

THE FESTIVALS OF THE ALPINE - KALITA ETHNIC GROUP

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Various ethnic and racial groups have long contributed various components to the Assamese people's overall cultural mosaic, the micro-nationalistic groups that were crucial in the development of Aryan culture created the fundamental foundation of this. Originally, they were known as "Kambojas," who came from a border region in South-East Iran and later settled in Assam's lush river valley regions. It appears that no other human race visited or lived in Assam prior to the Alpines. There are no documentary references to support the claims made about the groups that inhabit the state's hilly areas. come to Assam before those who came from the borders of the South–East Iran. From the mode of their attires, food – culture and habit, animal husbandry, weaponry and war-tactics, the Astro–Asiatic and the Mangoloids show their own identifiable features, that are to the fact that they have been settling over the hills and the high lands of the region since their entry into this land, instead of choosing the plains and river valleys for this. The lack of historical records makes it difficult to confirm the claims of the groups inhabiting Assam's hilly areas. It is interesting to note that they preferred settling in the hills and highlands rather than the more accessible plains and river valleys, pointing to a deliberate choice in their migration patterns. Geographical features, security concerns, and cultural traditions are just a few of the variables that might have affected this choice.

As a populous caste of Assam, the Kalitas have immense contributions to make into the Assamese folk cultural landscape.

According to Kali Ram Medhi: “Assam is the homeland of the Kalitas, and its civilization is predominantly Kalita. The other sub-castes follow the Kalita social laws and customs in their entirety”. In its process of contributing to the formation of the greater Assamese race, the Kalitas had its own share of ethnic customs, conventions, and various other folk elements, and in that way, it has also allowed itself to consecrate many of its own original features or elements. In this article, we will discuss the festivals of Kalita's, how they are celebrated with great enthusiasm, and traditional rituals.

Festivals : Garu Bihu, Bohag Bihu , Bah- pooja and different ceremonies:

As a testimony to the link with the rich cultural heritage of the Alpine civilization, which is more than 9000 years old, the Kalitas still retain a few of their ceremonies and festivals that have strains of the Alpine part. For example, they ritualize “**Garu Bihu**” as part of the Bihu Festival. Animal husbandry was an important part of the antique alpine population, and the ‘**Garu Bihu**’ of the Kalitas thus displays the community, past attachment to such an activity. The festival of Garu Bihu not only showcases the Kalitas' connection to their ancient Alpine roots, but also highlights the importance of animal husbandry in their culture. It serves as a reminder of the contributions made by the Kalita civilization and their rich cultural heritage, which dates back thousands of years. The preservation of such traditions is vital in order to understand and appreciate the history and legacy of the Kalitas. By celebrating Garu Bihu, the Kalitas are able to keep their heritage alive and pass down their customs to future generations. Through this festival, they honor their ancestors who relied on animal husbandry for their livelihood and sustenance. The continued practice of Garu Bihu serves as a testament to the resilience and perseverance

of the Kalitas in preserving their unique way of life despite modernization and changing times. It is through these cultural traditions that the Kalitas are able to maintain a strong sense of identity and connection to their roots.

The Kalitas retain the strains of their Alpine past in the form of their own agricultural activities and social ethics, and no wonder then that they celebrate the **Bohag Bihu** with such great fervour. The Bohag Bihu starts with a day dedicated specially to paying respects to the cows, as among all the domestic animals, the cow acts as the mainstay of the entire family, being indispensable for cultivating the agricultural land. The first day of the Bohag Bihu is called "**Garu Bihu**." On this day, leaves of a particular plant called - "**Dighalati**" are collected from the groves in the vicinity. The leaves of '**Dighalati**' are then used to prepare a special dish called "**Jolpan**" which is offered to the cows as a form of gratitude for their contribution to the family's livelihood. The entire community comes together to participate in the Garu Bihu celebrations, with young and old alike taking part in the festivities. This day marks the beginning of a week-long celebration filled with traditional dances, music, and feasting, symbolizing the joy and abundance that comes with the arrival of the spring season. The village is adorned with colorful decorations made from flowers and bamboo, creating a festive atmosphere that is infectious to all who attend. The sound of traditional drums and flutes fills the air as dancers perform intricate routines in perfect synchrony. The aroma of freshly cooked delicacies wafts through the air, tempting all to indulge in the delicious spread laid out for the occasion. The Garu Bihu celebrations embody the spirit of community and gratitude, as neighbors come together to celebrate the bounty of nature and the bonds that tie them together.

The same is tied to the granary or kept under the Tulshi plant. In the evening, earthen lamps are lightened as a token of reverence to the cows in the cowshed. In some places, while honouring the cows in the cowshed, people also sing hymns to them, e.g. :

"Bidhatai srajile,

Amino boricho tomak

Banare Dewata santosto thakiba

Tomak juricho haat."

["You were made by God, and on this important occasion, we humbly greet you. We humbly ask that you, God of the Wild, grant us fulfilment. Oh, my Lord, we humbly and respectfully offer our hands in submission to you.

Earlier in the day, cows are ceremoniously bathed in the morning and bits of guard, brinjal, etc. are thrown. The leaves of the **Dighalati** plant also gently tap on them. The Kalitas refer to this **Bohag Bihu** as "**Saat Bihu**" (**The Seven Days' Bihu**), since it lasts for seven days. During this time, people wear new clothes, visit relatives and friends, and exchange gifts and sweets. Traditional Assamese dishes like **pitha**, **larus**, and **doi** are prepared and enjoyed by all. The sound of traditional musical instruments like the dhol and pepa fills the air, creating a festive and joyous atmosphere. The Bohag Bihu festival is a time of renewal, unity, and celebration for the Assamese people, marking the beginning of a new year filled with hope and prosperity. It is a time for forgiveness and letting go of the past, as people come together to celebrate the beauty of life and the blessings of nature. The colorful decorations, vibrant dances, and melodious songs add to the charm of the festival, bringing communities closer and strengthening bonds of friendship and love. As the aroma of delicious food wafts through the air and laughter echoes in the streets, the spirit of Bohag Bihu fills every heart with happiness and gratitude for the abundance of blessings in their lives. This seven-day festival is a time to reflect on the past year, embrace the present moment, and look forward to a future filled with prosperity and joy.

The abundance of bamboo in South-East Asia is widely recognised. For daily needs, the residents in the area are heavily dependent on bamboo. The social, economic, and cultural lives of the inhabitants in the

area depend heavily on bamboo. Bamboo is used for construction, furniture, handicrafts, and even food in some cases. Its versatility and sustainability make it a crucial resource for the community. During Bohag Bihu, bamboo plays a significant role in the decorations, with bamboo poles being used to create colorful structures and traditional motifs. The abundance of bamboo symbolizes the richness of life and the interconnectedness of nature with the people celebrating this joyous festival. As the sound of traditional music fills the air and the aroma of delicious food continues to entice passersby, the spirit of Bohag Bihu, intertwined with the presence of bamboo, creates a unique and vibrant atmosphere that brings people together in celebration and gratitude.

In addition to fuel, dried bamboo is also utilised for lighting. As a symbol of their appreciation for it, the Kalitas used to conduct a Puja rite known as "**Bah Puja**" (**Bamboo-Puja**). During the Bah Puja ceremony, the Kalitas offer prayers and rituals to express gratitude for the bamboo's vital role in their daily lives. This tradition has been passed down through generations and serves as a reminder of the deep connection between the people of the Brahmaputra valley and the bamboo plant. The ceremony is a colorful and lively event, with music, dance, and feasting, bringing the community together in celebration of their shared heritage and appreciation for this versatile and essential resource. Through the Bah Puja, the Kalitas honor the bamboo's significance and reaffirm their commitment to preserving and utilizing it in a sustainable and respectful manner for future generations. The Bah Puja is not only a time of celebration but also a time of reflection on the importance of preserving the environment and the resources it provides. The Kalitas recognize that the bamboo plant is not only essential for their daily needs but also plays a crucial role in maintaining the delicate balance of their ecosystem. By coming together to honor and celebrate the bamboo through this ancient ritual, they are reaffirming their dedication to sustainability and ensuring that this vital resource will continue to benefit their community for years to come.

The ceremonies known as "**Bhatheli**," "**Suweri**," or "**Paora Tola**" are a component of this "**Bah Puja**." For this, the community brings one bamboo to a shared location. The bamboo is offered a Puja at the base of its trunk before being cut from its grove. After that, batel leaves and nuts are fastened together at the top of the plant's trunk. After that, the bamboo is carefully transported to the gathering spot where it will be honoured. The bamboo is lifted with great care to ensure that it does not come into contact with the earth and that it stays sacrosanct. After attaching colourful cloth pieces, such as **Gamocho**, to the bamboo, it is adorned and carried to the site of devotion. The community members then gather around the bamboo, offering prayers and blessings for the success of the upcoming event or celebration. The bamboo stands tall and proud, symbolizing strength, resilience, and unity. As the sun sets, the bamboo is lit up with twinkling lights, creating a magical and enchanting atmosphere. The sound of music and laughter fills the air as people come together to celebrate and pay homage to the sacred plant. The bamboo, now a centerpiece of the gathering, serves as a reminder of the importance of tradition, culture, and togetherness.

Next, the bamboo is affixed vertically to the holy ground. As a sign of their regard, the people refer to the bamboo with reverence and call it "**Madan Mohan Gohain**" or "**Paura Gohain**." In certain Assamese villages, the sacred bamboo is taken from home to house and across the hamlet as traditional horns are blown and drums are pounded. Every household lights clay lanterns in reverence upon the arrival of the holy bamboo. There are some locations where the bamboo's trunk is divided into smaller sections. Every family respectfully places these fragments beneath the earth they have excavated in front of their homes. With the aid of a piece of wood, the village's youth now divide into two groups and attack the sacred bamboo. The bamboo should be circled in order to make the striking. The people take bits of the crushed bamboo home after it has been completely crushed. It is thought that having a piece of it fixed to the house's granary wall could bring good fortune to the family for the whole year.

Another significant occasion in the Kalitas' folklore is the "**Mohoho**" festival. This well-known

celebration is customarily arranged by the populace to ward off mosquitoes. "Ho" signifies to drive away, while "**Moh**" denotes mosquito. During this celebration, young people from the hamlet gather in the open areas of their homes' front yards, armed with bamboo sticks. With the traditional "**Moho-ho**" tunes on their lips, they dance back and forth. The songs are in an odd arrangement, and in the name of the mosquito, they do, in fact, symbolically, proclaim the triumph of good over evil or the vanquishing of evil spirits. One of the young people takes the lead and begins to strike the ground in a rhythmic manner with a bamboo stick while dancing about to the melodies that the others are singing together. A young person is observed acting out the part of the bear in different locations by donning a dry banana leaf. There are other members of the squad who dress in masks with different designs and patterns to simulate chasing away insects. The family's host kneels down at the end of the programme to honour and revere the "**Moho-ho**" team, giving them money, rice, or both. The villagers eventually plan a communal feast with the treasures they have accumulated in this fashion.

In addition to all of this, the Kalitas plan a number of other celebrations. One such is the **Pacheti Utsav**. On the fifth day of Janmastami, which is celebrated as Lord Krishna's birth day, this festival takes place. Highlights of this Utsav include the folk songs and traditional Naam Prasanga (lyrical prayers performed in the Naamghars seeking blessing from Lord Krishna) accompanied by the staccato of the traditional terracotta drum played auspiciously by the "Khol" and the high-pitched percussion sounds produced by the "**Tal**," a pair of clash cymbals. Other significant community gatherings for the Kalitas include "**Bhui Ruwa**," which involves planting seedlings in wet fields; "Lakhimi Adara," which involves ceremoniously bringing home a sheaf of newly harvested rice; "**Nakhua**," which is a customary feast with family members featuring the fresh rice from the first harvest; and the Bihus, which are Assamese festivals known as "**Bohag Bihu**," "**Kati Bihu**," and "**Bhogali Bihu**."

The Kalitas customarily arrange a social event to ceremoniously mark the onset of **puberty** in girls. The event is referred to as "**Dhewari Parba**" or "**Tolani Parba**." Males actively participating in this are frowned upon. A girl must be sequestered for three days and three nights after reaching puberty in order to prevent male members of the public from seeing her during this time. After these three days are up, a "**Gamocha**" that has been woven somewhere else—known as an "**Anakata Gamocha**"—is placed inside a ceremonial casket—known as a "Japa." This coffin is currently stored at the home of a clan member. On the third day, the women who are staying at the house for this reason attend the girl's ceremonial bath. Only after this ceremony is completed will the girl be permitted to go outside. These days, the event is sufficiently attractive to draw in female participants. The girl is adorned in traditional attire and jewellery, signifying her transition into womanhood. Family and friends gather to celebrate and offer blessings to the young girl as she emerges from seclusion. The community comes together to support and uplift the girl as she embarks on this new chapter in her life, surrounded by love and encouragement. The ceremonial bath marks the end of her seclusion and the beginning of her journey as a respected and valued member of the community.

The Kalitas traditionally view the month that follows a baby's birth as a time of impurity for the family and the clan. The mother who has just given birth is expected to carry a small iron object, such as a knife, with her throughout this time. In the family, fire is also kept blazing throughout the day since it is thought to ward off evil spirits. It is also traditional to attach a tiny jujube tree branch or a segment of fishing net to the top of a door's entryway. In addition, a circular black mark is typically applied to the baby's forehead, supposedly to ward off any potential negative effects from evil spirits. These customs and rituals are believed to protect the newborn and the mother from any harm or negative energy during this vulnerable time. To ensure that the mother and child are in a supportive and protective environment, the family comes together. The presence of fire, iron objects, and symbolic decorations are all part of a larger effort to create a safe and sacred space for the new addition to the family. It is a time of great care and attention, as the community works together to ensure the well-being of the mother and child.

In conclusion, the Kalitas have undoubtedly left a lasting impact on the Assamese culture and language through their unique assimilations and contributions over centuries. Their role in the formation of the Assamese identity deserves recognition and further study to fully understand the complex dynamics of cultural exchange and integration within the region. The Kalitas can take pride in their significant role in shaping the rich tapestry of Assamese civilization through their acculturation efforts.

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