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The Fruitful and the Fulfilled: Looking at Adi Rasa and Shringar Rasa in the Folk Aesthetics of Bihu

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the folk aesthetics of the springtime Bihu festival of Assam. The concept of Rasa, a significant part of the classical aesthetics found in Bharatmuni's *Natyashastra*, has been outlined and illustrated through the Bihu songs- the dancing, the gestures as well as the overall ethos of the festival. A major aspect of the paper is the dialectics that form between the folk and the classical canon; an effort has been made to understand the juxtaposition of the two as well as the formation of the classical from the folk. Bihu as a celebration of eros, romance and fertility forms the core of the argument; adi-rasa and shringar-rasa form the primary essence of this celebration and this paper. This folk festival is undergoing rapid modernisation which has brought the dance form onto the urban stage that has led to the metamorphosis of the otherwise agricultural nomenclature of Bihu into a more 'sanitised' version of the same.

[Keywords: aesthetics, folk, *rasa*, *adi-rasa*, *shringar-rasa*, modernity, eros, romance, *Natyashastra*, *gamusa*, *Huchori*.]

I. Introduction

Rasa, the essence of a work of art, literally translates to 'taste' or 'savour'. Theorised by the ancient sage Bharatmuni (between 200 BC and 200 AD), *rasa* refers to the specialised emotion inspired by the performers in an audience, which enables the viewers to relish the performance and engage with it in a manner that is deeper and more involved than in the actions of everyday living. It is what demarcates a performance, a work of art- or even a celebration- from the mundaneness of daily existence and thereby aestheticises the emotions provoked in the viewers by the 'spectacle' created to inspire good thought which in turn will inspire good living. The moral injunction within a classical framework such as that of the *rasa* theory is undeniable- it would be largely reminiscent of the question about art's moral responsibility in place throughout history- specially in the context that the *Natyashastra* itself arrived at a time when society faced decadence, and it was left to the realm of the arts to elevate man from moral downtroddenness. (It is said that the four *Vedas* Brahma created- *Rigveda*, *Samaveda*, *Yajurveda* and *Atharvaveda*- were not allowed to be studied by the lower castes and the women of society; so Brahma created the *Natyaveda* to be studied and practised by all.) Is the experience of *rasa* subjective or objective? Different philosophers and scholars throughout history have provided their own perspective on it based on their philosophical stances. Although the *navarasas* per se are objective categories in terms of codification of the aesthetic experience through particular words themselves, Bharata stated how *rasa* and emotion

need to be felt in experience while words exist as the suggestions of the same. This democratic rendering of rasa stresses on the 'experiential or subjective side of poetic meaning' which 'seems rather pointless, for ultimately everything is an experience, such as a colour, taste, or emotion, and can be known as it is in itself only through direct acquaintance.'¹



II. "The Springtime Bihu of Assam"- a Celebration of Eros

One of the seven northeastern states of India, Assam encompasses numerous ethnic communities, each with its own distinct cultural flavour, thereby negating the notion of a homogenous 'Assamese' identity. The contours of such a representation would be multifaceted, then; not simply as a result of diverse tribal identities but also as a consequence of the interaction between the 'greater' mainland Hindu influence that has seeped into the region and interacted with 'indigenous' tribal faiths, ensuing a process of assimilation. This can be said to have been possible because "(t)he religion described as Hinduism is a body of beliefs and customs traceable to various sources- Aryan and non-Aryan, Indian and non-Indian, modern and old. It is absorptive in character and has an attitude which has found itself expedient in dealing with people of various grades of development- from believing in a super soul to worshippers of stones and trees... Indian folklore is as much the Hindu's as it is the tribal's."² A melting pot, hence, Assam fuses communities that trace their origin to the *Aryavarta*, the Tibeto-Burmans and the Ahoms who are descendants of the Shun community from China's Unan province, alongwith traces of Dravidian and Austric people as well.

Folk aesthetics (*folk: the common people of a society or region considered as the representatives of a traditional way of life*³) dominate the celebration of Bihu, the primary festival of Assam, and it is of three types. I shall discuss here primarily about the

¹ Chaudhury, 1965, pp. 145

² Goswami, 1967, pp.19

³ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/folk>

4. 'merriment'

springtime Bihu festival- called Bohag (spring) Bihu or Rongali⁴ Bihu. The festival lasts for seven days and marks the beginning of the Assamese New Year. It is celebrated during the month of April when spring arrives and all around can be heard the songs of the cuckoo (*kooli sorai*). Plants and foliage bloom with fresh shoots and new leaves called the *koohipaata*. A bounty in the heart of nature inspires glory, joy and celebration in the heart of the common people whose lives and emotions are integrally connected with the phases of the natural cycle and processes. Spring is the time that symbolises the rebirth of life and spirit, youth and fertility, vigour and rejuvenation; Shelley, writing about springtime, could express this spirit in these lines- “All overgrown with azure moss and flowers/ So sweet, the sense faints picturing them!”⁵ The hyperbole of emotion and sentiment visible here is essentially what folk songs describe. Like all folk festivals come down through centuries, their rituals and beliefs reflecting age-old notions and faith of the ancient man, the celebration of Bihu encapsulates the same. Many of these festivals originated in the primitive man’s ‘magical rites’ and rituals to appease the gods and goddesses who represented natural forces, revering the five elements of life-earth/ soil, forest, water, air and sky. Through such rites they wished to attain longer days, continuation of summer and to get rid of winters. The important aspect of such rites was to increase the fertility of both man and soil. Fertility, the acts of mating and birth held the fancy of the primitive man because they emblematised the act of creation. Rongali Bihu traces its origin and meaning to such older rites. The youth sing and dance in gay abandon during the festival to the accompaniment of *bihu dhol* (a special drum used on the occasion), *pepa* (buffalo horn pipes) and *taal* (bell-metal cymbals). These spontaneous occasions of singing and dancing occur unrestrained by norms and rules that define any classical paradigm of song or dance traditions- the aesthetics of folk performances do not adhere any form of grammar except for those inherent ethics that govern the lay-out of a ritual norm. For instance, the *Huchori* tradition that heralds the festival of springtime Bihu is confined to just male performers who visit as a troop from house to house singing songs primarily standing in a circle and playing the *dhol* and *taal*. The members of the household led by the elders- the parents in most cases and also the grandparents in respective situations- pay obeisance to the *Huchori dol* with a *xorai* and *phoolam gamusa*. They bless the family with prayers for a healthy and prosperous year ahead. In this tradition female members do not take part in the performance. There is an interesting story that explains the origin, and importance, of *Huchori* in the lore of the Sonowal Kachari tribe of Lakhimpur. It draws upon a Pauranic myth ‘in which the Vedic god Brahma as Prajapati or Creator performs his work of creation by incestuous intercourse with his own daughter.’⁶ The tribal version of this story incorporates this theme into the context of Bihu and considerably ‘sanitises’ it. As the story goes, ‘Brahma had a daughter by an Apsara or celestial maiden. The unrestrained god set his eyes on his grown-up daughter and wanted to enjoy her. King Dharma (another name for Jama or king of death) took up the matter and weighed his scales of justice. He found the girl guilty and drove her out of heaven.

⁵ from the poem ‘Ode to the West Wind’ by Percy B Shelley

⁶ Goswami, 1967, pp. 20

She came to earth and roamed about. When spring came there was a thrill of new life throughout the universe and the gods remembered this girl who was pining away in misery and loneliness. They went to Vishnu and spoke to him about her. Vishnu sent them to Bathou or Mahadeva. Sitting under a peepul tree Bathou gave them lessons in *Huchori* dance and music. The gods went to each divine household, danced and sang and thus collected various articles. With these they rehabilitated Brahma's daughter. The girl looked up again in all her youthfulness and sense of joy. She started dancing while the gods accompanied her on their instruments. Her bewitching dance softened the heart of King Dharma and she was recalled to her divine home. But the dance and music remained on earth, to be performed by the Kacharis every spring'.⁷ This story clearly merges the folk beliefs with that of the *Puranas*, such that there remains no clear demarcation between mainstream Hinduism and folk faith. We can say that the Hindu pantheon of gods and goddesses, including all the various manifestations of them in different regional cultures as well as in the mainstream realm, is a classicisation of indigenous folk articulations. The classical, as many scholars have argued about, is a process of condensing that which is already prevalent in people's culture. If we take this viewpoint, then the above story of the Kacharis shows an interaction between the folk and the classical in this manner: folk => classical => folk.

The process of classicisation is closely related to texts and textualisation while folklore and folk performances fall within the wider ambit of narratives. In this regard I shall bring in the argument about the theory of *rasa*, and its usage and relevance only within the 'greater' Sanskritic tradition of art and performance. In philosophy, *rasa* transcends its grammarian boundaries and expresses a concept of universality in the experience of particular emotions that is provoked by the watching of a performance. The emotions thereby felt do not correspond by all means in the way in which we feel them in our everyday life but the very fact they are being evoked while we are engaging in a work of art makes it aesthetic, resulting in the primary feeling of 'joy'. Abhinavagupta holds that in the contemplation of a 'true' poetic composition one gets detached from his temporal and spatial field and is transported into a dimension where the experience of the feelings occur at an objective level. This suggests that the experience of *rasa* is objective to the extent that a given performance evokes across all viewers the universal feeling of fulfilment and satisfaction that arrives upon the interaction on a mental and intellectual level with the realm of 'pure art'. The problematics of such a theory exists when *rasa* becomes an emotive outcome of only one type of art- the 'higher' Sanskritic tradition- which has codified the written word, gestures, the performer's body, music and similar aspects to create a discourse prescribed by the upper caste-class of society. It is exclusive of the 'vernacular, the peculiarities that pertain to lower castes and classes, their mannerisms and practices judged as 'impure' and less/ non-aesthetic. For instance, a lower-caste woman's body ideally gets categorised as provoking disgust and her mannerisms, such as loud talk and sweaty body, is a source of repulsive feelings. The upper-caste woman's body on the other hand is described with superlatives and portrayed as the ideal form of beauty and grace. Folk performances, for this reason, do not always

⁷ pp. 21

reflect norms and ideals of the *Natyashastra*. During the nationalist struggle of late-19th and early-20th century for instance, the urgency of creating an image of united India sought resort in the mythical idea of a great Hindu past of the country. This spirit of revivalist Hinduism did not bring the various folk cultures under its fold but tagged them as *bhrasth* (corrupt).⁸ A review on the popular Jatra performance of Bengal was reviewed by the *Calcutta Review* (19th century) as this- ‘Their sooty complexion, their coal-black cheeks, their haggard eyes, their long-extended arms, their gaping mouths and their puerile attire, excite disgust. For the screeching of the night-owl, the howling of the jackals and the barking of the dogs are harmony itself compared to their horrid yells (...)’. This perfectly exemplifies the idea of how the folk has been labelled throughout ages as the sphere of the lowly and the ‘uncultured’, lending a bourgeois characteristic to ‘culture’ and cultural exchanges.

I shall now endeavour to look at *rasa* in the context of the folk songs and dance of Rongali Bihu. The area of focus shall be on the traditional mode of this celebration, as can be seen even today in rural areas and more pervasively in Upper Assam as compared to Lower Assam (Assam is divided into two broad categories based on the flow of the mighty Bramhaputra, namely Upper Assam and Lower Assam. The logic behind this categorisation is that a river flows from high land to low land. Since Bramhaputra flows from east to west, the eastern parts of Assam, being high lands are known as Upper Assam and western parts are known as Lower Assam.⁹) The process of displacement of such folk traditions from their ‘indigenous’ way of celebration to a modern urban proscenium stage as a part of cultural programmes (which commemorate this Bihu celebration today in places like Guwahati) is quite ubiquitous.

III. The Erotic and the Romantic

The concept of *Rasa* as a formula of (Sanskrit) aesthetics cannot be applied appropriately to Bihu songs because they are part of folk-literature, called orature as we know, which is a product of the common masses illiterate in textual references and ideas that pertain to one dominant class. Orature never forms part of the canon; they cannot be accurately identified as a text nor can they be sufficiently textualised. Folk literature lives on in people’s hearts and gets carried from generation to generation through word of mouth; the dissemination is largely oral and hence they become a part of organic narrative that one gets exposed to and learns about by being a part of and growing up in that society and culture. Yet, we can look at how the *rasa* can be experienced not simply in the viewing of classically ordained art and performance but also amidst popular performances; the dynamics of *rasa* in traditional Bihu performance will become entwined in complexity if we consider that the viewer is flexible enough to become the performer at any point of time- in a strictly rural context. For the sake of convenience I shall not take into account that aspect of the folk here.

⁸ The category of ‘folk’ as illustrated by the 19th century playwright, Bharatendu Harischandra.

⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Upper_Assam

The Rongali Bihu was originally celebrated in the crop-fields. The Moran community of Assam does so even today. The aim was to increase soil fertility, bring in rains and pray for a good harvest. According to Dr. Prafulladatta Goswami, a pioneer folklorist, the Bihu dance might have come to Assam with the Mongoloid people who migrated from South-east Asia to this region. There are instances of Spring Festivals in other parts of the world which is the time for the youth to select their life partners. The entire celebration of this Bihu becomes an occasion of celebrating the life force *eros*- be it in nature or amongst people. The body becomes the venerated object of beauty and celebration, so we can find plenty of examples in Bihu songs where the woman's body is described with great gaiety and abandon. Infact, going by 'norms' of all fertility cults across regions and throughout history, these dances have served the purpose of provoking sexual union, which obliquely served to contribute to fertility of soil and resultant agricultural production. The songs express sexual desire overtly and candidly and the *rasa* we can associate with it is the *adi rasa*, the source of all other *rasas* as it is said to be. Springtime brings mother earth new life too, after the harsh long winter, and in turn invigorates the hearts of man. As one bihu song goes-

Bihu mari thalibor mon'e oi lahari
Bihu mari thakibor mon
Bihu mari thakote poluwa'i niniba
Bhoribo lagibo dhon.
Chote goiye goiye Bohag palehi
Phulile babori phool
Tomar logote mawro jodi morim oi
Eri jaam nijore kul

Here, in the first four lines, the woman expresses her desire to forever celebrate the springtime festival and to continue dancing endlessly, indicating at not just the beauty of nature during *bohag* but also her sexual vigour. She candidly asks her lover and fellow dancer to not carry her alongwith him to his house in the fervour of the dance, but explains immediately later in the next four lines, that in this month when the *babori* flower is in bloom she feels she can confront all hurdles and even leave her family name in the name of his love. The agency a woman gets to express her love and desire for physical union is as much as that of a man in these bihu songs. They are replete with a spirit of romance (*shringar*) and merriment (*hasya*). In another song-

Luit'or bali bogi dhoke dhoki
Kacho'i konee pare lekhi
Gaat'e jui jole xoriyoh bagore
Dhon'ok panighate dekhi.
Sage belbela'i kowai kelkelai

*Kaak pet'or kotha kom
Ene mon'e lage tomak oi moina
Xorir'ot xumuwa'i thom.*

Here, the man voices his desire to embrace his lover and keep her within his body. Like the abundant nature imagery in these songs and using them as similes and metaphors, the song uses the image of a river-turtle laying eggs on the white sand of the shores of the Luit (the river Brahmaputra). This has a clear connotation of both sexual desire and fertility. The lover mentions that his body burns with desire and the pit of his stomach bubbles with many untold secrets. All of these capture the mood of a lover pining for his beloved. In yet another song-

*Tomar sokujuri xorog'or tora jen
Kino khamuchiya kokal
Soku't soku aamar pori'o noporil
Kino jui'ye loga kopal*

Here, the lover describes the bodily features of his beloved. He says with a sigh about his misfortune that his gaze went uncaught and unnoticed by her; he describes her eyes as the stars of heaven and her waist as perfectly silhouetted. There is a good deal of freedom of expressing wants and desires between men and women, as can be seen through these songs, and they capture the essence of rural, agricultural societies ungoverned by dictates of bourgeois morals. Elopement used to be very common during the Rongali Bihu and it takes place even now in non-urban areas where the celebration of the festival has lost its traditional essence to the extent that the concepts of fertility and romance that are integral to the celebration of spring's bounty isn't essentially disseminated amongst the new generations who take this festival as the occasion of cultural functions only, watching Bihu performances on stages in different areas of the city and wrapping it all up with shopping for new clothes. Another important ritual of Rongali Bihu is called *bihuwan diya*. On the second day of bihu, called *manuh bihu* (people's bihu, preceded by *goru bihu* or cattle-bihu on the first day), families and neighbours exchange the traditional *gamusa* and pay elders obeisance by touching their feet and putting forward the *bihuwan* on the *xorai*. This ritual is also increasingly disappearing as children today in urban areas are often not taught traditional values. It is interesting to see the motifs on the *gamusa* which reflect the pervasive notion of union that characterises the core of Bohag Bihu. These motifs consist of floral patterns, most commonly, and other types of foliage that stay entwined alongwith motifs of birds facing its each other; in a way, if we choose to see, they too reflect the idea of union.

One more example of a bihu song, finally-

*Haah hoi porim'goi tomar'e pukhuri't
Paro' hoi porim'goi saal'ot*

Ghaam hoi xomam'goi tomar'e xorir'ot
Makhi hoi sumaa dim gaal'ot.

Like the others, this song celebrates the erotic and creates romance between the lovers; the volume of sexual desire doesn't undermine the overwhelming amount of romance in these songs. For instance, the first song explained here illustrates how the woman seeks to spend her lifetime with the lover. The erotic (*adi rasa*) and the romantic (*shringar rasa*) mutually compliment and arouse each other. In this song, the lover states how he shall transfigure into a duck to swim in the pond of her home and then a pigeon to perch on her rooftop; and eventually expresses his desire to enter her body in the form of sweat and kiss her becoming a housefly. The imagery is what in classical standards shall be termed as 'vulgar' or even 'obscene'. The images derived from aspects of natural life and common situations that we encounter on an everyday level create a great deal of intimacy. The charm of romance being created in these songs lies in the fact that they express love and desire as any common man will do, the emphasis is not as much in creating 'literary' flavour as in the merriment of the people who take respite from their labour and indulge in the festive mood to celebrate nature's bounty after the long cold winters.

The dominant mood of this bihu would definitely be merriment or *hasya rasa* caused by the thrill of love and romance (*rati*) that creates the mood of *shringar* alongside. It is said that creation only happened as a result of *shringar*, when Shiv and Shakti (the male and female energies) decided to play a game of hide and seek that eventually led to their union of body and soul. Similarly, the *adi rasa* is symbolised by the union of Krsna and the *gopis*, primarily Radha. While *shringar*- exemplified by the union of Shiv-Gauri- suggests romance within a conjugal union, *adi rasa* encapsulates the idea of love and sex outside wedlock, and is hence represented by the love of the eternal lovers Krsna and Radha. The practice of love is also often seen as surrendering to the divine. Fulfilment occurs when there is union, creating *sambhoga rasa*- one aspect of *shringar rasa*- which is achieved as a result of dancing and merriment post-festivity. For instance, in one song the beloved expresses her contempt on the rooster who crows early in the morning and thus announcing the time when her lover has to leave her bed, interrupting their lovemaking-

Kukuraa kukuraa ojati kukuraa

Bhukuwai marim tok

Rati nupuwaaotei kiyo daak'e dili

Dhon'e eri jai mok

Those songs which portray a longing for this union in love constitutes of the *vipralambha rasa* of *shringar*. This mood of romance is only required to nourish meeting. In the following song, it is created by a separation of the lovers caused by societal dictates that makes both restless. The beloved expresses how they have finally arranged for a meeting escaping the eyes of others and she has come crossing rivers, over bridges, to unite with her lover-

Dhonxiri dolong'khon bhetile' oi senaikon
Lohar oi xolokha mari
Tomake oi aamake bhetile oi xomaj'e
Duti deha duphal kori

Traditionally, people danced bihu in open fields under the shades of trees. There is no fixed structure or arrangement of the dancers and musicians but today, when they are performed on stages, the dancers are arranged such that they face the audience. Against a more traditional circular arrangement stage performances prefer that they be arranged linearly. The context and location of these dances, therefore, changes the formal component. The bihu costume is composed of *muga* (golden silk) *mekhela sador* (the traditional dress of Assam comprising of two pieces) that is covered by red and green floral or other motifs, red blouse, *Axomiya gohona* (assamese jewellery that consists of *dhul-biri*, *joon-biri* and *gaam-kharu*) and the *kopou phool* (foxtail orchid), that adorns the dancer's hair-bun. *Kopou phool* is a symbol of love, fertility and merriment. Men wear *muga dhuti-kurta* and tie the *gamusa* on their head. The costume of gold and red dazzles the eyes with their brightness and reflects the sheer vivacity of the dance and dancers. A combination of these two colours reflects not just symbolic meanings but also reflects the importance of that colour in the particular culture. The golden of the *muga* silk (*muga* means yellow) not only adds richness to the bihu costume but the use of *muga* and not any other silk conveys the idea of how this textile material is an important source of income and identity for the assamese community- Assam is renowned worldwide for its sericulture. In the words of John Hutchings, 'Colour and appearance are essential to the well-being of most living organisms. In common with that of other animal species, our total appearance, that is our colour, colour patterning, design and behavioural display have adapted to physical, geographical, climatological and sexual environments... Folklore is about what we do as a matter of course, about what we believe and how we behave as we go about our lives.'¹⁰ The colour red is known to symbolise love and erotica, coming from the colour of blood which symbolises 'life'. The dancers paint their palms with *jetuka* or henna leaves that is emblematises union of a sexual and romantic kind. In the pan-Indian context too, *mehendi* is an integral part of the bride's cosmetics.

The men play the primary instruments of the bihu performance barring the *gogona*, a tiny stick-like organ made of bamboo and played only by women by placing it between the teeth and twanging it with fingers. The most important musical instruments are the *dhol*, *taal* and *pepa* which are played intermittently. The *dhol* is responsible for keeping the rhythm of the dance throughout while the *pepa* is played prominently in the beginning and in the end when the tempo of the dance is at its highest. The *bihu-dhol* is made of wooden barrel and its open ends are covered by hard animal skin, while the *pepa* is made of the horn of a buffalo. The sounds emanated through these instruments are raw

¹⁰ 2004, pp. 57

and primal in their flavour, as is the essence of all folk musical organs. About the drum and its genesis, Dilip Ranjan Barthakur says- 'Music, which may be summed up briefly as a combination of sounds to please the human ear, has always played a vital role in human society. It is an art with endless ramifications and innumerable psychological and cultural affiliation. Geoffrey Brace states that since the primitive age the simple shouts, claps, chest beating, foot-stamping of early tribes had the power, it was believed, to bring rain, cure sickness and make crops grow. These methods of simple rhythms might have been the first pointers to the evolution of drum.'

IV. Conclusion

Bihu performance is undergoing a rapid process of modernisation, and so is the festival on the whole. This celebration being essentially linked to an agricultural society which characterises a symbiotic relationship between man and nature gets displaced in an urban bourgeois setting. This has largely affected the indigenous nature of the bihu performance which, as said earlier, is nowadays performed on the stage in cultural events that are organised not just during Rongali Bihu but in other festivals as well. Such shifts are as a matter of fact inevitable; knowledge about folk forms and aesthetics are important to be disseminated amongst the urban crowd of children and youth and for most part, their exposure to such cultural forms occur in limited spheres like that of cultural events held in auditoriums or open-air stages. Either ways, the displacement is huge but obvious. What is more problematic, rather, is how the erotic and 'folk' significance of the festival as well as of the songs and dances begin to get considerably sanitised when they are proselytised through schools that have newly come up in the cities where the bihu dance is taught to children by 'experts'. This is entirely antithetical to the very concept of a folk dance- which is meant to be spontaneous, without formal rules and dictates of postures, rhythm and gestures. This emerging trend replicates the dictum of those schools that teach classical dances like Bharatnatyam and Kathak.

Another important trend is that of the wide circulation of popular videos of Bihu dance-dramas which have been immensely well-received in the small towns and rural areas, interestingly. These videos concentrate on the blooming romance between the protagonists and often end on a note of conjugality and union with families. The makers of these short films occupy the role of cultural regenerators in one sense, and the manner in which the tradition of bihu gets represented depends upon them. To a great extent the videos are able to catch the core of the festivities surrounding springtime Bihu and they have been hugely responsible in arousing interest and enthusiasm towards this popular folk form amongst all people uniformly. They come well clad in the spirit of romance and desire which thankfully have not been appropriated or removed.

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