

# Female Participation in Folk Music of Assam - A Study on Bihugeet in Guwahati (GMA), Assam

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**Abstract:** *Songs, instruments and dance- the collaboration of these three ingredients makes the music of any region or society. Folk music is one of the integral facet of culture which also poses all the essentials of music. The instruments used in folk music are divided into four halves-taat (string instruments), aanodha(instruments covered with membrane), Ghana (solid or the musical instruments which struck against one another) and sushir(wind instruments)(Sharma,1996). Out of these four, Ghana and sushirvadyas are being preferred to be played by female artists. Ghana vadyas include instruments like taal,junuka etc. and sushirvadyas include instruments that can be played by blowing air from the mouth like flute,gogona, hkhtuli etc. Women being the most essential part of the society are also involved in the process of shaping up the culture of a region. In the society of Assam since ancient times till date women plays a vital role in the folk music that is bihugeet. At times Assamese women in groups used to celebrate bihu in open spaces or within forest areas or under big trees where entry of men was totally prohibited and during this exclusive celebration the women used to play aforesaid instruments and sing bihu songs describing their life,youth and relation with the environment. As time entered into digital phase women participation has become more and more paving the way towards the international platform. In this study the women participation in shaping up the folk culture of Assam in ancient times which led to make Assamese women independent and self-sufficient in today's world is tried to be analysed. The methodology adopted is conversation with women of different genres related to folk music of Assam, interviews with experts in folk music in Assam and online survey to get opinion from a bunch of folk music listeners.*

**Keywords:** Folk music, culture, participation, region.

## 1. Introduction

*Music is the most eternal vehicle of the deepest emotions.*

*Anonymous*

While conducting a research on certain musical phenomena, considering gender relations becomes a necessary element. The participation and role of women in any field is usually connected to their social status. With the change of the society, change in the gender relationships in musical culture also can be observed. Study of female participation in a region also reveals the impact of gender dynamics in a particular musical culture explaining how strongly the field of music is interrelated with gender roles in the society. Participation of females in singing as well as playing instruments has been an important topic of research from ethno-musical point of view. In the folk music of any part of India female participation can be observed while performing various household works, rituals and farming also. The study area is also not an exception of it. According to Indian classical literature combination of song (swara), instruments (vadya) and dance (nritya) – trio makes the music of any region or society.

### Defining folk music

Broadly, Indian classical music experts divided music into two halves- classical music and folk music. Classical music is the music based on certain permitted elements and is a systematic grammar based category of music. Folk music is a popular form of music in the society which reflects the culture of a community and associated with local rituals, tradition, believes and dance. There is no specific time or era determined for the origin of folk music. It is believed that since the inception of human society folk music has been an

integral part and parcel of the people. Folk music is also not far from any other higher category music in real sense. From time to time many classical music experts were inspired by folk music to create their compositions and vice-versa.

### Folk music of the study area

The folk music of the study area can be traced back to the times before Aryan race entered into the region. At that time folk music must be belonged to the adivasis or indigenous inhabitants of the area. Later the Aryan race brought a different flavor of folk music to the study area. So, folk music of the study area can be grouped into two distinct halves, one is Folk music of Assam and the other is Tribal folk music (Dutta,2017). In this study Folk music of Assam of which Bihugeet is a significant style has been discussed.

## 2. Methodology

The methodology adopted in this study is mostly primary in nature which is collected by conversation with women of different genres related to folk music of Assam, interviews with experts in folk music in Assam and opinion from a bunch of folk music listeners belonged to different genres. A part of the survey for collection of primary data in the study is done online with the help of Google Forms. The survey schedule was prepared in Google Forms (a facility to create and operate online surveys) which was online between 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2018 to 31<sup>st</sup> October, 2018. The stakeholders like lyricists, composers, musicians, recordists, producers, promoters, singers and listeners were recruited via e-mails, WhatsApp with prior confirmation over mobile messages or phone calls. Secondary sources also used to some extent to present the history of Bihugeet and its origin.

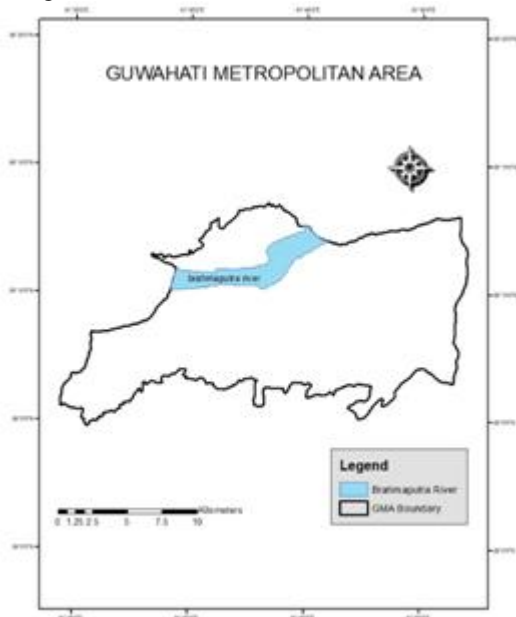
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### 3. Study Area

The study area selected is Guwahati (GMA) as it is considered as the hub of culture and performing arts in Assam (Fig.1).



**Figure 1:** Map of Guwahati (GMA) the hub of modern music during 20<sup>th</sup> century in Assam

Source: Primary, 2018

#### Objectives

- 1) To find out the origin of Bihugeet in Assam.
- 2) To study the female participation in Bihugeet in Assam.
- 3) To understand the present day status of female artists in performing Bihugeet in the study area.

#### Bihugeet

The most widely recognized pattern of folk music in Assam is *Bihugeet*. It is popular for its unique rhythm, notation, expression of human emotions in a very vibrant and romantic way. Bihugeet is based on only five notes i.e. sa, ga, ma, pa, na instead of regular seven notes of any other classical music (Biswas, 1978). This unique character of Bihugeet is called 'Pentatonic minor scale.' According to S. Roy (1972)-"Bihugeet is a peculiar combination of tunes of note sa and komalga and occasional repetition of these notes with quivering strokes at komalga (softga note). This feature is unknown to any northern Indian music. It may be contented that the element was received from a different genre altogether, may be from Tibeto-Burman."

The origin of the term *Bihu* is very difficult to identify. According to some experts' origin of Bihu lies among Austric group of people who came from South West Asia before 6000 B.C. and began to live in Indo-Gangetic valleys. One branch of such people entered Assam. Such people were involved in agriculture and before and after the cultivation they used to celebrate two festivals which in due course of time named as Rongali and Bhogalibihu. In the later times people from Tibeto-Burmese group came to Assam and contributed in the festival by adding specific time period (which is of course related with cultivation). In the thirteenth century Tai-Ahom group of people came to

Assam and from there 'Poihu' or 'Pihu' in Tai language meaning fun and worship '*Bihu*' term came. Since then Bihu is regarded as the main festival in Assam. Many scholars opined that Bihu word came from the Sanskrit word 'Bihkhub' (source).

As Bihu is mainly associated with cultivation, its lyrics reflects various elements related with agriculture and social life of the people of the region. Bihu song is being sung while going for cultivation, during harvesting, during animal rearing, women use to sing it during weaving, cultivating, praying, welcoming the spring season, to enjoy and having fun among women (Jengbihi), to express love to the dear one etc. Bihugeet and dance reflects the image of fertility of both the Earth and young people- onset of spring season mother Earth becomes fertile and provides grain likewise spring season brings excitement to the life of young people through colours of the landscape.

With due course of time people of Assam started celebrating bihu in three times associated with cultivation in a year i.e. Bohagbihi or Rongalibihu (onset of spring), Kati biu or Kongalibihu (onset of autumn) and Magh or Bhogalibihu (after harvesting in winter). Bihugeet is associated with all the three celebrations, but mostly it is widely celebrated during Bohagbihi or Rongalibihu which is regarded as the new year in Assam and spring season adds more colour to the celebration.

#### Female participation in Bihugeet

##### In social rituals

Since Bihugeet is associated with the livelihood and dailyworks of the people of the society in Assam female plays a vital role in it and shaping up the culture of the region. Without female participation Bihugeet cannot be complete. Females take part in cultivation, weaving and various social rituals, while doing so they use to sing and express their feelings happily for their involvement in such activities. On the other hand, female also use to sing Bihugeet to express their love and attention to the dear ones. Females used to sing Bihugeet in agricultural fields, under big trees and at homes while working to express the beauty of the nature also. A few examples are –

- 1) Comparing female with the beauty of fish, boys use to sing- '*ulaljaakimariamarenasoni*' meaning like the school of fish our girls are also coming to dance bihu suddenly.
- 2) While making rice in 'Dheki' (wooden tool to make rice from rice grain which is operated by one leg at one end and by one hand at the other end) females use to sing Bihugeet like- '*Dikhoutgumegumaicompanirjahajoi, dhekitgumegumaithura, deharomeromai, bukusomesomaitumakdekhiborepora*' meaning in Dikhou river there is the sound of British ship, in the process of making rice there is the sound of the sole of dheki and in my heart there is the vibration of your presence since I have seen you.

##### In present day society:

In the modern society female participation in Bihugeet has widely increased due to commercialization process. At present female participation inbihugeet is mainly found in

the performing culture on stage shows and music releases through CD's, online uploads etc. Now female singers are involved in a large number in Bihugeet singing leading to make female artists of our society independent to some extent. It is found from the study that the gender status of the musicians in the study area is 54% female and 46% male (result from online survey, Fig 2).

In case of favourite singer- female in the study area it is found that Torali Sharma who is a singer, composer is the most favourite singer (24.0%) then Zuble Baruah (15.2%) followed by other female singers of new generation as well as earlier generation, whereas 5.6% provided no choice of favourite female singer in the study area.

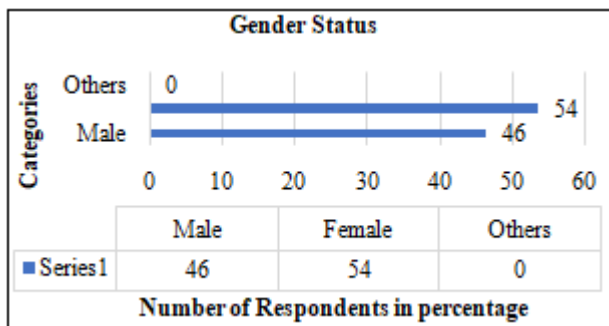


Figure 2: Gender Status of musicians in the study area.

Source: Primary survey, Online survey conducted between 30.9.2018 to 31.10.2018 via Google Forms

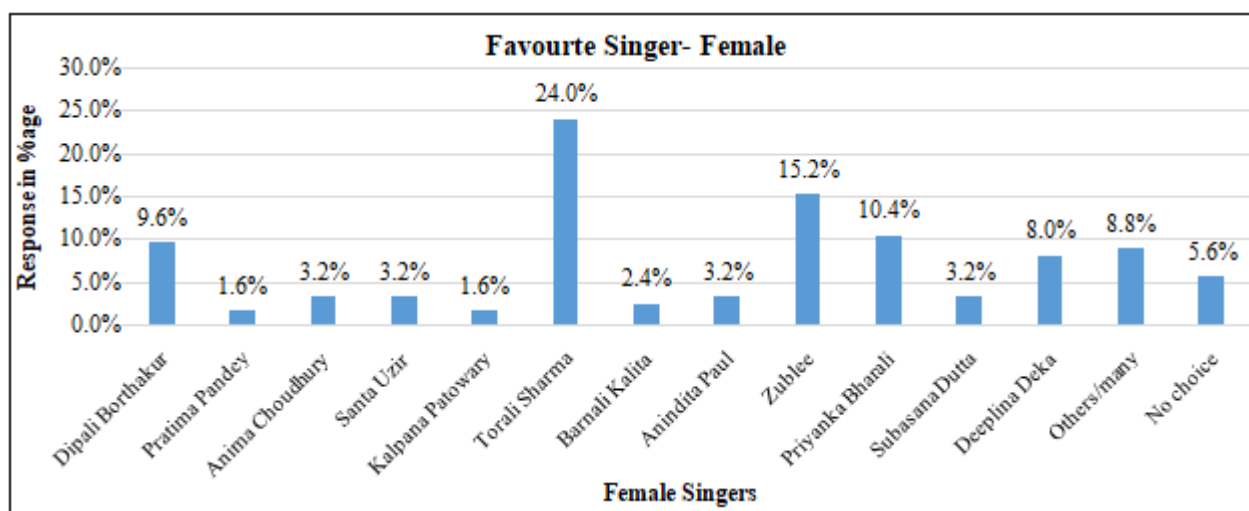


Figure 3: Favourite Singer-Female in the study area

Source: Primary survey, Online survey conducted between 30.9.2018 to 31.10.2018 via Google Forms

While surveying (interaction with selected 11 numbers of female popular singers of the study area) about female participation and making female independent financially the result came that most of the female artist involved in bihuguet are practicing it since childhood. They like to keep the original Bihuguet or bihunaam without confusing it with modern songs. The study reports that association with Bihuguet gave them popularity, name and a worldwide platform but still they are not financially secured completely and have to struggle to survive i.e. about 18% artist said 'fully independent' while about 54% said 'partly independent' and 27% said 'no' to financial independence (Fig 4). While conducting the study it is found that female bihuguet performers are paid less than the male performers. There is a huge difference found in terms of payments both for song recordings and stage performances. As a result of which singers prefer to upload their songs in youtube and other related music sites which can be easily reached to the listeners and the artists can get a few stage shows which provides them some financial help to survive (amount did not disclose).

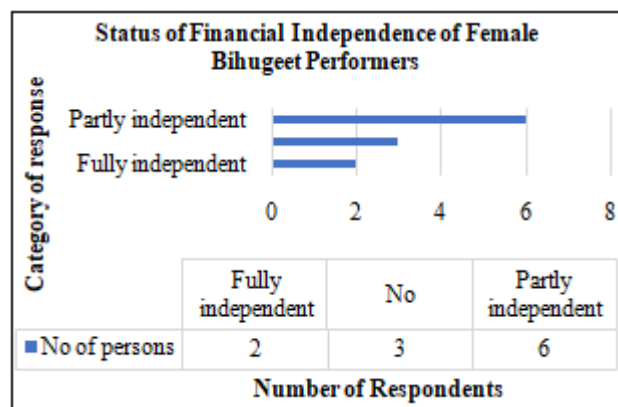


Figure 4: Status of Financial independence of Female Bihuguet performers

Source: Primary survey, 2018

**In playing instruments**

The instruments used in folk music are divided into four halves-taat(instruments having strings attached), aanodha (instruments made of animal skin), Ghana(instruments made



of metal used to keep the rhythm) and sushir(instruments played by blowing air by mouth). Out of these four Ghana and sushirvadyas are being preferred to be played by female artists in the study area. Females in Bihugeet mainly use to play such Ghanah and Sushirvadyas like gogona(mouth harp), toka(made of bamboo) hkhutuli(a blowing by mouth tiny instrument made of mainly mud)(Fig.5). Now-a-days

due to commercialization of Bihugeet many female prefer to play Dhol (aanodha), Taal (Ghana)and Flute (sushir)in stage performances (Fig.6)which were earlier used to play only by male performers.

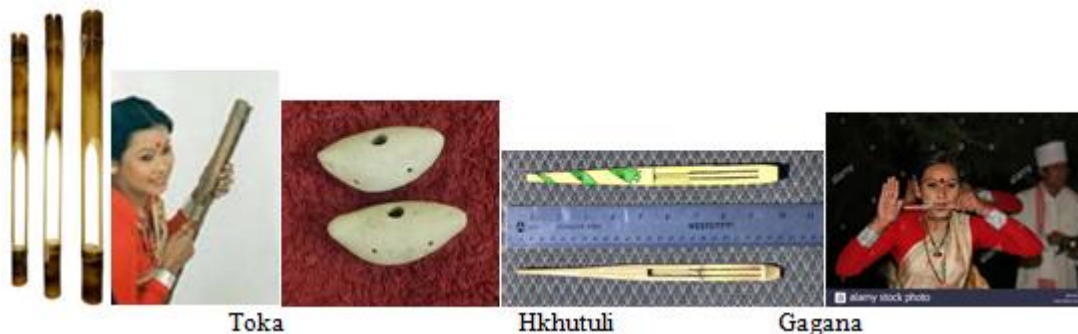


Figure 5: Instruments played by Female performers in Bihugeet

Source: Images from internet, 2018



Figure 6: Female artist playing Dhol on stage

Source: Images from internet, 2018

#### Towards international platform:

While conducting the study it is found that female bihuguet performers are paid less than the male performers. There is a huge difference found in terms of payments both for song recordings and stage performances. As a result of which singers prefer to upload their songs in youtube and other related music sites which can be easily reached to the listeners and the artists can get a few stage shows which provides them some financial help to survive(amount did not disclose). Most listeners prefer to listen male singers than female singers. But exceptions are there with a few number of popular female singers namely Tarali Sharma, Bhitali Das, Bornali Kalita etc.

All female artists opined(100% respondents) that performing bihuguet ensures an exposure to the world outside Assam. They are being invited regularly to perform in national as well as international platforms. People from Assam residing in foreign countries often use to invite artists to perform in their places. In that way people outside the country also becoming familiar with bihuguet. According to female artists in bihuguet digital world has given Bihuguet an international value as well as the female performers a great platform to show their culture in front of the whole world. Due to digitization only they can reach to their listeners effectively.

#### 4. Conclusion

Bihuguet has been the rhythm in the culture of the study area since time immemorial. The beauty of Bihuguet lies in the emotion and description females in terms of fertility, love

and bearer of the culture of the society of the study area as well as of entire Assam. Female participate in every element of Bihuguet and its associated environment in ancient as well as in modern society- only the way may differ but involved emotions and motive is the same. The male and female participation in Bihuguet performance as involved expectations and hard work is of the same level. Society in the study area seems to encourage female participation in Bihuguet in every generation so it can be wished to be a vital platform for paving the way for all female artists towards the world of performance.

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