhupen Hazarika. Moreover, the costume of the actress used is not the usual folk costume wear for folk *Bihu* performance. Dancing of *Bihu* is not

<sup>1</sup> Debasis,Bezbaruah, *Changing forms of Bihu and Media*, an unpublished PhD D thesis, Department of Communication and Journalism in the Faculty of Fine Arts,2015,p.186

associated with this part of the *Bihu* song. The phenomenon can be clearly stated as the example of popular culture form of Bihu song.”<sup>2</sup>

Further, he says,

“Creative music and mixture of *Bihu* dance gesture and creative dance gestures are used with the same creative costume. Towards the end of the film, there is the sequence showing the execution of the public hanging of *Maniram Dewan*. In this sequence, the background song’s music is used as an improvised version of *Bihu* music. The long toned tragic music of the *Bihu* song is used as the background music along with the song tuned in the music. However, the visuals carry the thematic activities of the execution scene of *Maniram Dewan*.”<sup>3</sup>

**Bowari**, 1982,(*Daughter in Law*) was directed by Siba Prasad Thakur and the music direction is of Upen Kakati. The film achieved huge popularity and its impact remained for the whole eightieth decade of the twenty century. This film is still considered as one of the evergreen Assamese movies, though not parallel but of the popular genre. Assamese folkloric tradition, songs, rituals, and customs are reflected in this film. Moreover, women are against themselves are also revealed. How the Assamese marriage is held and performed, what is the role of daughter-in-law in the family, what kind of behavior has to be shown, and what kind of costume has to be worn after marriage are revealed through this film. The lines of Bihu song are given below:

*Man hira doi saikel nahai tilinga*

*Man hira doi deka nahai pilinga*

*Rahdhala patharat ahiba oi nijanat*

*Man hira doi tumarnu kumalia man.*

*man hira doi*

(i.e. Oh dear, the bell is not a bicycle; Oh, Dear of mind, it is in youth but not in matured youth; When there no men, you come to the Rahdhala paddy field; Oh, dear of mind how lovely your voice is!)

The entitled “*Man Hira Doi*” is the most popular evergreen Bihu song that has a strong impact on society because of its beautiful music and melody. In the film, no traditional costumes and dance performance in the song sequence is not seen. This is neither a folk song nor fusion but can be categorized as a modern song based on *Bihu* song’s tone, tune, and musical notes. *Siraj* is one of the evergreen Assamese films that was scripted and directed by Dada Saheb Phalke awardee Bhupen Hazarika in 1948 and re-made in 1988. This film is based on the communal harmony of Hindu and Muslim. The film tries to create a good relationship between Hindu and Muslim by showing their folklore.

The exploitation of folk elements in the film is found all over the world’s film. The agriculturalist people like the Assamese *Japi* has been using to protect from raining and the light of the sun as well since the earliest time. In *Siraj*, *Japi* is shown hanging on the wall of the Assamese house from the starting time. *Siraj* film contains the *Bihu* songs sequence that is sung in the background and on-screen and the romantic moment of hero and heroine is shown by dancing. The song sung is:

*Piriti piritui piriti Piriti sua patit pari*

*Piriti piriti piriti piriti isat bisat karila*

.....

<sup>2</sup> Debasis,Bezbaruah, *Changing forms of Bihu and Media*, an unpublished PhD D thesis, Department of Communication and Journalism in the Faculty of Fine Arts,2015,p.188

<sup>3</sup> Ibid,p.190

*Piriti piriti piriti hal fal karila*

*Piriti piriti piriti pisali pariba saba*

(Love, love, love, do love on sleeping on bed; love love love love, love makes one being restless; love, love, love losses sleep for the whole life; love love love, love is sweet card; love love love, love is flowing river; love love love, love will flow all through the life) ... (Love love love, become excited with love; love, love, love, be aware of getting slipped)

Also, to the Bihu song, *Zumur* song and dance of the tea tribes of Assam and marriage performances at the altar of *ahuti* is shown. *Garu gari* (bullock car), cremation at the graveyard with the rites and ritual of Hinduism, and chanting *mantra*, lighting in the name of her boyfriend are also shown. Some Assamese people especially the proprietor of tea gardens try to live like British people. British culture like wearing like British, drinking wine, etc. are also found in this film. Uses of the Assamese proverb are also shown in this film. This film is popularly seen throughout the nineteenth century and continues to be one of the ever-green acclaimed movies.

The film **Juj**, 1990, was written and directed by Hemen Das. This film is based on the story of the buffalo fight that is observed during the *Magh Bihu* in the Ahatguri area in the undivided Nagaon district of Assam. There is a tradition of buffalo fight competition in Assam especially few pocket areas like Morigaon and Nagaon district. In the whole film, there are several sequences of Bihu dance, music, and songs. The director of the film directly incorporated some folkloric elements in this film. There is a continuation where most people are taking part in buffalo procession at the beginning of the film. The sequence represents the coming of people from different villages for buffalo fight competition through the procession of men, women, and buffalos. Even people are coming with the beats of *dhol*, *tal*, *gogana*, and *pepa*. The rhythm used in this sequence is of the folk rhythm of the *pati dhol*, used in the undivided Nagaon area. The tune of the *pepa* also resembles the tune usually played by buffalo herds in the area also in the *bihu*.

*Ki ful bachiso tai ae lahari oi*

*Bihuloi bihuwan boi*

*Kakenu dibaloi hiya tur nasise oi*

*Garaka nasadi oi ..*

E.g. Oh dear, what flower are you designed,

You are weaving the *Bihuwan* for *Bihu*;

Why is your heart dancing to give whom?

Like the dancing of the *Garaka* i.e. a part of weaving instrument.

Before performing a *Bihu*, dance there is a tradition of performing a *Husuri* at the courtyard of a particular family. There is a sequence too where *Husuri* is performed by a group of small boys at a household. The *Husuri* is shown to be performed with *Dhol*, *Tal*, and *taka* as the musical instrument. The *Pad* and *Nam* are the folk performance of *Husuri* using Vaishnavite *Husuri* songs taken from *Kirtana* of Srimanta Shankaradeba. The costume is *Suria*, *Genzi* with *Gamosa* on the head. One of the *Husuri* song used in the sequence is:

*Rangpurar ranga mani pindhai diya saru bhani*

*Bihu maribalai jau oi gobindai ram.*

(Oh! Little sister, you make me wear red gold from Rangpur, I go for *Bihu* performance, Oh Govinda Rama)

One of the most important agricultural festivals of the Assamese people is *Magh Bihu*. This Bihu is called *Bhogali Bihu* i.e. Bihu for eating and merry-making. Before the coming of the *Magh Bihu*, the preparation for the buffalo fight through training of the buffalo on the river bank is shown with background music of the playing of *Pepa*. Subsequently, the story leads to the cutting of rice in the paddy field, while well the sequence of spontaneous *Bihu* dancing is shown on the paddy field, where the *Bihu* tune of *Pepa* is used as the background music. This is followed by the singing of *Bihu* song with *Dhol, Tal* at the paddy field, where folk gestures of dance are shown with the use of folk *Bihu* songs and music. Households gift the performers some money in a beetle leaf, and they, in turn, receive blessings for the New Year.

### Conclusion

The film is one of the powerful media that plays a significant role in society. It not only provides ample opportunity to entertain the people but also informs about various hidden issues and events which due to some reasons have not picked by the people. By analyzing the above-mentioned Assamese film, it is seen that Bihu is not only one of the important festivals of the Assamese people but also the lifeline of them. There are many songs and dance elements that are taken from different folk forms of *Bihu*. The improvisation of folk *Bihu* forms with modern elements on the song; dance, costume, rhythm, etc. are the result of the Assamese popular culture. Now, most of the performers are created a new shape from the folk forms and fused them with folk elements. Use and Exploitation of traditional utensils and musical instruments are also seen in numerous Assamese films. Like that other Bihu songs are performed in the *Bihu* dance competition. Bringing the *Bihu* program on the stage and competition in the Assamese society was held for the first time in 1950 at the playground of Judge filed, Guwahati where many *Bihu* parties participated and performed their dances. This program greatly influenced on the Assamese society and other tribal groups of societies as well in respect of exploring their rich cultural heritage. Under the hand of the filmmaker, the traditional dances like *Bihu* got a new shape.

### References

1. Debasis,Bezbaruah, 2015, *Changing forms of Bihu and Media*, an unpublished Ph.D. D thesis, Department of Communication and Journalism in the Faculty of Fine Arts,p.186
2. Ibid,p.188
3. Ibid,p.190