Physical Folklife of Assam

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Physical folklife or material culture, or what we now call tangible heritage, can be regarded as indicative of the various facets of the cultural process of a community. The materials or artifacts are the most vivid expressions of the interface of man and environment. They provide valuable glimpses into the inner spheres of a cultural realm and the values that accompany varied cultural manifestations, both aesthetic and functional.

Food is the most visible and frequently encountered cultural manifestation of a community. Though not strictly artifact in the sense that it is the most liminal of categories and continuously responds to external realities, food provides an idea about the values and mode of life of a community. In the case of Assamese foods, characteristic features are the limited use of spice and the use of endemic herbs that might seem exotic to one new to the locale. Varied recipes for fish and the widespread use of pork, chicken, lamb, mutton, duck, and pigeon characterize the local cuisine. The apparent simplicity of the cooking process, which mostly involves boiling, cloaks the widespread use of local ingredients like pot herbs and bamboo shoots that gives the food distinctive taste and aroma. Use of mediums like vegetable oil and mustard oil are basically colonial inputs arising out of contact with people from outside the region. The most unique Assamese preparation is Khar, an alkaline preparation derived from the burning of dried banana leaves and plant, and using the ash as a medium to filter water through. Khar has become a definite marker of Assamese identity, as has the chewing of raw areca nut. Several varieties of rice beer add punch to celebrations all over the state, except amongst the caste Hindus for whom it is not a traditional food item.

Assamese is almost synonymous with the gamocha, (literally meaning a towel but multi-functional in practice, an item held in high esteem and an important marker of cultural identity) The Assamese gamocha is mostly woven out of white threads with colourful and intricate inlays in red. There are different varieties of gamocha woven for religious and auspicious occasions.

Wood carving is an important traditional craft of Assam. Exquisite wood carvings can be seen in the furniture, doors, walls, beams, decorative panels and ceilings in houses. Khanikars of the satras (vaisnavite monasteries) are versatile artistes, equally skillful in painting, architecture, manuscript-making, mask-making and wood carving. The finely sculpted images of garuda and other celestial characters, various decorated trays and pedestals for keeping holy books bear testimony to the rich tradition of satriya woodcarving. Manuscript making, both with and without accompanying painted illustrations, on barks of agar trees and cotton folios, is another distinctive tradition of graphic art in Assam. Mask-making in Assam is primarily related to the bhoana – a vaisnavite theatrical performance. Clay or papier-mâché is applied over structures of bamboo and wood to make such masks which are painted with locally-made colours.

Bamboo and cane products of Assam, in the form of furniture and other domestic implements and decorative objects are of acclaimed quality. The japi or the hat made of bamboo strips and dry palm leaves, a common trait of the south Asian region, is another eye-catching item of Assamese material culture. Like gamocha and sorai, it has also earned the distinction of being an icon of Assamese identity and is displayed as decorative item in households and office premises.

Brass and bell metal craft that produces different utensils and decorative items is of special importance. One very important product of this craft is the sorai, a decorative platter with a detachable cover at the top. Seen in various sizes, it is a valued and revered item, and like the gamocha, a marker of Assamese identity in contemporary times. There are also the traditional Assamese jewellery made of gold, silver and copper, in distinctive local motifs and styles.

Various domestic implements, pitchers, clay-lights, idols and toys of terracotta are found in the Goalpara and Kamrup regions of the state. Folk toys are also made from pith in Goalpara.
Assam and the other states of North-East India are geographically located between the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. The physical folklife of the region provide ample evidences of cultural fusion: if one finds the sorai and the japi to be of Southeast Asian origin, the terracotta toys of Assam are unmistakably Harappan in make and style.

The folk traditions of Assam encompass a great variety of occasions and events to celebrate. Farmers and agricultural workers have a dance to welcome practically every seasonal change. They dance with joyous abandon to create for themselves their raison d’etre - a reinstatement of beliefs rooted in the mythology of their land and culture. Originating in the harvest festivals of our ancient ancestors, when the gods were invoked or appeased through magical verses and dancing feet, the folk dances retain much of the spontaneity and vitality of their primary impulse. In earlier times, man supposedly bridged his world and the one beyond through dance, assuming the role of gods and demons; even today, the dancing steps take their cue from nature, which at times is conquered, and at others, befriended. There is an essential rhythm that binds the dancer and the environment into an organic whole; and this is reflected in the varied beats and movements of the folk dancers.

The folk traditions of Assam too, encompass a great variety of occasions and events to celebrate. People consider it as art, work, ritual, ceremony, entertainment, or any combination of these, depending on the culture or society that produces it.

There are dances that celebrate the bounty of Mother Nature and celebrate the generous gifts showered by her. Bihu is performed by young men and women reflecting youthful passion and joy of life. The dance movements are patterned in a way that can be intelligible to the audience. The slinging of the hands, and vigorous body (hip) movements symbolize mirth and yearning for union. The moving body here is a mechanism by which meaning is produced. A prelude to the Bihu, the husori, is a slow dance, the text sung and danced by clapping of hands to keep the rhythm of the performers, as they make circular patterns that are repeated till the end of the singing. The dancers move freely in simple movements and make allowances in the choreography for others to join in and express their joy through individual dance movements that are created spontaneously. Finally the household in whose courtyard the event takes place is blessed.

The Deodhani dance is considered more of a ritual than a dance; but essentially the same movement sequences may be considered a secular performance if de-contextualized from religious moorings. The dancer, who apparently goes into a trance, uses mimetic movements of snakes and goddess Manasa and enacts the popular legend of Behula. The meaning of what is being communicated can be understood if we are aware of the rules or grammar of a cultural form. The Goalpara region in Assam has colourful dances which combine the dramatic with the realistic; the performers use props such as bamboo poles, swords and masks, both at the apparent level and the symbolic. The bamboo pole doubles up as a phallic symbol, while the sword is the annihilator. The mask signifies the hypocritical nature of people or the difference between appearance and reality.

The Bodos, a major ethnic group of the state, are known for dances like Bagarumba and Bordoisikha that represent the different hues and moods of nature. The dancers mould their bodies into various postures and images that symbolize a movement in nature or a spirit. The shamanistic dances of the Daudini (shaman dancer) are visual treats of frenzied and vigorous movements. The movement involved here is for the pantheon in the traditional dance arena (sali) of the kherai festival, which is a social and religious occasion of great significance for the Bodos. The body movements communicate primarily to gods, priests, and believers that the proper ritual is being celebrated or carried out. The visual spectacle produced is one of regular and rhythmic linear movements intersecting at right angles; it generates the effect of an essential maze. Around the ritual structure of the Kherai, in a semi-circular pattern, the musicians play the Kham (drum), Siphung (flute) and the Jotha (cymbals).

The Gumrag dance of the Misings is associated with the Ali-ai-lyang festival which depicts the various activities of the Misings in their daily life. The movements in this

References

Folk dances of Assam: a short appraisal

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