

# JOONBEEL MELA: DIMINISHING GEOGRAPHICAL BOUNDARIES AND A STUDY OF THE PEOPLE, CULTURE WITH RESPECT TO THEIR BARTER SYSTEM

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## Abstract

Assam, a state of North East India, is a heterogeneous region with diverse, but rich cultural heritage. 'Jonbeel mela' is one of the most unique festivals of Assam that is believed to have originated in 15th century AD which was initiated under the patronage of the Ahom and Gobha kings purely on political-economic ground and acquired a cultural and social meaning over a period of time. The paper is an attempt to understand the historical trajectories of the 'Mela' and the growing socio-political importance in Assam. The festival has transcended its original purpose and now involves participation from various other communities. Additionally, it has contributed to the re-articulation of the Tiwa tribe's identity within the broader socio-political context of Assam.

**Keywords:** Assam, Jonbeel Mela, Ahom, Tiwa, tribe, festival

## INTRODUCTION

Assam, "the land of Red River and blue hills" is the hearthstone of a melting pot of culture comprising of numerous tribes, each having their own socio cultural identities. Assam is a place where various cultures and traditions come together and blend, creating a diverse and culturally rich environment. Diverse with respect to its topography too, Assam is divided into hills and plains and accordingly some people reside in the hills and some in the plains. Further people from the same community are also seen to be scattered into hills and plains. The people of Assam drawn from diverse hives at different point of time have merged into a common harmonious whole in a rare process of assimilation. Jonbeel Mela, which mainly originated in the central Assam, is a thriving example of rich cultural identity associated with Tiwa community observed in the Marigaon district of Assam. It is the showcase of an inter-community relationship in the region. Though it is primarily associated with the Tiwa Community, the Mela is an assemblage of people from different socio cultural backgrounds and geographical setting. Apart from the Tiwas, the Khasis, Karbis, Assamese Caste groups and others also enthusiastically participate in the Mela. They barter different commodities among themselves. Even today, when the region is surrounded by ethnic conflicts and violence, the Mela is celebrated with zeal and zest. Ethnic divergences and discords have not been able to hinder or prevent the participation and rejoicing of the people in the Mela.

### The Tiwas

Tiwas, also known as Lalungs, are a plains tribe of Assam. Tibet region is believed to be the original abode of the Lalungs. However, due to the dearth of written documents, their immigration to the plains is ambiguous, contested and shrouded in mystery (Thakur, 1985). It is assumed that they migrated to the plains of Assam in the middle of the 17th century A.D. They are concentrated mainly in the Nagaon and Morigaon District of Central Assam. Besides there are a few Lalung villages in Dhemaji areas of Dhemaji sub division of Lakhimpur district, Titabar area of Jorhat District, Sonapur areas of Guwahati sub division of Kamrup district. Further they are also found in some

hilly areas or in the foothills of Karbi Anglong, Khasi hills and Jaintia hills. The undulating topography and the varied ecology of the region of Assam have influenced the Tiwas in certain ways that many aspects of socio-cultural life of the hill Tiwas became distinct from that of the plains Tiwas. Thus, food habit, dress, pattern of houses, agricultural pattern etc. of the hill Lalungs are different from those of the plains Lalungs. It is interesting to note that there has been tremendous impact of the Assamese culture and Vaishnavism among the Lalungs residing in the plains of Brahmaputra Valley. Infact a majority of them got completely assimilated with the Assamese Hindu population, adopting all Hindu customs and way of life. They even started taking up Assamese Surnames like Saikia, Bordoloi, Das and so on.

However, in the post-independence period, this community has undergone significant changes. Despite their progressive assimilation with the Assamese Hindu society, they got themselves entitled to the Constitutional status of the Scheduled Tribes of the plains and in the contemporary period they are trying their best to retain their identity as a tribe. The Tiwa people have experienced significant changes in their cultural and social practices over time. While some elements of their traditional way of life, such as matrilineal institutions, language, and cultural practices, have been lost or modified, the term "Tiwa" serves as a unifying factor in their contemporary identity, reflecting the evolving nature of their cultural identity and adaptation to changing circumstances. The Hill Lalungs on the other hand stands as a contrast to this. When British ascendancy led to the disintegration of the Jaintia Kingdom, the Tiwas inhabiting the Hill areas of Karbi Anglong and Jaintia Hills got separated from the body of their Kith and kin in the Brahmaputra Valley. Interestingly even after being away from the influence of Vaishnavism or Assamese Culture and upholding their traditional culture – their Matriliney, their Tibeto Burman Language, the dormitory institution, their practice of shifting cultivation, so on and so forth, they were not accorded the Scheduled Tribe Status. They had to fight a long standing battle of existence with the Karbis, who are the dominant tribe of the district and who enjoy the Scheduled Tribe Status. In the Jaintia Hills also, the Lalungs met with the same fate, because in Meghalaya also they were deprived of the status of Scheduled tribe, though their political allies, the Jaintias, a much advanced community since the historical times, got themselves recognised as a Scheduled Tribe. Under the pressure of these circumstances a separate Hill Lalung identity is slowly but steadily emerging.

### **Origin and Significance of Jonbeel Mela:**

Assam is a heterogeneous region with people inhabiting in different geographical regions and having rich cultural heritage. The concept of fairs, Melas, Haats (Markets) etc have been playing a significant role in the interaction of the people. They have helped in initiating and intensifying social relations thereby bringing social solidarity among people.

Jonbeel Mela is the harvesting festival of the Tiwas of Assam, held on the eve of Magh Bihu (January) festival of the Gobha Mouza. The Mela is held once a year and is renowned for the traditional barter exchanges that took place between the Tiwas (and indeed some other communities) residing in the hills and the plains. The significance of the Mela also lies in continuing with the historical legacy of offering tribute and loyalty to the Tiwa king. Initiated under the patronage of the Ahoms and Gobha Kings purely on political-economic ground it was formerly known as a haat (mart) where transactions were done mainly through barter system between the people of hills and

plains (Kakati, 2010). It bears a long history of the Gobha Kingdom which was the most powerful among many other kingdoms under the Tiwas. It begets great enthusiasm, love, feeling of fraternity, brotherhood among the Tiwas.

Jonbeel Mela is now being organised under the auspices of the Gobha-Tiwa Deo Raja Jonbeel Samiti and at the direction of the Gobha-Tiwa Deo-Raja Rajdarbar. It is held for three days in an area composed of land and water bodies. The Mela begins by offering prayers and sacrifices at 'deosal', a greatly revered shrine of the Tiwas of the area. On the first day of the Mela people from the hills often referred to as 'mama mami' by the plain Tiwas comes down with a variety of goods and starts settling down in the plains. Some make their temporary houses with reed and straw in the mela ground while some others reside in the houses in the nearby villages. Familial ties are not required to reside in these houses nearby. People in the plains embrace and accommodate them, make arrangements for them to settle down and in this way they establish a friendly relation. On the same day, traders and shopkeepers from different parts of Assam also get assembled at the mela spot. The king of Gobha and other Tiwa States also come and visit the Mela. They all have a ceremonial place at this Mela. These kings do not have any administrative and political relevance now besides being deemed as descendant of historical figures and symbols that are socially recognised.

The second day is the most significant because on this day the unique and the most awaited barter exchange, for which jonbeel mela is famous for, takes place. The people from the Hills procure pithas or cakes, dried fish, vegetables, medicinal herbs, and so on by bartering with ginger, turmeric, arum, leafy vegetables, yam, lac and such things which they themselves produce. The people from the hills not only bring with them whatever they produce but also those which they buy from others in order to exchange it in the Mela. The things that the hills people procure here are used to celebrate their feasts up in the hills. The Mela can be seen as a traditional gathering with Traditional Mode of trading. The bartering which takes place early in the morning is the primary attraction of the Jonbeel Mela, apart from cock-fight and other cultural events.

The Third day holds a General Mela, where a huge crowd gathers at the Mela spot for buying and selling things. Here monetary transactions take place. The Raj Durbar is held on this day, where all the Tiwa Kings, officials, representative of administration participate. Formal meeting is held and various issues are discussed. The kings are felicitated and given their annual Rajbhatta (Salary) Of INR 24000 (INR 2000 per month). Again, the Gobha king traditionally celebrate the 'Nowan festival'- the annual feast after the harvest season with the commodities and money that are collected as taxes from the Mela. This also makes the mela a significant event which continues even today.

### **Socio-Cultural significance of the Mela:**

Jonbeel Mela indeed holds great significance in promoting social and communal integration while celebrating the diversity of different cultural settings. This annual event serves as a bridge between people from hill and plain regions and brings together various communities. Some of its significance are as follows

**Cultural Integration:** The Mela serves as a platform for people from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds to interact and connect. It promotes a sense of togetherness and unity among different groups.

**Celebration of Love and Brotherhood:** Jonbeel Mela is not just a marketplace, it is a place where people come to celebrate values like love, brotherhood, and loyalty. This highlights the cultural and social significance of the event.

**Religious Significance:** For the natives, Jonbeel Mela holds deep religious importance. It is considered God's Mela, and attending it is seen as a way to pay tribute to the king, likely a local or historical figure of significance.

**Economic Exchange:** In addition to its cultural and religious aspects, the Mela also serves as a marketplace where people exchange goods and engage in trade activities. This contributes to the local economy and fosters economic interaction among different communities.

**Showcasing Tiwa Culture:** The Mela provides an excellent platform for showcasing the richness of Tiwa culture. Various traditional folk dances, songs, and cultural performances are organized during the event. This not only preserves cultural heritage but also allows a larger audience to appreciate and learn about Tiwa traditions.

Thus, Jonbeel Mela is more than just a market. It is a unique cultural and social event that brings people from different backgrounds together, promotes values of love and brotherhood, and showcases the cultural richness of the Tiwa community. It plays a vital role in fostering social harmony and communal integration in the region.

## CONCLUSION

Jonbeel Mela, in the contemporary period has expanded in terms of its size and popularity. Its celebration has become more and grander with every passing year and it has been able to capture the interest of the larger public as well as media coverage. The Mela though embraces and welcomes everyone irrespective of their socio-cultural background, yet the more and more use of Tiwa cultural symbols brings to mind the inquisitiveness to know whether there is a latent motive related to their ethnic aspiration behind the celebration of the Mela and that too in such a pompous way.

In nutshell, we may say that Jonbeel Mela is an event which brings the Tiwas together irrespective of their internal differences to glorify their age old tradition, remember and celebrate their common past, and offer their tribute and loyalty to the traditional authority. In this process their relationship gets further strengthened and a common identity gradually develops which sees themselves as distinct to the others. Thus Jonbeel Mela not only provides a rostrum for hill plain integration but also becomes a critical moment in rearticulating the Tiwa identity.

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