

MODERNIZATION AND ASSAMESE CULTURE

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Abstract

Assam, the Land of Blue Hills and Red Rivers, is an assimilation of various ethno-cultural groups. 'Axomiya' or Assamese culture along with their language and tradition is a unique and is traditionally a hybrid one in the Northeastern states. The Assamese culture is influenced by Kamrupa Kingdom which was later curved or paved into another dimension by Srimanta Sankardev. But as time passed by the culture of Assam has gone through a tremendous change with the blend of modernization into it. This paper will showcase the affect of modernization in different ingredients of Assamese Culture which has gone through major changes or in the verge of getting extinct as there is lack of interest to safeguard the old cultural beliefs which is leading its path to materialistic culture.

Keyword- *Assam, Assamese culture, modernization, influence, materialistic culture*

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INTRODUCTION

Culture refers to people's way of life i.e., the things they do, the values and belief system they follow which also includes morals and norms. Culture is usually passed on to the next generations by learning or by hereditary. Assam being an assimilation of various ethno-cultural groups is a meeting ground of diverse culture. One of the important parts of Assamese culture is symbolism. There are three important symbolic elements in Assamese Culture; they are '*Tamul-pan*', '*Xorai*' and '*Gamusa*'. The first cultural assimilation of roots of Assamese Culture took place between Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman groups. The cultural assimilation went through three waves, first the wave of Tibeto-Burman ethnic group then the wave of Indo-Aryans from Northern India and lastly the wave of migration that was of the Ahoms (Tai/Shan). (Raatan)

ASSAM

Located at Northeastern part of India, Assam is the gateway to Northeast India and also serves as a link of trade with the South-eastern countries. The culture, landscape and environment of this state are shaped and rooted to its mighty Brahmaputra River. The land has attained its name from the 'Ahom' word 'Axom' which means 'a land like no other'. Assam has 35 districts which are inhabited by 30 different tribes. The state has conserved the one-horned rhinoceros and also other wild lives. The Fox Tail Orchid is the state flower of Assam. Assam is well known for its Tea and Silk (*Pat* and *Muga*). (North East India People, History and Culture)

CULTURE OF ASSAM

Assamese culture is the assimilation of various ethno-cultural groups, which got highly influenced by the Kamrupa Kingdom followed by the Ahom kingdom, the Koch Kingdom, the Kachari Kingdom and later by the Vaishnavism introduced by Srimanta Sankardev, which paved another path or dimension to the culture. However, the

culture of Assam got a blend of modernization into it as time passed by. The various ingredients of Assamese culture such as Bamboo culture, Assamese marriage, food habits, costumes and music got blended into the vicious circle of modernization keeping apart the old traditional lineage. (Nath) (North East India People, History and Culture)

AFFECT OF MODERNIZATION AND ASSAMESE CULTURE

When we talk about Modernization what is the first question that comes to our mind, what is modernization?

Modernization although a complex term, refers to socio-cultural transformation. It refers to the transition from 'traditional' to a 'modern society.' During the 17th and 18th century when the developments were taking place in Western Europe and North America, modernization refers to the process of change towards those developments. It also followed to Africa, Asia and many others parts during the 20th century. It may also refer to the change the custom-bound people try to adapt themselves to the present changing time. An individual's dress habits, food habits, ideas, values etc may reflect the changes that are taking place. (Yasin)

With the advent of British colonies, modernization began in Assam. The gradual emergence of the elite class in middle of the pre-existing traditional society has created a desire among the societies move towards modernization. The Assamese society has been undergoing complex process of transitions which moves more towards the modern ways from the traditional ways. The various ingredients of Assamese culture are molded with the flow of modernity coming into light. Any society to be modernized must be an industrialized society. Industrialization leads to modernization. The growth of machines has reduced some of the traditional methods of the society. The influence of machines in Assamese society is clearly reflected in its use on the agricultural field. Tractors and other machines are being used in fields and other farming procedures. These has reduced the use of bullocks and cows in fields and led to their absence from the household area. As such the waves of modernization have affected the culture of the society. The Goru (cow) Bihu which is celebrated on the first day of Bohag Bihu has seen reduce of traditional bath of cow, a part of few villages still following it. The cow is particularly given a bath with the paste of Matimah (phassolus max), Halodhi (Turmeric) and Mitha Tel (Mustard oil) than this paste is used by the family members for their bath. But the absence of cow in houses has left a gap in this tradition followed. The only plant, Makhiloti with which the cows are beaten on the day of Goru Bihu may

not be familiar to the present generation. Tradition and culture keep alive other things which are linked with it. Japi is unique of Assamese culture, is used by farmers during rainy season. In the present day, very few usage of Japi in such situation can be seen. The traditional tools such as *Haal* is rarely seen which is replaced by tractors. Various craftsmen associated with this work have been affected by such change and so did the preservation of the traditional modes of farming tools. This is the great side affect of industrialization. The great amount of man force that was required was reduced leaving majority of the people unemployed and devoid of jobs. When one ingredient is broken, it eventually breaks other linkage with it. (shodhganga)

Bihu, which is part and parcel of Assamese culture, has undergone various changes in its form, celebration and outlook. Bihu is a dance form of Assam as well as the famous festival of the state. Bihu carries the soul and essence of Assamese people. Bihu is mainly agricultural festival of ancient Assam. But as regards the origin of these festivals literary and historical reference is not adequate enough. But from the records that during the reign of Lakshmi Singha, Raghav Moran, the Moamoria king was killed by Kuranganayani, when he was kneeling down to devote to the Huchariparty (Bihu song and dance party) of the disguised Ahom soldiers.¹ The other two bihu-kati bihu and magh bihu is also fully agro-based. The celebration of this bihu's are not clearly extinct, but the tradition and the belief which is associated with it is blurred. Bihu as a festival was celebrated in relation to agriculture. Bihu dance was a way of merriment among the Assamese people. In earlier times, the Ahom kings who were interested in music and dance used to reward the girl who was best dancer during the Bihu festival. This Bihu as a dance form was mainly conducted in open field under a tree. People of every age would gather, sing and dance, as a part of Bihu celebration. However with time this tradition is undergoing continuous change. The form of merriment has now become a part of competitions and judge involved event. (Raatan) (Nath)

Social customs and traditions are part and parcel of every society. Assamese culture, too, has its unique set of customs, which is now becoming a part of modern society aloof from its tradition. Marriage as a custom and tradition is followed in its way. But the little bits which make it a whole are gradually becoming extinct. Various customs and traditions such as, on the third day of marriage *khuba-khubani gucha* are observed in bridegroom's house. *Dheki diya*, which is traditional way of grinding rice, was a form of test for the bride is no longer observed. The concept of reception can be said as fairly a new concept. *Juranaam*, *biyanaam* are some form of entertainment which the people from both the family used to sing and amuse. What modernization has changes are the

folk elements of a culture. The songs which are kept alive through tradition lose their pace. Everything has their own importance, *husori*, and *husori maandiya*, emphasize richness of a culture. The modern effect of *bandwalas* and other modern and electronic form of entertainment has replaced those traditional songs. Acculturation may also be the fact for such changes. Various cultures, customs and traditions flow without any hindrance, also leads to such cultural changes. The *maandhora*, *ritual* after marriage by the bride is observed after the first meal prepared by her. The little elements of this rituals, however, might not been properly observed. The veil in Assamese culture is of utmost importance for showing respect towards the elders, during and after marriage. This difference can be observed among the old women and new women in the village. Similarly, *konikapur* is hardly seen in *Xorai* which is used for *Xorai dhoka*. *Tuloni Biya* (second marriage), is observed and celebrated in Assamese culture. During the menstrual of first seven days, the girl is made to sleep in banana leaves with straws under it. But these have been replaced by sleepovers. The explanations which can be given for it is –first, unlike earlier days, there is somewhat lack of banana plants and straws, for no cows to feed on them. Secondly, the modern mindsets oppose such blind customs and prefer rational actions. *Xilor bason* (utensils of stone) were used to serve food for the girl is no longer seen. There is also change in the food items that is given. The clearest affect of modern society is seen in the use of mobiles, where on one hand they are not allowed to see male members and not step outside. *Muga* and *Pat*, the famous silk of Assam, is worn during marriage and other events. *Riha* of either material is to be worn by the bride is longer seen. There is much usage of *banarsi pat* and other dress which have replaced these dress forms. *Tamul paan* in *Xorai* is a mark of respect for elders and guest to host them. Utensils of *kaah* are used for serving quest and family members. All these have been gradually declining from the society. Lipstick is not a part of this society but its *Borhomthuri*, a plant stem which was used as lipstick. This plant might have been preserved by some; however its existence is still a question. (Nath) (Raatan)

The social customs and traditions are always followed and passed from one generation to another. With modernization and industrialization coming into force, the concept of nuclear family came into existence. The ignorance and decline of culture can also be regarded due to the absence of old people in household or in society. The older generation is the chain between the new generation and traditions. It is learned and acquired through them. The growing distance between the old and new results in the decline of cultures, those were in practice. They have become oral cultures rather than

practicing cultures. The customs and traditional are verbally explained story like, but until and unless they are put into action they cannot be revived. (shodhganga) (Raatan) What modernization urges a society to attain is, being materialistic. Materialization of culture is highly associated with the affects of modernization. This is clearly evident in everyday life of a culture centric society. The notion of materialization has taken the culture and traditions of a society to another level. There is infusion of west into it. In the name of preservation, culture which were socially followed or practiced are ornamentalized and presented in order to have a huge amount of attraction worldwide. . The development of culture is a continuous process; but it was definitely slow in the case of non-material culture in a tradition-bound society. The evolution of *Bihu* proves that there have been changes in the tradition of *Bihu* since its inception in the past. Evidently, the process of change at any stage of society is likely to be considerably influenced by the concerned society's cultural view of change.ⁱⁱ Bihu from the time of Ahom king till present has undergone tremendous changes in terms of its form and mechanism. The rise of mancha bihu the original inherent message of the festival is not given due importance. From its journey from open fields to mancha has attached capitalist and economic values. There arise compulsions which may come through many forms. Like Kopou Phul which is replaced by plastic flower in dance form. The judgment of best bihu dancer developed titles of Bihu Kuwori, Bihu Rani Etc. The items have become merely mandatory rather than tradition. The dresses, from its design to the materials have undergone change. Material culture brings in the concept of high Pop Culture. Traditional elements are presented highly due to capitalist society. Gamusa is center of Assamese culture. It is now received a hierarchy from presenting as token of love to presenting an item of respect which is highly designed and cultivated. Extreme extends are production of umbrella and wearable's from it. Similarly Xorai, Japi and Seleng are now capitalist products. (shodhganga)

The materialistic affect can also be seen in the songs and traditional uses of instruments. No doubt industrialization bring with it all around development, there has been fusion and cultural blends. The recent development can be seen as the emergence of popular culture. Although this is not highly considered, what makes it popular is its connectedness to the larger mass of society. This culture tends to somewhere bring is west ideas, deviating the tradition way, like Rap music, highly western musical instruments, the values etc. earlier it was Dhol, Bahi, Khuti Tal, Tokari and many more. Similarly old Luko Geet, Bihu songs etc has been remade in a modern setting and technique. Preservation has become the central idea, but, this preservation

has led to the alteration of the traditional songs, methods and techniques in much modern way. Even some artist borrow or adapt from western songs like Bhupen Hazarika, Jayanta Hazarika, Zubeen Grag etc. much modern techniques and methods can be seen in songs of Papon Mahanta. On one way it is a boon and also a side effect for the culture. Materialization has led many cultures blend together, which creates illusions. In most of popular music videos, Assamese, Tiwa, Naga and other tribal's are infused together. The side effects of such techniques are misconceptions and doubts which may in created in upcoming generations. Modernization has led to develop many culturally deviated items and if the forms of entertainment, which is highly consumed. A culture which is undergoing transformations from all round, should be able to preserve its authentic self. The food has also become capitalist conscious. The normal food habits are transferred from daily household into the economic field. Many items that are presented as part and parcel of Assamese culture may be in due time, or not always consumed. The notion of preservation has led to its materialization. The *Aloo Pitika*, which is considered as unique and central to Assamese life can be question, where Potato (Aloo) was brought by the Portuguese. So what is called authentic and served as tradition can sometime be question.

To conclude, it can be said that with developments taking place every minute, it is difficult to resist it. However attempts and steps should be taken to preserve one's culture, irrespective of outer pressure. Merely following an oral tradition of cultures is not and will not preserve it until and unless it is practiced. So a culture must be practiced and followed through generations to keep it alive. The idea of preservation of certain cultural values has in time led to materialistic culture. Materialization has altered traditional and cultural values.

ⁱ . H. Barbarua, Op.Cit. , pp. 259,260

ⁱⁱ . S.C. Dube, Op-cit., p.1 16

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