



## UNVEILING WOMEN'S VOICES IN ASSAMESE FOLKLORE: A STUDY OF GENDER DYNAMICS AND RESISTANCE

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### Abstract:

The focus of this paper is on the representation of women's voices in Assamese folklore. The status of women in society demonstrates how gender equality is reflected in all aspects of life. The struggles of women are attempted to be portrayed through *Goalpariya Lokgeet*, *Jeng Bihu*, and *Biyanam*. How Assamese women's resistance and hardships are reflected in folk songs. This paper tries to emphasize how folklore portrays their experience, identity, role, and problems. Lastly, it considers how important it is to raise women's voices to comprehend gender dynamics and resistance.

**Keywords:** *Folklore, Gender equality, Identity, Gender dynamics, Resistance, Jeng Bihu Biyanam, Goalpariya Lokgeet*

### 1. Introduction:

Women's position in Assam depends upon various traditional and verbal theories that contribute to limiting their voices in society. Among those, folklore is the one that assists in communicating the narratives from generation to generation. This research paper aims to analyze some of those beliefs that represent women's emotions, expectations, and nature differently. The experiences of women, as depicted by folklore songs will show as a narrative background to understand experiences and expectations from them from society. Women express their pain, love, celebration of womanhood, and resistance to social norms through these songs.

### 2. The Significance of Folk Songs in Representing Women's Experiences:

According to Das (2016), state folk songs are those traditional songs sung in Assam. This

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folk song is passed from one generation to another verbally. Some folk songs are exclusively sung by Assamese Women. It presents the celebration of life, ritual, and worship. Women are often unnoticed by popular media and academic literature. Sometimes their hopes and expectations are dominated by their respective societies. Through folk songs, women try to show how gender discrimination has tried to make them marginalized and how they encounter their identity in society. The systematic study of the folk songs sung by women will bring to light how gender identities are constructed, interpreted, and negotiated by women from different walks of life and bring forth the reflection of ordinary women on the state of their societies and their future. Though folksongs are thriving as an oral tradition in various parts of Assam, systematic study concerning the voices of women is often lacking. Therefore, Das tries to find out the voices of resistance and how they encounter their identity in society. Women in Assam used to express the pain of their hearts through folk songs. *Biyanam*, *Goalpariya Lokgeet*, and songs of *Jeng-Bihu* are some types of them that represent pain, anxiety, and the voices of resistance.

Marriage songs in Assamese society are known as *Biyanam*. In the *Biyanams*, the pain of the woman's heart is reflected, and various instructions are given to the bride to lead a problem-free life including listening to the orders of her in-laws as lives are not at all satisfactory at the houses of the in-laws. The song tells that as a woman, any lady can digest all the pain and suffering and in the eyes of society and in-laws, she has pretended to be happy.

*GoalpariyaLokgeet* refers to the lyrical songs of Goalpara, a district of lower Assam, and these songs are not associated with religion or rituals. Love is the primary theme of these songs. Women's pain from child marriage and early motherhood are reflected through *Goalpariya* songs. Through *Goalpariya Lokgeet*, the heart of the women has beautifully come out showing the pictures of the pain and agony of women's hearts. These songs sometimes express love and longing, or sometimes about various relationships, marital relationships, and situations.

Another famous folklore song is the *Jeng Bihu* song. *Bihu* is an agricultural ceremony and the most cherished festival of Assam. The meaning of “*Jeng*” is pure and ideological or the “*Bihu* of pure young women”. The *Jeng Bihu* song symbolizes the role of women in society. Women play multiple roles throughout their lives, they run the household, nurture the child, and work in the paddy field, for the whole year they are busy conducting their social and domestic responsibilities, but still, they do not get a single day where they can enjoy their freedom as a human being. They are not permitted to go to the *Bihu* fields and enjoy the *Bihu* songs and dances performed by men. So, the concept of *Jeng Bihu* occurs where only women participate. This *Bihu* is organized far from the village, generally in a forest area, under a big tree where no one can see women celebrate *Bihu*. Through *Jeng Bihu*, women try to celebrate their womanhood, they try to respect themselves as human beings. Through the songs of *Jeng Bihu* women have tried to express their pain, anger, fear, strength, and other feelings.

### **3. Analysis of Biyanam: Reflections of Women's Pain and Social Expectations**

*Biyanam* is considered the marriage song in Assamese Society. The main theme of the song is how it is the duty of a daughter-in-law to keep the in-laws happy, even though she is in pain she can not show it to society. Through these songs, a message is conveyed to the bride that she must have the capacity to digest pain and suffering while listening and obeying the in-laws. That will lead her to a problem-free life or even though her life is not satisfactory or as expected, she must seem to be happy. Many societal expectations are placed on women in marriage and family. According to Phukon and Das in their writing (2021) it states that *Biyanam* (Marriage songs) suggests the bride prepare to cope with the in-laws' house. The identity and existence of a girl in Assamese society are depicted in these songs. While she marries her identity has changed from someone's daughter to someone's wife. She must adjust and compromise with her new life. A newly married wife's value lies in her ability to be hardworking and multitasking in what she does, and in her capacity to work like a spindle. And she tries to meet all the expectations that are imposed upon her by her in-laws (Medhi, 2002).

### **4. Understanding GoalpariyaLokgeet: Expressions of Love and Women's Suffering**

In Goalpara district of Assam, there is one traditional song that is very popular known as *Goalpariya Lokgeet*. The primary theme of these songs is considered as Love. This song depicts the pain and suffering of child marriage and early motherhood. Apart from those, these songs sometimes express various situations of a woman's life like her relationships, material relationships, her love and longing, etc. These songs are a way of showing the pain and suffering of a woman's heart.

### **5. Unpacking Jeng Bihu Songs: Celebrating Womanhood and Resisting Restrictions**

Bihu is one of the main festivals of Assam that is celebrated every year for agricultural ceremonies. *Jeng Bihu* is associated with the Bihu of young women. It represents women's status in society. A woman must play different roles throughout her life as a wife, a mother, a daughter, a daughter-in-law, running the family, and working in the paddy field for harvesting, besides that she has also performed her social and domestic responsibilities. Performing all the duties she has no freedom for herself as a human being.

In the earliest times, women were prohibited from going to the celebrations and enjoying the Bihu songs and dances performed by men. The concept of *Jeng Bihu* occurs where only women participate in the Bihu to celebrate their womanhood. It usually performs in the forest area away from the village under the tree. *Jeng Bihu* songs women try to celebrate their womanhood as human beings by expressing their suffering, anger, worry, strength, etc.

Borthakur and Kalita (2019) state that the Bihugeet or Bihu song is associated with the livelihood and daily works of the people of the society in Assam; females play a vital role in and, shaping the culture of the region. Females take part in cultivation, weaving, and various social rituals; while doing so they sing and express their feelings for their involvement in such activities. On the other hand, females also sing Bihugeet to express their love and attention to their loved ones.

These Bihu songs are composed by women to express their feelings. Women dance to these *Jeng Bihu* songs in a secluded 'Jeng' ('bamboo' in Assamese) grove. Traditional women's activities such as weaving, fishing with Jakoi (a kind of bamboo scoop used for catching fish), and gathering edible greens, are mentioned in the Jeng Bihu songs (Sonowal,2021).

## **6. Conclusion:**

Assamese Folklore usually represents women as weak, emotional, sacrificing, loving, etc.stating that Moran (2019) selected some Assamese proverbs that are commonly used in society, “Laoo jimaanei daangar hauk Sadai paatar talei. (লাওযিমাননইডাঙৰহওকসদায়পাতৰতলেই)” (The size of a gourd is immaterial; it will always be under the leaves.) Here, Assamese women are compared with gourds and leaves of the gourd are compared with men who are dominating the women. Another proverb that is mostly applied to represent women's knowledge is- “Tirir mel kalar bhel. (তিৰিৰমেলকলৰভেল)” (The gossip of the women is meaningless. This is as baseless as a raft made of the banana tree.) The meaning of this proverb is- Women's conversation is meaningless as a banana raft, as their intellectual knowledge and mind are poor. The above examples show to some extent how the social-intellectual development of women is denied in the Assamese patriarchal society (p. 63). Folklore is the one that helps to transmit the stories to the generation by showing women's character inferiority, lack of confidence, limited duty and role towards family, where her dreams are not known and she is inferior in power. The above explanation shows women's voices for understanding gender dynamics and resistance are suppressed. To enjoy the equal status of their dynamics and resistance is more important for women to raise their voices and show their presence. Women as co-inhabitants of society should gain certain rights equally accrued to males. These are fundamental human rights, such as the right to freedom of speech, the right to self-expression, etc. (Abakadi and Egbai, 2020). Here, women's voices for understanding gender dynamics and resistance, a new concept of reaction as per situatedness arises that is known as Feminist Epistemology.

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