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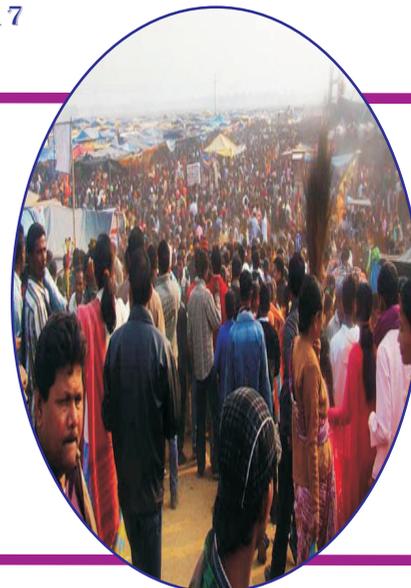
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PRESENT STATUS OF JONBEEL MELA AS A CULTURAL TOURISM SITE

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ABSTRACT :

Indian Culture is interrelated with fairs and festivals. In Assam also all the communities observe a good number of fairs and festivals. Some of them are conspicuously above the religion. Such a fair, viz, the Jonbeel Mela (fair of jonbeel) is observed by the Tiwa tribe in Marigaon area of Marigaon district, Assam, which has an amazing impact on different communities in accelerating the process of spreading of peace and amity. The present project study has been undertaken with an objective to study the present status of the Jonbeel Mela. The study designed followed is Descriptive design and this study involves primary and secondary Sources. Although the mela starts on the third week of January every year, the time of beginning of the mela is not known. Although in the present economic scenario barter becomes almost obsolete, this traditional system is one of the primary attractions of the Jonbeel mela. The 'cock fighting' is also an interesting folk game of this mela. One another primary attraction of the mela is several eateries comprising of varieties ethnic foods.

KEYWORDS : Cultural Tourism, Jonbeel Mela, Status.

INTRODUCTION:

India offers various tourism options due to its vastness and diversity, attracting tourism from all over the world. Those are Heritage tourism, Medical tourism, Wildlife and Eco tourism, Business tourism, Sports tourism, Culture tourism etc. Among all these tourism, culture tourism played a very important role in the tourism sector. In the words of Jawaharlal Nehru, "Culture is the widening of the mind and of the spirit". Cultural tourism (or culture tourism) is the subset of tourism concerned with a country or region's culture, specifically the lifestyle of the people in those geographical areas, the history of those people, their art, architecture, religion(s), and other elements that helped shape their way of life. Cultural tourism includes tourism in urban areas, particularly historic or large cities and their cultural facilities such as museums and theatres. It can also include tourism in rural areas showcasing the traditions of indigenous cultural communities (i.e. festivals, rituals), and their values and lifestyle.

Indian Culture is interrelated with fairs and festivals. Fairs and Festivals can perform an amazing role to create congenial geographical area. Each Society observes some fairs and festivals related to their culture. Various communities of North-East India also observe a good number of fairs and festivals, particularly as indispensable components of their mainstay, i.e. Agricultural. In Assam also all the communities observe a good number of fairs and festivals. Some of them are conspicuously above the religion. Such a fair, viz, the Jonbeel Mela (fair of jonbeel) is observed by the Tiwa tribe in Marigaon area of Marigaon district, Assam, which has an amazing impact on different communities in accelerating the process of spreading of peace and amity.

The Jonbeel mela is unique and important in many respects. Jonbeel Mela acts as a melting pot of ethnicity with people from different communities of the hills of the northeast meeting the dwellers of the vast plains, exchanging their goods through barter and it strengthens the bond of ethnic bonhomie. Jonbeel Mela is a three day community fair held in the weekend of Magh Bihu (Magh Bihu is the festival observed by the Assamese people during the month of Magh (January-February) through household and community feast, merry making, and appeasing the fire of God) at a historic place known as Dayang Belguri at Jonbeel. The Joonbeel (Joon and Beel are Assamese terms for the Moon and a wetland respectively) is so called because a large natural water body is shaped like a crescent moon. People from different community of hill like Tiwa, Khasia, Karbi comes to the Mela with their Jhum produces like Arum, ginger, turmeric, leafy vegetables, yam, lac etc., jungle products like Bamboo shoots –both fresh and pounded dried, medicinal plants, dried fish etc and exchange those with local cakes made of rice flour powder with or without coconut granules, sesame, molasses, sugar, kerosene, fish, salt, match boxes etc offered by the plains Tiwas.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

The present project study has undertaken with an objective to study the present status of the Jonbeel Mela.

METHODOLOGY:

The study designed followed is Descriptive design and this study involves primary and secondary Sources. The primary sources are through face to face interview, telephone surveys, emails, focus groups and observation etc. The secondary Sources being published, several souvenir, research papers and news paper articles.

AREA OF THE STUDY:

Jonbeel mela is held near a marshy lake known as Jonbeel at a historic place named Dayang Belguri which is 5 K.M's far from Jagiroad in Marigaon District of Assam. The national highway connecting this mela is NH 37. The venue of the Mela is 32 km's away from Guwahati. There is good transportation facility from Guwahati to the main venue .It takes maximum one hour to reach the Mela from Guwahati.

The Mela is held in an area of 18 bighas, composed of land and water bodies. All the initial members come from the nearest villages from hilly and plain area. The investigator want to mention some nearest villages which are the regularly involved in the barter system are – Markangkuchi, Nowagaon, Bhomoraguri, Sarangkuchi, Fatasil, Uporkuchi, Rajakuchi, Kanabari, Pachim Nagaon, Baghjaap Gaon, Hatiyamukh, Bongalbari gaon, Bangthai gaon, Dongabari gaon, Langabadang, Thabakunji, Aambi, Ulukunji, Ultangkunji of Nagaon, Morigaon, Karbi-Anglong and Meghalaya district respectively.

DURATION OF THE FAIR:

Although the mela starts on the third week of January every year, the time of beginning of the mela is not known. The fair actually is held for three days in the weekend of Tiwa tribes Magh Bihu celebrations by the Gobha Deo-Raja Junbeel Samiti on the direction of the Gobha Deo-Raja Rajdarbar at Jonbeel paar. This year also it's held on January 21 with a three day programme.

The first day of the Mela which was Thursday, Jan 22, Deep Singh Deo-Raja, the Ceremonial King of the erstwhile Gobha kingdom along with his ministers and other personalities from the tribe has assembled and inaugurate the Mela.

Next day on Friday, Barter system a primitive and indigenous trade system between the hills and plain people was held early in the morning of the day.

In the last day of the Mela a Rajdarbar of the Gobha kingdom was organized at the Mela ground with the rajdarbar followers and other Rajas to be followed by an open session with the dignitaries and other programmes like collection of subscription from the shops on the Mela ground.

PRESENT STATUS OF JONBEEL MELA:

A fair is a gathering of people for a variety of entertainment or commercial activities. Jonbeel Mela is also not too different. During the three days of fair thousands of people gather in the mela. In earlier time, the Ahom king and Jayantia king plays the major role in the Jonbeel Mela. But now a day's mainly Gobha king and their other members from Nagaon, Morigaon, Kamrup district, and khasi jayantia hill of Meghalaya participate in the Mela.

Before the preparation of the Mela, Usually Gobha king meets their other ministerial member to fix the date of the Mela. There they fix the date of the Mela and inform the date to all the participator states and villages. The sagarwali, Magrawali and Mayangali Lalung people of Meghalaya prepare the mattress specifically for the Gobha king to sit in the mela. On the other hand Tiwa people of hill area collect the Jhum crops and starting the preparation of mela. People of Plain area also prepare local cake made of rice flour powder with or without coconut granules, sesame, molasses, sugar, fish, salt, kerosene, match boxes, etc for bartering.

Usually Tiwa people started the mela by praying and scarifying in the deosal, a greatly revered shrine of the Tiwas of the area. In the past human sacrifices were conducted to appease the deity of the deosal along with different animals. In 1834 Raja Chatra Singha, the chief of Gobha was arrested by the British for sacrificing human beings in the deosal (Deuri, 1994:32). From that time the Tiwas have abandoned the custom of human sacrifice.

PRIMARY ATTRACTIONS OF THE MELA:

a) Barter System:

Although in the present economic scenario barter becomes almost obsolete, this traditional system is one of the primary attractions of the Jonbeel mela. This is a traditional gathering with a traditional mode of trading. The bartering takes place early in the morning in the mela days. The principal object of barter are arum, ginger, turmeric, medicinal plants, leafy vegetables, bamboo shoots-both fresh and dry, yam, dried fish, local cakes, black pepper, almond, garcinia, lac, myrobalan, khaldhuna (a kind of resin, raw cotton, chilly, rock-salt, black-salt etc. The hill Tiwas come to the mela with their jhum produces (Arum, ginger, turmeric, leafy vegetables, yam, lac etc), jungle products (bamboo shoots-both fresh and pounded dried, medicinal plants, etc), dried fish etc, and exchange those with the local cakes made of rice flour powder with or without coconut granules, sesame, molasses, sugar, fish, salt, kerosene, match boxes, etc, offered by the plains Tiwas. The things that the hill people procure here are used to celebrate their feasts up in the hills.



Fig 1: People are trading in Barter System

b)Cock Fight:

The 'cock fighting' is an interesting folk game. The plain Karbis, Tiwa, Kachari etc. tribes play this folk game. This folk game is an important part of the folk customs of plain Karbis. Usually in this game, two owners place their gamecock in the cockpit. The cocks fight until ultimately one of them dies or is critically injured.



Fig 2: Cock Fight in Jonbeel Mela

The birds are equipped with either metal spurs (called gaffs) or knives, tied to the leg in the area where the bird's natural spur has been partially removed. A cocks spur is a bracelet (often made of leather) with a curved, sharp spike which is attached to the leg of the bird. The spikes typically range in length from "short spurs" of just over an inch to "long spurs" almost two and a half inches long. At last the owner, whose cock wins in the fight, he gets the looser parties cock as gift. The looser bird is called "Ghatou Sarai" in Assamese word.

c) Different types of ethnic food stuff including local wine:

One another primary attraction of the mela is several eateries comprising of varieties ethnic foods. There we can see lots of ethnic food stall of different community like Tiwa, Karbi, Missing, Ahom and Assamese too. Some of the dishes commonly available in the mela are smoke pork, jhum rice, smoke fish, smoke crab, meat and rice in bamboo tube, smoked arum, Smoked lobster etc.



Fig 3: Ethnic food stall in Jonbeel mela

Several sweet and meat shop also can be seen in the mela field. Besides these, in one side of the mela field, there are several shops of rice bear (wine) made by local Tiwa, Missing and Karbi, where People visiting the mela enjoy the rice bear with smoke meat or with other snacks.

d) Different types of trading stalls:

In all four days of the fair a big market is held at the fair site. In earlier time, only the local produces were exchanged and sold in the fair. But the market now-a-days exhibits furniture like bedstead, table, box, articles like quilt, mattress, sweets and traditional cloths and so on. Old war implements like swords, Rhine-hide shields, one

or two small canon and spears are also exhibited.

Now-a-days the organizers have allowed random traders to set up extra shops in the Mela ground as well as along the road that approaches the ground. Those familiar sights that we see on any random fair including a Ferris wheel, a “maut ka kuan”, a mini-circus, a Bollywood inspired titillating dance show (Chitrahaar) and shops selling electronics and factory made apparels and utensils are all present.

e) Cultural events and different speech in the temporary Assembly stage:

In Jonbeel Mela Tiwa and other tribe perform their various folk performances to express their happiness as well as to praise their King Gobha Raja. This time some artists have performed Bagurumba dance, Bihu Dance, Missing bihu dance, Maifatala Nitya (dance), Barat Nitya (dance), Godalporia Barat Nitya (dance) and Moinari Kanthi Nitya (dance).



Fig 4: A view of Cultural programs in Jonbeel Mela

Maifatala Nitya or dance is associated with the agricultural practice of Tiwas which followed by Maifatala song. These dance and song performance focused the main occupation of this tribe or the importance of agriculture in Tiwa community.

The fair always ends with a traditional durbar held by the titular Gobha Raja. They organize this durbar in temporary assembly stage and discussed lots of things. This time even Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi attended the durbar as a special guest.

The three days Agenda of the Mela:

The first day of mela, the hilly tiwa people come down walking to mela place with all their luggage on a huge concourse and makes temporary shelters in makeshift huts covered with paddy stubbles to procure pithas or cakes, dried fish, vegetables, medicinal herbs and so on by bartering with ginger, turmeric, arum, and such things that they themselves produce. Some of them make fictitious kinship relationship with the village people and stays in their



Fig 5: Community fishing in Jonbeel

home while the rest of people stay in the mela field only by making temporary shelter of paddy stubble. The people come down walking about twenty miles or so. However Now-a-days mela committee arrange vehicle for the participant village or states. On the other hand various traders also start to come from different place of Assam. Brass boll-metal Traders from Barpeta, Nalbari, Sarthebari, Sualkuchi, Cloth traders from Guwahati, Sualkuchi, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Dhakuwakhana, Nagaon, wood traders from Dhuburi, Goalpara, Barhampur, Dhekiajuli, Samuguri are get together in the mela. The members of the mela committee and the ministers of the Gobha king help to arrange all the commercial shops in a discipline manner. A conference hall is setup in the mela hiding the Kharbill for the Gobha king and the assembly for the purpose of meeting and cultural programme. As soon as the night came, cultural programs are started by the hill and plain Tiwa people with their traditional folk and modern songs.

Next day, Mela starts in the early morning about at 3 or 4am. On this day all the trading system happen through the barter system till 10-11 AM of the day. On this day, people from the plain area come to the mela in a huge concourse to exchange their produced things with the hilly people already campaigned in the Mela. Hilly and Plain area People used to call each other in the mela as Mama-Bhagin based on the relation of Langbor king and Jayantiya king. Same day fishing is conducted in jonbeel under the vigilance of the chief official's of the king and tributary kings and organizes a community feast on the bank of jonbeel. There is a traditional rule to sing "Lalilang" song during fishing by all male/female participants. A small quantity of the catch is taken by each of the participants, one portion is given to the Gobha chief, and another portion is kept for bartering. The lion's share of the catch is utilized for the community feast held in the site of the fair place for the honour of the chieftains, their officials, and the other guests. The king participates in the feast and discusses various administrative related topics. Second day also, the mela people organize some cultural events and resounding the whole night by various folk and western programs.

The third day of the mela is same as the normal Mela. No barter system happens on this day. On this day, the Gobha king with his ministerial followers and the tributary kings come and joined in the temporary assembly house. Same day, there is a rule to collect taxes periodically for the kings according to their designation from all the commercial traders or shops in the mela. During tax collection also, there can be seen some Tiwa traditional dance singing their Lalilang song by a group of Tiwa people. Today only, Gobha chief gives the permission to all the people for fishing openly in the beel and community fishing is held in the water sources of a vast area. Take fishing is conducted in the Jonbeel, kharbeel, Thakur Durgabeel and Amolbeel, where thousands of villagers irrespective of age and sex, simultaneously takes part. The community fishing is done under the vigilance of an official (Nga pathla bishia) of the Gobha chief.

Usually everyday there are some cultural programs in the Mela but the closing ceremony in this day turned out to be more colorful because of more numbers of cultural function, where traditional dances were performed by the local tribes. One of the chief attractions of that day was the Bagoorumba dance performed by beautiful Bodo girls.

With music and dance, the atmosphere turned even more cheerful and finally the three day long fair came to an end.

CONCLUSION:

The age-old Jonbeel Mela is acting like a powerful catalyst in establishing a warm and sincere relationship among the hill Tiwas and the plain Tiwas. It also established a cordial relationship among the people of different caste and creed. Festivals are the external expression of behavior. In community fishing integral to the Jonbeel fair a good number of villagers from far and near irrespective of age and sex take part wholeheartedly. They do not grab the entire catch and obeying the primordial custom they offer the lion's share of the fishes to arrange the community feast. The Tiwas coming from distant areas visit the houses of local people. Some of such people have established the fictitious kinship relations with some households of the local Tiwas and the Assamese Hindus. The exchange in the fair is not conducted with a motive of gaining but done for merry-making, and to create a congenial environment among the people of different racial and cultural identity. In present years the mela is overcrowded by a good number of unindigenous traders; these scrupulous traders

stealthily seek the opportunities to deceive the honest hill Tiwas by giving a few sugar candy (batacha), a cup of puffed rice (muri), or such cheap products taking big amount of ginger, turmeric, etc. The government, NGO's and the local socio-cultural organizations of Marigaon should keep a cautious vigil to stop such malpractice for keeping praiseworthy flavor of the mela. Now-a-days the foreign tourists also take part in the jonbeel mela. The fair could be said that jonbeel mela has created a congenial environment to spread the feeling of universal brotherhood amidst the environment of suspicion malice, and insurgency.

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