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Tea Plantation in Assamese Folk Memory: Decoding Colonial Imprints Through Bihu Songs

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the representation of colonial imprints within Assamese folk memory through an analysis of Bihu songs that reference the socio-cultural aspects of tea gardens and plantations. By tracing the emergence of Assam's tea industry during British colonial expansion in the 19th century and its socio-cultural repercussions, the paper situates Bihu songs as dynamic archives of historical consciousness and lived emotion. Drawing upon theories of folklore articulation by Barre Toelken, William Bascom, and Gregory Gizelis, it interprets the lyrical depictions of "Company works," "Sahab," and the experience of displacement as expressions of subaltern negotiation with colonial capitalism. The songs' metaphoric imagery of captivity, separation, and disrupted agrarian life encodes the community's response to economic coercion and emotional estrangement under plantation modernity. Through contextual reading, the paper decodes how folk expressions transformed historical trauma into aesthetic and moral commentary, revealing that Bihu is not merely a celebration of fertility and joy but also a repository of resistance, adaptation, and memory. Thus, the research bridges the historical study of tea plantation labour with oral traditions, locating within Bihu a performative critique of colonial disruptions that continues to shape Assamese cultural imagination.
KEYWORDS: *Tea Garden, Bihu song, Colonial Imprint, Folk Memory, Assam.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The tea plantation industry and tea garden in Assam began in the early 19th century during the colonial period, following the discovery of indigenous tea plants by Robert Bruce in 1823. In 1832, Captain Jenkins assessed the resources in the Assam region and identified native tea species suitable for commercial tea production. Based on Captain Jenkins's confirmation, the colonial government established a committee to begin the process of tea production, which brought in Chinese tea varieties and tea experts to enhance their expertise in the field. The first tea plantation venture undertaken by the colonial government in the Brahmaputra River area was unsuccessful. The reasons were the lack of appropriate soil for the tea plantation and insufficient expert knowledge. The establishment of the Assam Company in 1839 marked the beginning of a successful tea enterprise, initially concentrated in Upper Assam and gradually spreading across the entire region [1]. With the growing demand for labourers, the search for suitable labour for the tea plantation industry in Assam led to the import of 'Adivasi' tribal people from Jharkhand and Central India, as a large number of them were forcibly brought to Assam in different phases [2]. 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 [3]. This switch brought about a change in the rural landscape and generated long-term socio-economic changes, mainly through massive labour force mobilization and migration. This historical fact continues to find expression in various cultural contexts, such as Bihu songs, which regularly reference displacement, and changes in livelihood patterns came along with the tea plantation. This study attempts to decode the colonial footprints reflected in selected Bihu songs that address disturbances caused by tea gardens in Assam, focusing on social transformation, exploitation and cultural enactments.

Bihu songs, central to Bohag Bihu, Assam's key agricultural festival, are performed by young men and women through dance and song, featuring poetic lyrics rich in refined sentiments and striking imagery (p. 11) [4]. Accompanied by traditional instruments such as *dhol*, *pepa*, *toka*, *gagana*, and *xutuli* during *Husori* and Jeng-Bihu rituals, these antiphonal love songs evoke moods of romance, separation, eroticism, and union, set to the distinctive *duchaporia chapori* rhythm of two hand claps in four matras that differentiates them from other folk, modern, or classical genres. Structured in four-to-five-line couplets with vivid, dialogic descriptions, Bihu songs symbolize youthfulness while reflecting rural social values and contemporary events, including Ahom rule, colonial incursions, tea gardens, independence movements, and figures like Gandhi employing such motifs as metaphors to express the populace's inner sentiments and historical consciousness. Assamese communities have orally transmitted Bihu songs across generations since prehistoric times through indigenous verbal traditions. In the modern period, numerous Bihu songs have been systematically documented in print by various

scholars, though many remain unrecorded, while others have been disseminated via audio cassettes, CDs, and VCDs.

Bihu songs exemplify the folkloric essence of Assamese cultural expression, closely adhering to Barre Toelken's conceptualization that a composition begins as an individual's musical and poetic articulation of personal sentiments or ideas, and only achieves folk status through oral dissemination, iterative rephrasing, and communal adoption as a medium for shared attitudes, emotions, and experiences (p. 147) [5]. This process corresponds with the American Heritage Dictionary's definition of folk songs as creations originating within the populace, typically linked to legendary, historical, or everyday events, with both lyrics and melodies emerging from and circulating among common people [6]. As a result, these songs serve as vivid representations of a region's social customs, natural environment, and cultural distinctiveness. Within William Bascom's framework, Bihu songs function as verbal art [7], encapsulating the sociocultural vitality of human existence and preserved through intergenerational oral transmission. Consequently, they serve as essential sources for historical inquiry. As Bill Nasson explains, history involves the systematic examination of past eras to identify causal relationships and developmental patterns within human societies [8], and folk forms provide interpretive frameworks that reveal experiential depth beyond mere chronology. Gregory Gizelis explains that folk singers reshape real events through performance, turning history into cultural expression. In doing so, they draw on inherited styles and forms, which means their songs may not match historical facts exactly, but they reveal how a community understands its past, how it feels about those events, and how it imagines what should have happened [9]. In Assam, Bihu songs clearly show this process. These songs have no single author, yet they display remarkable literary depth and have been passed down almost unchanged over generations. They carry memories of the Ahom period, touching on themes of power, conflict, and heroism, and continue into the colonial era, when tea plantations became potent symbols of change.

Scholarship on colonial memory in Assamese folklore highlights how oral traditions not only recall historical events but also embody subaltern consciousness through expressive performance. Manjeet Baruah's study of peasant ballads, *Barphukanar Geet*, *Moniram Dewanar Geet*, and *Doli Purana*, locates them within an oral–textual continuum, drawing on A.K. Ramanujan and Walter Ong to argue that repetition and vernacular poetics transform episodes like the Burmese invasions and peasant uprisings into mnemonic art. His reading of the trope *"nohobor hol"* ("what should not have happened") reveals moral inversions that mark the affective politics of colonial encounter [10]. In relation to plantation culture, Biraj Jyoti Kalita (2022) examines how Adivasi tea workers forged hybrid socio-cultural forms, Baiji Nach, Jhumur, and festivals that gradually indigenized migrant experience in Assam [11]. Arupjyoti Saikia's work on the *Doli Puran* situates oral memory within Assamese nationalism, showing how ballads of the 1894 Patharughat rebellion transformed subaltern pain into collective history [12]. Extending this ethnomusicological perspective, Dulal Hazarika's *"Reflection of Assamese Society in Bihu Geet and its Relevance"* (2025) positions Bihu songs as dynamic archives of labour, ecology, and anti-colonial critique. Songs rejecting plantation wages and lamenting British disruptions exemplify how Bihu encoded colonial memory in lyrical form [13].

Research on tea plantations has extensively mapped the economic, demographic, and cultural changes brought about by the colonial tea economy. At the same time, folkloristic studies have deciphered Bihu songs as an unfolding text of agrarian culture. Yet again, this dialogue between plantation modernity and the lyrical sage of Bihu remains untouched, particularly in analysis. The neglect to study critically in what ways and in what forms the plantations' modality of labour extraction, spatial relocation, and environmental changes are registered in the affective and symbolic space of Bihu culture stands out as a significant knowledge gap. Research on this site of interaction could uncover how Bihu songs served as seasonally recurring expressions of agrarian tradition and, in another sense, crafted nuanced statements on matters of displacement, dependency, and rural redevelopment in colonial capitalist restructuring. Building on this sense of moral independence and cultural pride, the following stanza adds emotional depth to the theme of folk resistance. It voices the pain, disruption, and sense of loss that people experienced as colonial forces entered their lives.

II. TEA GARDEN AND COLONIAL IMPRINT IN BIHU SONG

The Assamese tea gardens, established during British colonial rule, occupy a central place in Assam's socio-economic and cultural memory. Their presence, however, extends beyond material production into the expressive realms of folklore and song. Within Bihu songs, particularly those composed in regions influenced by the plantation economy, traces of colonial encounter, labour exploitation, migration, and cultural transformation subtly emerge. These songs become living archives of how the rural imagination negotiated the shifting landscapes of power and identity under colonial capitalism. By examining the portrayal of tea gardens in Bihu lyrics, one can discern the deeper imprints of colonial modernity on the folk consciousness of Assam, where

resistance, memory, and adaptation coexist in melodic form. This reflection is evident in the following Bihu verse.

Assamese*:*
Xojat bondi hole xojare moina
Xalot bondi hol hati
Company kamote senai bondi hole
Tuponi nodhore rati (p. 176) [14].

English:
The myna bird is confined within its cage
The elephant remains tethered in its stall
When my beloved is bound to the labour of the company
Cannot sleep at night.

In this verse, the metaphor of the caged bird and tethered elephant illustrates the profound sense of captivity imposed by colonial systems, particularly the East India Company's tea garden labour regime established in Assam from 1833 onward. The beloved, explicitly referenced in Bihu songs as exploitative "Company works" (Company sakori) and associated with the Company's labour, which local Assamese communities rejected in favour of cultural self-sufficiency, symbolizes the extent to which colonial restructuring permeated not only economic domains but also intimate relationships and the affective rhythms of daily life. This restructuring resulted in both physical alienation and psychological unrest, as demonstrated by the speaker's sleepless nights, which attest to the intimate disruptions caused by colonial modernity. Thus, the verse suggests that colonial memory encompassed not only economic exploitation but also an emotional rupture lived. By embedding these experiences within familiar folkloric imagery, the community maintained its critique of colonialism and ensured the transmission of these memories across generations.

Assamese:
Bura gorur bejarot gai goru besilu
Koria tulilu changot
Tumare bejarot eru ghorebari
Xumaogoi company kamot (p. 176) [14]

English:
With sorrow for the bull, I sold the cow,
Kept the kari seeds on the *chaang*.
With grief for you, I left my home
Now I must go to the company’s work.

This verse encapsulates the intricate relationship between personal sorrow and the transformative pressures of the colonial era as experienced by the folk community. The symbolic act of selling the female cow out of profound sadness for the old bull highlights a desperate measure to retain the bull despite economic hardship. This act parallels the disruptions caused by colonial tea garden labor, where the "beloved" bound to Company work signifies a sacrificial parting that prioritizes emotional bonds over material survival, reflecting Bihu's folkloric critique of imperial exploitation. Through agrarian metaphors, the verse conveys the psychological impact of colonial modernity, transforming personal loss into collective memory. The use of “kari seeds” as currency, carefully stored on the “*chaang*” (the traditional stilted kitchen platform), grounds these actions in the economic realities of colonial Assam, where indigenous practices adapted to colonial cash and barter systems. The speaker’s decision to leave home and work for the company demonstrates how colonial labor regimes extended beyond economic exploitation to affect emotional and social bonds, resulting in displacement and relentless toil as responses to personal and communal ruptures. Through this folk expression, the community articulates colonial modernity as a force that disrupted traditional rhythms of life and loyalty, embedding feelings of loss, betrayal, and forced adaptation within collective memory. The verse thus serves as both a lament for disrupted intimate relationships and a subtle critique of the colonial system that reconfigured livelihood, labor, and emotional life, highlighting the resilience and agency of folk memory in responding to colonial impositions.

Assamese:
Lali lali kori bongali namile

Murote tukuri loi
Bortolor Darogai Jorimona Korile
Bajipat singare hoi (p.176) [14]

English:
Bright and colourful they come, the Bongalis,
carrying baskets on their heads.
The daroga of Bortol fined them,
For plucking the leaves too early.

This folk verse reflects the harsh realities faced by tea garden workers, mainly indentured laborers brought by the British from other parts of India (referred to as Bongalis or tea tribes as the outsiders are often termed as bongali by natives). They carried baskets (tukuri) on their heads, plucking tea leaves as part of their daily work. The daroga, or colonial overseer, imposed fines on them for plucking the leaves before maturity, reflecting strict control and exploitation under colonial authority. The verse captures both the colourfulness and vibrancy of the workers' presence ("lali lali" meaning bright red, possibly referencing the colour of attire) and the oppressive surveillance by colonial officials. It is a poignant folk memory preserving the experiences of disciplined labour and the everyday struggle within Assam's colonial tea garden system.

The figure of the "Sahab," frequently depicted in Assamese Bihu songs, serves as a cultural trope that embodies the power dynamics inherent in colonialism and societal transformation. Linguistically and culturally, "Sahab" is synonymous with "Sahib," the honorific used for European colonial administrators in Assam's tea plantations. In both usages, "Sahab/Sahib" denotes representatives of colonial authority who profoundly influenced social structures and collective memory. As a narrative construct within folktales, the "Sahab" encapsulates the disruption and authority introduced by colonial rule. Specifically, in the context of tea plantations, the "Sahib" signified European overseers who maintained strict control over production and labour, while also reinforcing racial, patriarchal, and class hierarchies. Imagery associated with bungalows, affluence, and privilege positions the Sahab as a recurring motif in folk memory, illustrating how colonial dominance was perceived, interpreted, and contested in daily life. One verse situates the Sahab's imposing bungalow as a backdrop:

Assamese:
Sahabor bongola sari kholopia
Lekhi lekhi di gol gathi
Tumake Lahori dekhibore pora
Tuponi nodhore rati (p. 183) [14]

English:
The *sahab's* bungalow stands four storeys high
Each knot is tied with careful counting
Since I caught sight of you
I have a sleepless night.

Here, the Sahab's four-storey bungalow symbolizes the formidable authority of British rule. Its height and imposing structure evoke an image of surveillance, discipline, and total administrative control over plantation life. The reference to the "careful counting" of knots further underscores the strict regulation and regimented labour practices instituted within the tea garden economy. Significantly, the verse juxtaposes these signs of colonial power with the register of intimate emotion: the speaker's admiration for the girl's beauty parallels the orderly precision associated with the bungalow, creating a layered metaphor in which the material presence of the colonial world shapes desire. In this way, the verse reveals how British power entered the realm of personal sentiment, leaving traces not only in labour and social hierarchy but also in love, longing, and memory. The persistence of such imagery in Bihu songs indicates how colonial experience became woven into Assamese cultural expression, preserving its emotional and social impact across generations.

III. CONCLUSION

An analysis of Bihu songs as repositories of colonial memory demonstrates how Assamese folk culture internalized and expressed the significant transformations brought about by the tea plantation economy. The lyrical world of Bihu, characterized by its metaphorical interplay of captivity, longing, and displacement, serves as a vernacular archive through which rural communities conveyed their experiences of colonial intrusion. The

recurring imagery of the "Company," the "Sahab," and the migrant labourer represents a collective negotiation between exploitation and emotional resilience, transforming personal sorrow into a subtle yet persistent critique of imperial domination. In these folk expressions, labour functions as a metaphor for both bondage and resilience, while themes of love and loss mirror the disruptions caused by colonial modernity. The persistence of these motifs in Assamese oral traditions indicates that Bihu operates not only as a seasonal festival but also as a mnemonic landscape where history is remembered, contested, and transformed into cultural meaning. Decoding the colonial subtext of these songs reveals that folklore offers a vital perspective for understanding the interconnected histories of labour, identity, and resistance in Assam's colonial past, thereby affirming the ability of oral traditions to preserve, reinterpret, and critique historical experience across generations.

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