



Negotiating 'Challenges' to folklore in Digital age: Case Study of Phatobihu in India's Northeast

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to trace the digital impact on folkloristic practice in India, in a context where the country has notched up record levels of digital engagement both in the private and public sphere. The attempt is to gauge whether digital technologies are shaping folkloristic traditions and how the local people embedded in such practices are responding to the presence and circulation of such technologies. Is it still possible for practitioners of folklore to retain its organic form and essay a nuanced relationship with technology in the digital age without being overwhelmed? Spatially, the focus area of this research is Assam located in India's Northeast, a region steeped in various folkloristic traditions as opposed to the 'mainland' characterised by classical genres. The research in particular dwells on Phatobihu, whose practice is intertwined with the onset of the spring season and which as a folkloristic genre combines dance and song aided ably by food recipes.

Keywords: Phatobihu, folklore, digital technologies, Assam

How does the practice of local performative folk art engage with the digital media? On one hand, digital media enables to capture for posterity, current practices in art forms and contributes towards its archival purchase/value. On the other, there exists constant tension of being overwhelmed by the medium to lose the very essence of a particular expression or practice.

The object of this research is an annual event called Phatobihu which is celebrated as part of the Spring Bihu festivities and confined largely to the specific Dhokuakhana sub-division in the northern bank of upper Assam, an area criss-crossed by several rivers. Spread across three days, Phatobihu celebrations fall within the last Sunday of the Bohag month of the Assamese calendar (mid-April to mid-May) and are unlike other Bihu festivities. Characteristics unique to Phatobihu is its emphasis on 'collective' and 'inclusivity'. There is a preference for team competition under various categories, be it dance, drums and songs as opposed to 'Mancho Bihu' (Bihu performed on stage), marked by an array of individual competition. Phatobihu is considered complete only with the participation of local communities with specific identities, apart from the dominant people whose mother tongue is Assamese. Phatobihu celebrations bring closure to the month-long Bihu festivities observed during Bohag in Assam.

Bihu as a generic cultural term is associated with Assam and its observance tied closely with the agrarian calendar. The festival of Bohag Bihu coincides with the Assamese New Year, characterised by performances across several genres, dance, songs, drums, and wind instruments on the eve of the sowing season. Next comes the autumn Bihu known as Kati or Kongali, a sombre occasion in which people offer prayers for a bountiful harvest. The last Bihu called Bhugali is observed during winter, mid-January devoted to feasting coming as it does post-harvest, when the granaries are full.

Bihu, celebrated in the Assamese calendar of Bohag with which Pahtobihu is associated, is memorialised as a spring festival. Just as the natural world comes alive in this season with a burst of colours, Bihu celebrations are meant to reflect this positivity through a revelry of songs, music and dance. The predominant emotions are appreciation of beauty, love and harmony steeped in inculcating a reverence for nature, reiterating an organic bond between man and nature. The underlying agrarian import of Bohag Bihu lies in these festivities which are considered as a prelude to the hard labour that awaits in the fields for sowing paddy. The first day of Bohag Bihu celebrations is dedicated to domesticated cattle, particularly the cow, crucial for ploughing when they are feted with a bathing ceremony and special feed.

Literature Review

Prior to the digital age, the introduction of technology into everyday living has not sat down well with folklorists as well as practitioners. Opinions have broadly been divided into two broad schools. One is apprehensive about technology making folklore redundant, other argues that technology would facilitate transmission of folklore and in the process generate new converts and frontiers (Dundes, 1980). Since then several new shifts, persuaded largely by associated technological developments, have been clocked. Notably, efforts have been made to locate folklore in the backdrop of industrial society in the last two decades of the twentieth century, for instance exploring folklore vis-à-vis mass media communication pioneered by historians. These developments were then marked by anthropological and literary turn (Ben-Amos, 1998). Recent scholarships have examined folklore in the backdrop of digital media technologies and the latter's impact on the manifestations of folk performances in digitised and virtualised form (Bronner, 2009).

The current research attempts to investigate two pivots on the site of folklore in the community. One, how does the object of the study, Phatobihu celebrations in Assam located in India's Northeast, engage with media technologies? Second, given the ubiquitous presence of both analog and digital technologies, to what extent is it possible for practitioners of traditional art forms to engage with media technologies and remain unscathed by retaining their organic essence?

In the scheme of Pahtobihu, audiences share the same equivalence as participants and to figure out the significance of their gaze and location, it was essential to borrow the concept of 'experiencing the city' from the review essay, Walter Benjamin for Historians written for the American Historical Review by V Schwartz (2001). Further, to explore the significance of the Phatobihutoli both as a site of performance and practice and dynamism this space lends to the assembled participants and audiences, this research draws upon the rhizomatic pattern of beginnings and relationships elucidated by Deleuze and Guatarri's (1984) in *A Thousand Plateaus*.

Methodology

The methodology adopted for carrying out the research has been a multi-pronged qualitative approach. One is a textual analysis of the annual souvenir titled *Bihuwan*, published to coincide with the *Phatobihu* festivities for representing and reflecting the literary and cultural heritage of the event, and the other, in-depth interviews of past office bearers representing various committees associated with *Phatobihu* celebrations.

Within the genre of textual analysis, for decoding the embedded meanings, messages and structure associated with *Phatobihu* celebrations, the study relies upon qualitative content analysis, more particularly, the readings of various texts such as essays and writeups published in the annual souvenir, *Bihuwan*, whose subject matter constitutes *Phatobihu*.

In-depth interviews with former office bearers of the various committees were conducted to elicit the views and valence of *Phatobihu* for local residents of Dhokuakhana. These interviews were conducted face-to-face in the town of Dhokukhana and largely followed the conversational style format with open-ended questions. They pertained to organisational rationale and institutional drive without which *Phatobihu* festivities would not be possible. *Phatobihu* has a permanent committee with elected members to run throughout the year. This organising committee is assisted by other committees like editorial committees, celebration committees etc.

Two issues of *Bihuwan* have been taken through purposive sampling method due to their content material as primary sources. The 2013 issue of *Bihuwan* focuses on media and media technologies in relation to the circulation of *Phatobihu* as well as its archival merit. It raises the crucial issue of the nature of *Phatobihu*'s media engagement or rather the lack of it. The 2016 issue commemorates forty years of the *Bihuwan* publication and marks a milestone in carrying a dedicated colour photography section with a special exposition on cultures of various communities inhabiting the region, including neighbouring states like Arunachal Pradesh.

Historicity and Genealogies of *Phatobihu*

One feature that lends distinction to *Phatobihu* is its claim to historical lineage as being the oldest form of *Bihu* in Assam. The name 'Phato' has multiple origins. Writing on the history and traditions of *Phatobihu*, author Ismail Hossain lists no less than eight such probabilities (Hossain, 2002). Of these, two are widely accepted through circulation via print media. One of them, 'Phat' in Tai-Ahom language refers to an assemblage of people in large numbers for trading and payment of tax. Boasting an exceptional drainage system, the Habung region graced by seven tributaries of Brahmaputra was considered the most fertile and hence open to trade and a haven for government revenues. The other refers to severance, which in the Assamese language means *phat* or breakaway. The idea behind the move was to make *Bihu* celebrations more inclusive, engaging all communities inhabiting the land rather than confining it to a single community of Assamese-speaking people.

Legitimacy for *Phatobihu* is drawn from historical documents. The narrative begins with Edward Gait's description of Habung as the initial capital of the Ahoms, then referred to as a Shaan tribe in his famous 'History of Assam' (Gait, 1984). The Ahom monarchy is famed for securing the longest uninterrupted reign of over six hundred years in India's medieval history. Coinage of Dhokuakhana is of more recent origin, for the area historically referred to as Habung. In common parlance, Gait (1984) is credited with introducing the practice of history writing into Assam by mastering no less than several Indic and local languages and referencing multiple sources (Saikia, 2008).

This assertion legitimised through history texts gets traction through circulation in most expositions and commentaries on Phatobihu. Be it monographs on Phatobihu like Pahtobihur Itihaas aru Oitijya (Hossain, 2002) and Pjatobihu aru Ananya (Gogoi, 2020). Bihuwan, the souvenir brought out each year to time with the Phatobihu festivities, echoes this through dedicated articles on its historicity. For instance, the 2016 edition carried articles like Phatobihur Ayurekha (Periodicity of Phatobihu), Looking Back: Childhood Memories of Phatobihu, etc. (Bihuwan, 2016).

While Phatobihu's origin can be traced to the medieval period around 15th century, it has nurtured ties to events shaping the emergence of independent India. Popular parlance narrates how local youth from the Mishing community, inspired by the concept of the Non-cooperation Movement at Kheda of 1918, raided the godowns of Marwari merchants, called Keyas. Few narratives even allude to the influence of the Russian Revolution of 1917 on the people behind the incident. The backlash from the colonial government was so harsh that, it became impossible for the Mishing men to return to their homes for fear of imprisonment. As an expression of solidarity with the hounded fellow neighbouring community, the Phatobihu celebration was suspended. The period of suspension from 1918 to 1947 coincides with the commencement of the First World War till India achieved independence.

Spatio-temporal aspects of Phatobihu

Phatobihu comes with a geographical patent. In popular parlance, the word Phatobihu conjures up simultaneous images of two associated spaces. One is the Charikoriya river on whose banks Phatobihu is said to have originated, followed by Moghuli Sapori, the very site hosting the Pahtobihu ground. This ground christened as Phatobihutoli, was secured in 1996 after many meanderings mimicking the rivers crisscrossing the region.

Spatial references and adjectives abound in the writings and narratives on Phatobihu. Be it in the public sphere like the Assam Tribune, an English daily from Assam, carrying news headlined 'Phatobihu of Dhokuakhana: A unique folk tradition in nature's bounty'. Another English daily The Sentinel too is not far behind in inscribing the locality with the event by announcing that 'Phatbihu will be celebrated in Dhokuakhana' and goes on to highlight the various activities and programmes lined up for the festivities. Focus on Phatobihu does not elude national newspapers like The Telegraph, by dwelling on the local government's initiative to nurture the oldest form of Bihu as a form of institutional recognition.

Articles published in Bihuwan bear titles like 'Phatobihu a unique festival of Dhokuakhana'; 'Bihu Dhokukhania: Phatobihu'; 'The Gem of Assam's culture: Phatobihu'. Such titles, for instance, 'Historical Phatobihu'; The Past and Present of Phatobihu; 'A page from Assam's Glorious History: Dhokuakhana', have temporal dimensions too with hints at their historicity.

Bihuwan carries on an average five to six articles devoted to Phatobihu. Most of them would come with prefixes like 'Privileged to participate in Phatobihu'. Ties to the land feature as a recurring motif in the artistic stable of Phatobihu. Highlighting this aspect, chapters titled 'Geography of Dhokuakhana as reflected in Bihu songs' form parts of manuscripts on Phatobihu. What materialises is the pronounced influence of geography on the cultural expressions of Phatobihu, a concept popularised by Ogbo Kalu in his exploration of the impact of ecology and cultural orientation on the adoption and practice of 'masquerades' among the Igbos of Africa (Kalu, 2004).

The Environmental Turn

Nature holds the centre stage in the Pahtobihu worldview, be it to frame the Bihutoli grounds, the actual site of performance, or in the narrative through songs, compositions and textual representations. Unlike other festival grounds, Phatobihutoli is remarkable for exhibiting green vegetation and sporting trees while also exercising a strict ban on any artificially made wares be it headgear, kitchen wares, serving dishes, etc. from the celebration venue. Conventions prescribe strict adherence to things natural be it flowers adorning the dancers' hair or clay cups for serving tea /water and dried tree leaves for platter.

The lyrics of the Bihu songs are replete with allusion to the natural world, of birds, bees, and trees. Rivers have been integral to Phatobihu celebrations since yore. The sanctuary that the river bank provides with its tall grass both in terms of secluded space, where amorous longings could be expressed while also inspiring creative compositions for Phatobihu festivities. Bihuwaan carries articles chronicling the myriad ways nature features in Bihu songs, with titles like 'Influence of rivers, boats and oarsmen on Bihu songs'(Bihuwaan, 2016).

Trees are mandatory for Pahtobihu venue without which 'Mukoli-bihu' or open celebration closely associated with Phatobihu would not be possible. Of the total three days of celebration, one day is earmarked for dancing and merry-making beneath the trees. Each team from different communities, exhorted by the enthusiastic public, rotates among trees by swapping them. On beholding the Mukoli-bihu, a chief invitee to the celebrations is noted to have remarked how Bihu would have been organically observed thus amidst natural surroundings. It affords an immediacy and intimacy rarely witnessed in Manchobihu or staged Bihu.

Space as relational: the many meanings of 'Tholua'

The Assamese term 'tholua', implying local, has multiple readings when deployed in association with Phatobihu. This festivity serves as a special marker of the significance of inhabiting a region of Dhokuakhana. In such a context, the term Dhokuakhania 'raj' gets traction and foregrounded. Dhokuakhania as a sub-set of the larger Assamese identity rests largely on the celebration of Phatabihu and its register of unique characteristics.

The other is that of local produce, what the land has to offer and how human ingenuity makes the most of it. Dhokuakhana is home to a distinctive breed of silkworms out of which women spin silk threads to weave the Muga fabric that goes on to adorn the Phatobihu participants and audience alike. Tholua also means using locally sourced metals, the bell-metal in this case as a base for artisanal products of kitchenware and traditional decorative symbols, including ornaments. Reiterating this aspect, Indira Gogoi associated with the editorial committee asserts that 'Dhokuakana is written all over Phatobihu, be it specific dance gestures, attire made out of muga silk, food served on bell metal utensils and Bihu songs inspired by the myriad rivers and rivulets of this region.

In several published articles, the land of Habung is referred to as a rural idyll, where people are self-reliant growing their own food, weaving fabric spun out of locally produced thread and engaging in art and craft. Phatobihu celebration is an occasion where all of these traditional practices converge to serve as a brand ambassador for all things 'Dhokuakhania'. Phatobihutoli is a site where the 'Tholua' is in full display for the audience gaze to soak in and immerse themselves.

Ritualistic sanction of conventions

Phatobihu originates in the performance and observations of certain rituals during the designated three days of celebration. These rituals lend the celebrations a certain distinctiveness. The cultural practices associated with Phatonohu are informed by the idea of the world as interdependent. Just as the succession of seasons is a certainty carrying within it the values of persistence and continuity, this desire to retain the authenticity of the cultural expressions, particularly performances associated with Phatobihu can be read as a measure to reflect these conditions.

A set of codifications governs the observance of many facets of Phatobihu celebrations. These rules given the sanctity of conventions are carefully regulated and monitored. Right from performance both in form and dance moves, lyricism, exhibition, attire, to food sold in stalls and utensils on which food is served is codified. Strict adherence to these conventions is mandated. Rules are mandated for teams to qualify as participants in the Phatobihu festivities. Both men and women have to clad themselves in traditional attire woven in silk reared in the region, called Muga. Apart from natural fiber, artists are required to adorn themselves with materials sourced locally. Be it the orchid that graces ladies' hair-bun, to their armlets to headgear of men.

Language is another aspect that is closely guarded. Modern Assamese words are not allowed to inform the lyrical expressions of the Phatobihu repertoire, be it songs or poetry. The rhythm of the accompanying instruments, as well as the tune of the songs, are jealously monitored by an insistence on using traditional instruments like drums made out of Deer skin, Bamboo flute, Gogona made out of Bamboo, Pepa made out of Buffalo horn and Taal again of Bell-metal. Competitions in various categories during the festivities are adjudicated based on proximity to laid down conventions and adherence to the aforementioned rules. It needs to be mentioned that a few of the dance moves and manoeuvres are unique to Phatobihu.

Focussing on the gatekeeping aspects of the organisers, Manju Gogoi, former Vice-President of Udjapona committee for several terms, explains 'as a collective the onus is on us through a strict vigil on the usage of words in the Bihu lyrics, implementing specific attire bound rules in terms of colour, texture, and tonality, etc. She further claimed to take pride in enforcing the dress code uniformly across all people irrespective of their positions.

Conventions are not confined to participants alone. Sporting non-traditional attire to the Phatobihu venue is considered a sacrilege. It is mandatory to be clad in handwoven traditional dress. There have been instances when renowned cultural personalities have been denied entry to the venue for being found wanting in this aspect. The insistence on conventions even for the audience stems from the idea that Phatobihu is complete only with their active participation. This removal of audience passivity considers them as co-creators of the very festivities they have come to witness. This resonates with Schwartz, who describes a historical mode of experiencing the city in which the viewer is situated to observe, command and participate all at the same time (Schwartz, 2001).

As a tribute to the exemplary discipline on display, a chief guest invitee to the 2012 Phatobihu celebrations, litterateur Nirmal Kumar Choudhury, swayed by a sea of people sporting handwoven customary dress, could not help remarking that 'surely Bihu would have been celebrated thus in days of yore' (Bihuwan, 2013).

Documenting Phatobihu: Souvenir as archives

The contribution of intelligentsia to keeping the tradition of Phatbihu alive cannot be ignored. Represented by teachers, professors, lawyers, authors and literary figures, they are deeply implicated in this project through their independent literary contribution as well as in Bihuwan. This practice of documentation deploying the print medium was institutionalised in 1976 through the publication of Bihuwan as an annual souvenir. With an average of over 200 pages, the Bihuwan is officially described ‘as a cultural and literary souvenir to the Phatobihu festival’. It carries articles, essays, lyrics, and poems dedicated to various expositions of Bihu, its relevance to everyday life, and the larger question of Assamese identity.

The Bihuwan does not come across as a customary souvenir but is essayed with an eye to posterity. Apart from sections dedicated to the historicity of Pahtobihu, creative aspects, relationships and impact on society, every edition serves as a template for creating a corpus of institutional memory. Each edition carries the list of office bearers for various Phatobihu committees, like the welcome committee, celebration committee, and editorial committee since the launch of the souvenir, even while incorporating the latest. Importantly, the elected committee responsible for organising Phatobihu, functions throughout the year, with offices built within the Phatobihutoli.

All these work toward creating the Pahtobihu celebration as an event of pride and prestige. The organisers are buoyed by the fact that invited guests do not merely grace the occasion but memorialise their experience at Dhokukhana through narratives. Renowned litterateurs like Ismail Hossain and academicians like Nirmal Kumar Chowdhury are a few such instances. Both were guests of honour during Phatobihu celebrations on different occasions. The former has authored a book titled ‘Historicity and Significance of Phatobihu’ where he asserts Phatobihu as the organic representation of the actual form of Bihu celebrations. Through the pages of Bihuwan one can map out the famous personalities associated with Phatobihu festivities by giving time through attendance.

Interestingly, the photo essay carried to mark forty years of Bihuwan was divided into several sections. One was titled ‘From the old files’, and another ‘Generating harmony: Phatobihu’ showcasing the participation of different indigenous communities in Phatobihu clad in their traditional dress. This entanglement of media and technology with Phatobihu continues to inform discourses around it.

Through his article titled ‘The role of news media in promoting Phatobihu’ Indivar Buragohain chronicles how for the first time Phatobihu made a mark in the Assamese public sphere in 1985 with Prantik, a cultural magazine from the leading news group carrying a lengthy exposition (Bihuwan, 2013). The article maps out the media trail about when and how Phatobihu was featured in Assamese newspapers and television channels. The daily, Dainik Assam, gets special mention for running a feature series in 1990 coupled with a coloured photo feature. With an eye on the longue duree, essaying a letter to the organisers, B Buragohain goes on the offensive by raising the parochial nature of the organising committee due to its disinterest in the digital medium. He asks why the members have not thought of a simple website showcasing Pahtobihu celebration. Joining the issue, Indivar Buragohain too attributed the misrepresentation of Phatobihu in the public sphere to the lack of digital presence, even in the simplest form of a website, as a source of authentic information.

B Buragohain takes the trouble of drawing the attention of organisers to the curation facilities that digital media affords without much expense and little effort in each year’s

celebration. The engaging aspect of his letter was its insistence on garnering an international audience not merely for curiosity, but for translating it into scholarly interest that would beget academic footfalls into the Dhokukhana area through research. The article further underscored the need for a digital version of Bihuwan published in English and the official language, Hindi, to take its contents beyond provincial and national shores (Bihuwan, 2013).

Apart from documentary value, such exhortation to cater to an international audience through uploads in multiple languages goes contrary to the celebration of the 'local' that Pahtobihu remains embedded in practice. In continuation of this spirit, till date, the organising committee of Phatobihu has not been compelled or persuaded to engage with either digital medium or technologies. No official website was launched nor Compact Discs to record and archive the various creative expressions spurred by Phatobihu festivities. Be it songs, dance, drum beats and notes of other musical instruments. Such an attitude does not spell the absence of digital footprints on Phatobihu. A facebook Page titled 'Fato Bihu - Dhakuakhana' stands out for its disclaimer stating 'not the official page of Fato Bihu'. The official inaction is replaced by a multitude of individual initiatives on Phatobihu across all popular social media networks.

Meanwhile, mired in the world of print, Pahtobihu celebrations serve as an occasion to launch books, essayed by noted litterateurs like Ismail Hossian, titled *Phatobihu History and Significance* to independent publications like *Phatobihu* and *Anyana* by Dimebshwar Gogoi. The latter seeks to memorialise the untimely death of their son. Even as the former unabashedly works to document the historicity of Phatobihu, the latter too attempts to inscribe the same by carrying two testimonials. One, a letter from leading cultural icon Moheswahr Neog complimenting the songs and lyrics of Phatobihu, the other, Ram Goswami, a former librarian of Central Library Assam commending the author's first publication 'Deha Gorokhile Prem' in 1972 as an effort to locate the centrality of Phatobihu songs as a cultural expression of Dokuakhana. Indeed, few such publications run into reprints.

'Performative site' as master enabler

If the codification of rules and regulations pertaining to the Phatobihu celebration has helped retain its organic self, then credit for facilitating strict compliance and adherence goes to the performative site for engendering a gatekeeping function. In this case, it is the Phatobihutoli on the erstwhile Mohghuli Chapori.

The three-day celebration within the Phatobihutoli is steeped in organisational heft. The public gaze is well choreographed by inviting a host of eminent personalities as invitees to the three-day event. Customary practice designs a four-tier guest list straddling multiple sites of the capital, social, political, economic and cultural (Bourdeiu, 1986). A chief guest along with a host of other invitees as special guests, guests on whom honour would be conferred, adorn the festival. Literary figures, cultural icons, institutional heads like the Assam Sahitya Sabha and political representatives of Assam often tend to figure in the guest list.

The performative site takes on a layered meaning aided ably by ritualised conventions. It is a site, which facilitates the public to engage with Phatobihu intimately and meaningfully. More importantly, experiences are scored and memorialised as conventions demand the public to co-produce the festivities rather than remain passive recipients. This explains why Phatobihu as an event in the cultural calendar of Assam has a lot of purchase. From the common man to the intelligentsia all like to flag their association with Phatobihu.

Carefully calibrated visual imagery that emerges from the three days of Phatobihu is a giant assemblage of people clad in traditional attire and engaged with local customary practices.

Three colours dominate the Phatobihutoli - red, golden and white in their many hues. The golden of the Muga silk competes with that of the bell-metal products. Red dominates the patterns on the dress fabric and the matching blouse of the women, both participants and audience. White is what graces the Gamucha, a hand-woven native garment of honour. Framing them in a collage is the green of the natural world as the overarching backdrop. The materialities of colours, bodies and the event space jostle for the attention of the visitors' gaze.

What is at work here is Gertrude Stein's assertion that 'visual culture is what is seen.' If what is seen depends on what there is to see and how we look at it, then a montage of images is achieved through the careful choreography of time-tested conventions ensured by the members of the organising committee. Not merely another assemblage but ascribing itself the task of continuing traditional folk festivals in an organic way, maintaining the authenticity of everyday agrarian life. Encapsulating this experience, Rekha Gogoi, a general member of the Phatobihu organising committee, described 'the energy which emanates from the assembled people to watch the participants perform is something to behold as a living tradition.'

Creating a collage of place and memory through a series of impressions and experiences collected across three-day days of festivities at Phatobihutoli contributes toward building the 'performative notion of space' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980). Phatobihutoli is not just a static space to behold and witness but to carry away evocative impressions, where the site itself comes into being while marshalling and enabling the subjective experience of individuals present, framed by conventions aural, auditory and visual.

As inheritors of 'tholua' legacy, the Phatobihu organising committee of Dhokuakhana pitches itself as the custodian of this unique cultural expression through the insistence on conventions parleyed through punitive measures and ritualised observance in an otherwise a-religious setting. In return, the public of Dhokukahna responds with a commitment to participation.

Key Findings

Phatobihu originates in performance and the three days reserved for this festivity resonates with practices considered organic to the Dhokuakhana region and is reminiscent of a period when life was governed by rhythms of seasons privileging agrarian life, where rivers and its tributaries formed the main artery of navigation. What stands out in the commentary on Phatobihu carried in Bihuwan is an emphasis on the event's exceptionalism in terms of people and place. Phatobihutoli is a site to showcase and behold the local traditions of everyday life, a peek into a bygone organic self. A site where people from various communities inhabiting the land gather to partake in an annual ritual of harmony and co-existence. It is not merely as a site of rituals for an organic living, but also as an assemblage of people.

The accent on the local, be it produce like silk, metals, organic lyrics or songs, works to project an immersive experience of what it means to be 'sons of the soil'. It can be read as a challenge to the idea of globalisation. A period during which descendants of the not-so-distant inhabitants of Habung detach themselves from the world and goes back to being organic without any form of mediation. Within the kernel of this insistence on the 'tholua' carry several symbolic meanings like saluting the craft of silkworm rearing for threading, which in turn begets the art of handloom. Or for that matter, nurturing the craft of making utensils and decorative pieces work to project in sharp relief the rural idyll of independence and self-sufficiency.

This desire to retain the authenticity of local cultural expressions, particularly performances associated with Phatobihu through conventions can be read as a measure to keep

harmony among the people like the assured succession of seasons with the flow of time. The performative space of Phatobihutoli helps in ensuring compliance by enabling close monitoring and implementation of conventions which are backed ably by organisational heft.

Subscription to the rules and conventions willingly by the people cannot be ruled out entirely given the pride involved in the evocation of an immediate identity of 'Dhokuakhonia Raji'. Dhokuakhonia emerges as a badge of honour to be worn literally and locals are preoccupied simultaneously with exhibiting, engaging and participating. Through a calibrated coordinated accent on historicity, continuation of tradition and custodians of an organic legacy, Phatobihu serves as a special marker of the significance of inhabiting the region of Dhokuakhana and reiterating this relationship every year. Phatobihu represents the aural, auditory and visual culture of celebrating everyday life in an organic form shaped by environment, people and place. A period when the micro-identity of Dhokuakhana, a region that can be traversed in one's lifetime as opposed to the nation, which implies distance, is fore-grounded.

Conclusion

The conventions, rituals and projection of 'tholua' collectively work to solicit for the Phatobihu festivities respect, attention and collective engagement from the Dhokuakhana raji 'public' cutting across ethnic, linguistic differences, particularly between the tribal and Assamese-speaking people. A time when the term 'Dhokuakhana Raji' takes on a resonance in shaping a unique identity away from the minefield of mediated realities. This explains the official disinclination to engage with digital media yet, despite persuasions from several quarters.

In the process, this digital indifference opens up spaces for archiving and interpreting the Phatobihu folklore by a multitude of foot soldiers through individual initiatives in the digital sphere and thus echoing the very pluralistic and inclusive attributes that the celebration is associated with.

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