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Folk Memory as Counter-Archive: Colonial Encounter, Power, and Resistance in Bihu Songs

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Abstract: This paper examines Bihu songs of Assam as counter-archives that preserve and reinterpret the colonial encounter through folk memory. Drawing on the postcolonial lens of Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, the study explores how these songs articulate power, resistance and a critique of colonial modernity. The study focuses on selected Bihu songs collected from secondary sources. By employing textual analysis, it looks at how figures like the “Bongal” and the “Sahab,” along with images of steam engines and tea gardens, capture the tangled mix of domination, adaptation, and quiet defiance that shaped people’s lives under colonial rule. While the songs encapsulate the lived experience of labor exploitation and the social changes brought by colonial policies, they often reshape these memories through humour, irony, and a grounded sense of identity. By embedding colonial experiences within agrarian, ecological, and affective idioms, Bihu songs turn artistic expression into a form of historical consciousness. The study argues that these songs function as living folk archives, keeping collective memories alive and challenging the gaps and silences in official colonial histories through folk expression, remembrance, and resistance.

Keywords: Bihu song, Colonialism, Counter-archive, Resistance, folk memory.

Introduction

The memory of colonialism extends beyond the history of governance; it permeates historical narratives and literary works, folk songs and oral stories, reminding us that the past is repeatedly reimagined in the present cultural imagination. Assam, a state in Northeastern India, underwent significant changes in its everyday lives, administration and education system under British colonialism, including the introduction of new languages and literature. The history of Assam is marked by multiple cultural influences, with climate, geology, and the environment significantly impacted by human activity from an early period. Assam witnessed the establishment

of various empires and dynasties over the centuries. Of these, the Ahom Kingdom, founded in 1228 CE by people of Tai origin from Southeast Asia, is a significant epoch in the history of Assam. (Gait). The Ahoms ruled the region for nearly 600 years and developed a robust administration. The Ahom Kingdom, which lasted for centuries, fell in 1826 due to internal conflicts within the state. (Baruah). Faced with a Burmese invasion, the Ahoms requested help from the British East India Company. As a result, after 1826, it became part of British India following the Treaty of Yandabo, which was signed between the Burmese king and the British East India Company. (Guha).

Institutional history and popular memory are two sources of collective memory. History, as a shared memory, unfolds from two distinct pitches: institutions and popular memory. Political and religious institutions maintain and construct a shared memory of the past that evolves in response to the changes within those institutions. This is contrasted with the work of folk culture, through which communities keep memories and traditions alive in customs and oral literature. These cultural sites in early modern times were characterized by a mix of historical experiences that led to both community belonging and differentiation within the same geographical area. (Das). In Assam, colonial influences can be seen in the culture through its folklore. To Dundes, folklore is a "creative dynamic living tradition". Such traditions offer acceptable means of symbolizing and conveying intricate histories, fears and contested narratives between generations in a society. (Bronner). These express collective memories, such as the experience of colonial rule, by transforming old traditions in response to new circumstances. Therefore, in Assam, as part of folklore, the position that folk songs hold is different from that of other arts; they also store lived experiences and cover social dimensions (realities) or feelings, and are not confined to the realm of art alone, a historical consciousness acquired during colonial rule. Bihu songs are selected in this study as "living archives of colonial memory" because they embody experiences of pain, resistance, and negotiation, a central genre within Assamese folklore. Bihu song, a folk song of Assam, is associated with the Bohag Bihu festival, which celebrates the arrival of spring and symbolizes love, fertility, unity, and all that is beautiful in nature. Bihu is a significant cultural festival in Assam, observed at various stages of the Indian agricultural year. (Goswami). It is not just a practice or a festivity, it is a culturally constructed phenomenon that owes its form to folk traditions, tales, songs, dances, customs and practices transmitted from one generation to the next.

The Bihu songs, which were passed down through generations without a dedicated focus in ancient times, cover a range of aspects of nature as well as more professional themes, such as love and passion, or social issues with collective aspirations. They are rich in literary elements, such as metaphors and ornamentation. They are coupled with a melodious sweetness that produces a unique and profound emotional experience for both singers and listeners. (Hazarika). The lyrical/musical content of these songs depicts the multifaceted shades of Assamese culture, encompassing political, social, religious, and socio-economic aspects. Bihu songs are also called *bihunam* or *bihugeet*. “They are absolutely archetypal Assamese folk tunes. They are mythical ones and have excellent quality, not only in the sense of lyrics, but also for rhythms, tunes, singing patterns, etc.” (Sarmah & Goswami).

This study approaches Bihu songs as vital cultural texts that reveal how colonialism shaped folk expression. Through close attention to lyrics, the study examines how these songs voice indigenous resistance and unsettle the authority of colonial outsiders. Employing a qualitative methodology, grounded in textual analysis and interpretive frameworks, the study analyzes selected Bihu songs related to colonial experiences, drawn from published collections by earlier folklorists. Grounded in Said’s and Bhabha’s postcolonial discourses, the analysis methodically examines how metaphors and cultural signifiers in Bihu songs negotiate identity and articulate resistance under colonial conditions. Supplemented by secondary sources including historical documents, literary works, and academic studies on colonial Assam, the study situates Bihu songs within broader cultural and political discourses.

Edward Said explains through his idea of orientalism that colonial power often worked by portraying the colonized as the “Other”, as people who were weak, uncivilized, or in need of guidance. This way of seeing helped the colonizers justify their rule. (Said). But this gaze was not one-directional. If the colonizers viewed colonized as the “Other,” the colonized also developed their own ways of seeing the colonizers as outsiders who did not belong in their world.

Bihu songs do show traces of how the British introduced new ideas and objects into Assamese life, but they do much more than reflect colonial notions of backwardness. These songs actually challenge the way the colonized were represented. Bihu songs reveal how Assamese people saw themselves with confidence, humor, and pride.

Through teasing, flirtation, jokes, and comments on daily life, they present a self-image that resists the idea of weakness. Instead of accepting the colonial gaze, the Assamese folk expressed their own sense of cultural strength. This flips the direction of the gaze: the British are no longer the observers; they become the ones being observed.

Homi Bhabha's idea of ambivalence helps explain this complex dynamic. He argues that colonial relationships are never stable because the colonized both absorb and resist colonial ideas. That tension is visible in Bihu songs. The songs acknowledge new elements brought by the British, yet they also use humor, pride, and skill to assert a sense of superiority. This means the colonized were not silent or passive; they actively shaped how they wanted to be seen. Bhabha calls this in-between zone the "third space," a place where identities are continuously negotiated, where people resist, adapt, or blend different influences. (Bhabha). Bihu songs operate within this space. Here, Assamese communities express their agency by giving their own meanings to the changes brought by colonial power. Through everyday singing, they subtly reinterpret and reshape the narratives imposed on them.

By reading Bihu songs through Said and Bhabha, we can understand them as a site where different ways of seeing collided. The mutual "othering" shows that folk expressions, such as Bihu songs, carried subtle forms of resistance and power during the colonial period.

Colonial Encounter, Power, and Resistance in Bihu Songs

During British colonial rule, Assamese was initially dismissed as a mere dialect of Bengali, with Bengali imposed as the official language in Assam's courts and schools. The British administration's close association with Bengali officials earned them the label "Boga-Bengali" or "white Bengalis" among the Assamese, highlighting the sociopolitical dominance of outsiders. (Bhattacharya). Folk memory crystallizes this foreign intrusion in the term "*Bongal*", derived from "*Bangal*" (people from Bengal), which, through vernacular adaptation, came to signify outsiders, especially colonial administrators and Bengali settlers, disrupting Assamese sociopolitical and cultural life. In Assamese, the term "Bongal" evolved as local pronunciations of "Bangal", reflecting their adaptation to the Assamese phonetic and linguistic context. These terms suggest

colonial outsiders, British officials who imposed foreign governance and undermined indigenous authority. One folk verse recount that:

Bongal Bongal ki nu oi Bongal

Bongale asile sai

Xatraj mari ek raj korile

Lole Jorhatot thai. (Gogoi, 85)

English:

Bongal, Bongal, what is this Bongal?

The *Bongal* were watching.

They conquered seven kingdoms and established a single rule.

They made Jorhat their seat.

This verse highlights the dominance of outsiders, referred to as “*Bongal*,” marking a clear divide between the native Assamese identity and foreign colonial rulers. It shows the *Bongal* as opportunistic, waiting to seize control by overthrowing the fragmented “seven kingdoms” and establishing a unified rule. Jorhat, the last Ahom capital, symbolizes this shift, gaining even greater significance following the colonial transition after the Treaty of Yandabo, which disrupted Assam’s sociopolitical structure and displaced traditional authority. (Goswami). The verse thus captures local anxiety over lost sovereignty and preserves the memory of colonial conquest and the loss of identity.

The reflection of colonial technology in Bihu songs captures the disruptive nature of the imperial encounter, symbolized by the introduction of ships, railways, roads, and steam engines that transformed Assam’s social and economic landscape. The historical introduction of steam navigation on the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, including the Dikhow River, stands as a tangible symbol of colonial modernization in Assam. Previously, transportation primarily relied on indigenous modes, such as elephants, human bearers, and traditional country boats, methods closely tied to local ecological and social systems. The arrival of steamers, initially operated under government auspices and later by private companies, revolutionized trade and mobility by linking Assam

more closely with colonial commercial centres. This technological shift embodied not only infrastructural change but also the colonial reordering of Assamese society, facilitating resource extraction and administrative control. (Barpujari). In Bihu songs, these new infrastructures were remembered with ambivalence:

Boga bongal ahile bhapkol anile

Dikhow noit solale nao

Ami axomiya bihute bolia

Bihu mariboloi jao. (Hakacham, 166).

English:

The white *Bongal* came, bringing steam engines

Boats started sailing on the Dikhow River.

We Assamese, crazy for Bihu

We are going to celebrate it.

The verse's reference to the "white *Bongal*" bringing steam engines and the subsequent launching of boats on the Dikhow River captures the ambivalent nature of colonial intervention and the imposition of modernity in Assam. While these technological changes transformed the material conditions of life revolutionizing transportation and commerce, they also disrupted established social and ecological rhythms. Nevertheless, the spirited invocation of "*Ami axomiya bihute bolia*" (We Assamese, crazy for Bihu) underscores the enduring vibrancy and resilience of indigenous cultural traditions. Despite the sweeping disruptions wrought by colonial rule, cultural practices like Bihu continued to serve as vital expressions of community identity and continuity. In this way, the verse eloquently embodies Assam's complex colonial encounter, in which enforced modernization coexisted with persistent indigenous adaptation and cultural negotiation.

The Bihu songs reveal the complex dynamics of colonial intrusion and indigenous response in Assam through folk memory. The use of terms like "Bongal" and "Boga Bongal" encapsulates a local linguistic resistance that names and delegitimizes colonial outsiders while asserting native identity against imposed structures. This naming signals not only an ethnic or cultural divide but also a profound sociopolitical contestation where

colonial governance characterized by language imposition and administrative dominance, was experienced as alien and coercive.

The Bihu songs that engage with the theme of colonial tea gardens articulate a nuanced social critique of labor exploitation and its profound impact on indigenous life. The tea plantation industry in Assam during the colonial period began in the early 19th century, following the discovery of indigenous tea plants by Robert Bruce in 1823. Captain Jenkins was sent in 1832 to report on Assam's resources, leading to confirmation that the Assam tea plant was a true variety suitable for commercial cultivation. Following this, the British government formed a committee and imported skilled tea makers and Chinese tea plants to improve cultivation techniques. The first government tea plantation was established near the Brahmaputra, but it failed due to poor soil quality. Later, the Assam Company was formed in 1839, establishing commercial tea gardens and expanding plantations across Upper Assam. (Gait). As the tea plantation industry in Assam expanded, the planters faced a significant problem: there were not enough people willing to work in the tea gardens. Because the local population was small and the people were seen as lazy and slow, finding workers for the tea gardens became a challenge in Assam. (Akhtar). With the growing demand for laborers, the search for suitable labor for the tea plantation industry of Assam led to the import of 'Adivasi' tribal people of Jharkhand and Central India, as a large number of them were forcefully brought to Assam in different phases (Kalita, Handique, & Borgohain). These workers, brought from diverse regions of India, came from varied cultural, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds but were collectively labelled as 'Coolies' by the colonial planters. (Jung). A verse explicitly contrasts exploitative plantation work with the dignity of agrarian life:

Baganor Sakori nokoru lahori

Nalage bongola muk

Hatot loi esari halkhoni bamegoi

Gusibo petore bhuk. (Hakacham, 165).

English:

I will not do the work of the tea garden

I do not need the bungalow

I will carry a stick in my hand and go to the paddy field with the plough

This will erase the hunger in the stomach.

This articulation rejects both exploitation and the hollow symbols of colonial wealth. Turning away from the tea garden and its colonial bungalow, the speaker instead embraces the plough and the paddy field, symbols of rootedness in land, self-sufficiency, and continuity with ancestral traditions. The verse becomes a declaration of independence from colonial hierarchies, asserting that dignity is preserved not through the wages and privileges of the Company but through indigenous modes of labor and livelihood. Some Bihu song reflects a powerful folk assertion of nonacceptance towards colonial wealth and labor exploitation. By stating that there is no need to work in the tea garden or seek money from the British Company, the speaker symbolically rejects the economic system imposed by colonialism.

One such verse declares:

Bagisar sakori nalage koribo

Nelage Company dhan

Ghaarte thakiba ramayan pohiba

Xuni thakibore mon. (Gogoi, 176).

English:

No need to work in the tea garden

No need for the money from the Company

Stay at home and read the Ramayana

I find joy in listening to it.

The advice to “stay at home and read the Ramayana” evokes a return to indigenous cultural and spiritual values, emphasizing inner contentment and moral strength over the material gains offered by a colonial regime that brought hardship and social dislocation. The Ramayana is an admired creation of the great seer Rishi Valmiki, a renowned figure in Indian literature. (Johari). This particular verse can be read as a cultural critique, suggesting that true wealth lies in cultural memory, spirituality, and community, rather than in the profits extracted by

foreign rulers. Thus, the verse embodies a subtle yet firm cultural resistance, preserving collective memory and affirming indigenous traditions. The verse conveys that colonial memory was not only about economic exploitation but also about lived emotional rupture.

The figure of the “*Sahab*,” frequently referenced in Assamese Bihu songs, serves as a potent cultural symbol embodying colonial authority, social hierarchy, and societal upheaval. Linguistically and culturally, the term “*Sahab*,” used in Bihu songs, is synonymous with “*Sahib*,” the honorific title given to European colonial masters in Assam's tea plantations. Both terms signify the colonial power whose presence profoundly shaped local social structures and cultural memory. In folk expressions, “*Sahab*” emerges as a motif, symbolizing both the dominance and disruption brought about by colonial rule. The term “*Sahib*” in the context of colonial Assam tea plantations refers to the European colonial masters who wielded both economic and social power over the tea garden workers. These *Sahibs* not only controlled the labor and production processes but also exercised patriarchal and racial domination, often sexually exploiting the women workers in the plantations. The bodies of women were doubly exploited as laborers and as objects to fulfil the sexual desires of the *Sahibs*. Many such relations were forced and non-consensual, reflecting the harsh realities of colonial capitalist patriarchy in Assam's tea estates. At the same time, native women resisted and participated in freedom struggles, challenging the oppressive colonial order. (Kalita, Handique & Borgohain). Unlike anonymous references to “*Company*” labor, the *Sahab* is a personified presence of both the grandeur and the alienation of empire. Through imagery associated with wealth, privilege, and intimate encounters, the *Sahab* becomes a recurring motif in folk memory, reflecting how colonial domination was perceived, interpreted, and resisted in everyday life.

Sahab ahi ahi Bagisa khulile

Murot soru hen tupi

Cooliere sualik memoni korile

Mukhote seleudal hupi. (Hakacham, 166).

English:

The *sahabs* came one by one and opened the tea garden

Wearing hats shaped like a *soru* (rice vessel)

They made the coolie girls their wives
Smoked a hookah in their mouth.

This portrayal encapsulates both the authority and cultural intrusion of colonial administrators. The *Sahabs'* distinctive hats mark them as foreign and elevated, while their relationships with coolie women reveal the penetration of colonial hierarchies into intimate, domestic spaces. Such unions, often shaped by coercion and power asymmetry, underscore how labor systems also reshaped social and familial life. The image of the sahib's smoking hookah reinforces their leisurely detachment and privileges, contrasting starkly with the laboring lives of those who sustained the plantations.

Another verse offers a sharper critique of colonial wealth and lifestyle:

Ujaie ahile bagichar sahib ti
Serap khai pelale sisa
Otek dhan bastu kelei lagise
Sowali nohole misa. (Gogoi, 183).

English

The sahib of the tea garden came and drank wine,
Then threw the glass away.
What is the need for so much wealth?
If a girl is not in one's life.

Here, the *sahib*, though wealthy and privileged, is drinking, and the careless disposal of the glass stands for colonial indulgence, yet the verse reframes this apparent prosperity as ultimately hollow. By posing the rhetorical question about the absence of a woman, the folk voice exposes a gap in the *sahib's* life, wealth without a life partner, power without a rooted social connection. In contrast to colonial isolation, the indigenous community locates value in relationships, kinship, and emotional fulfilment. This subtle critique articulates that material wealth, however grand, cannot substitute for cultural belonging and social warmth.

These verses illustrate how Bihu songs transform the *sahab* from an abstract figure of power into a cultural archetype, part critic, part witness, part intruder. The *sahab*'s bungalow, his wealth, his indulgence, and his intimacy with coolie women register a layered folk perception of colonialism as both material exploitation and social stratification. These songs reveal the community's capacity to interpret imperial power structures not only through economic critique but also by embedding them into emotional, relational, and cultural narratives. In doing so, they preserve a collective memory where colonial domination is simultaneously acknowledged, interrogated, and resisted within the rhythms of everyday folk expression.

Conclusion

Bihu songs reveal that colonial encounter in Assam, epitomized by British administration, bungalows, steam navigation, tea plantation, etc., was not simply a narrative of infrastructural and socio-cultural progress, but a site of cultural negotiation and memory. While this progress facilitated colonial resource extraction and administrative control, it simultaneously disrupted established ecological, social, and emotional rhythms integral to Assamese life. Through evocative imagery and metaphor, the folk encoded these disruptions as experiences of displacement and alienation, blending critique with a deep sense of loss. However, even as colonial rule reshaped Assam's material landscape, the celebration of indigenous cultural practices, such as Bihu, reveals the resilience and adaptability at the heart of Assamese identity. Thus, these songs serve as vernacular archives, where the ambivalences of colonial modernization, its devastations, and persistent cultural continuities are inscribed within collective memory, offering vital insights into the lived realities of the colonial encounter beyond official histories. Bihu songs act as folk archives of colonial memory. They encode trauma, resistance, and resilience in symbolic and affective language, thereby ensuring that communities did not passively absorb colonial impositions but gave voice to their dissent and alternatives through song.

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