

### **Jonbeel Mela in Assam: The Only Existing Barter-Market of India**

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#### **Abstract**

*In the North-Eastern hills of India, is an unexplored slice of paradise. Assam is a melting pot of various indigenous tribes and ethnic cultures. The Tiwas or the Lalungs are one of the significant communities of Assam. The Gobha raja belongs to a Tiwa clan and his territory covers more or less the Tiwa cultural realm. Gobha is mentioned in the Buranjis, since the early 18th century, as an important market for the trade between Assam, and the Jaintia Kingdom. These two powerful neighbours have since been competing to keep Gobha principality under their authority, with varying success. The historical role of Gobha and the Tiwas as mediators between plains and hills in Central Assam is enacted every year during an old fair, the Jonbeel mela. Jonbeel mela is perhaps the only occasion that brings the barter system alive in India today. Money is literally no object during the three-day-long community fair at Jonbeel, near Guwahati, which brings thousands of people from the hills and plains of the North-east together for a barter fest once a year. Though Assam has often been regarded as 'Dark-Magical Prohibited Corner' of India by many and its inhabitants as 'backward', what people tend to miss is the unexplored bright and radiant Assam which is full of grand history, culture, tradition and living.*

*Jonbeel mela though is a community-centered fair and festival today, its significance and origin is immensely rich. This treasure is undoubtedly not discovered and hence neither celebrated nor conserved or preserved by the people of India and abroad, except the tribal community themselves. This is an event which has socio-political-economic-cultural impact on the society of Tiwa tribes and Assam and hence adds to the Cultural Heritage of not just Assam but India. Proper knowledge of the same will not only help us take pride in it but will encourage policy-makers and Government to take necessary steps to expand and keep the only existing Barter-system alive for long. However, more research and measures on the part of the state, academics and industry is crucial to attain this objective.*

**Keywords:** Tiwa, Assam, Jonbeel Mela, Barter Trade, Cultural Preservation.

In the North-Eastern hills of India, is an unexplored slice of paradise. Assam is a melting pot of various indigenous tribes and ethnic cultures. The Tiwas or the Lalungs are one of the significant communities of Assam. The Tiwas belong to the Mongoloid community and to the China-Tibetan linguistic communities as regards anthropological and linguistic perspectives respectively. They speak one of the twelve languages belonging to the Bodo linguistic family. The historical background of the migration of the Mongoloid community in Assam cannot be determined exactly. Probably, the migration of the Mongoloid people occurred in the North-Eastern region of India 2000 years before the birth of Christ. Tiwa people are closely associated with the principality of Gobha. The Gobha raja belongs to a Tiwa clan and his territory covers more or less the Tiwa cultural realm. Gobha is mentioned in the Buranjis since the early 18th century, as an important market for the trade between Assam, and the Jaintia Kingdom. These two powerful neighbours have since been competing to keep Gobha principality under their authority, with varying success. The historical role of Gobha and the Tiwas as mediators between plains and hills in Central Assam is enacted every year during an old fair, the Jonbeel mela.

**Etymology of 'Jonbeel Mela':**

Jonbeel Mela originates from the coronation ceremony of Langbor (Gogoi, Lokeswar : 1987 : 48-99).

Langbor was coronated as the King of Gobha after seven days back of general Magh Bihu festival of Assam. Initially the anniversary of this coronation day was celebrated at Phulaguri. But, in the time of King Joon Sing the venue of this festival was transferred to a place, which was situated in the midst of the Kingdom. There was a beel also, on which bank the particular day was celebrated. From the name of 'Joon Sing' the beel as well as the festival or Mela got their names 'Jonbeel' and 'Jonbeel Mela' respectively (Gogoi, Lokeswar : 1987 : 49, Deka Hareswar : 1992 : 16).

If the terms 'Jonbeel' and 'Jonbeel Mela' derive from 'Joon Sing', what name does the beel initially bear is not known. But it is true that the Gobha King and his grantees have been arranging an annual feast on the bank of the beel from the time immemorial. In this context, the family members of the Gobha King describe that once the queen too desired to take part in that feast. She was amazed to see, the beauty of the beel and incidentally lost her 'Jonbiri' (an ornament) there. As the queen lost her 'Jonbiri' there, she named the beel as 'Jonbeel'. Of course, she might be highly impressed by enjoying the beauty of the 'Joon' (Moon) that reflects on the water of the beel and was inspired to prefer the name. It can be pointed out that Jonbeel was preferred as venue not because of its existence in the midst of the Kingdom, because Jonbeel is not in the middle position of the Kingdom. It is only because of its existence by the side of Jagi Chauki.

### **Political Background Leading to its Emergence:**

The Kachari and Jayantiyas were two formidable and indomitable rivals of the Ahoms from the very inception. The Kachari Kingdom was extended up to the river Dikhou in the East and the Western boundary extended up to the river Kalang including some parts of present Nagaon district. Ahoms had faced series of attacks from both the tribes that disrupted the smooth functioning of the administration. It was also the time many foreign forces, after sensing the inner turmoiled state of Assam, were trying to slip in and become the absolute ruling power of the state. Afraid of further foreign invasion and observing the unsubmissive character of the Jayantiyas, Siva Simha thought it better to cultivate friendly relation with them by opening up marts and markets. With this intension Siva Simha dismissed the Patra Barphukan from his seat of Barphukanship and appointed the Sarujana Duara as Barphukan. Then the 'dolois' of Gobha, Nellie, Khola and the King of Dimarua on behalf of the Jayantiya King ceaselessly appealed for liat' (Mart) at Jagi Chauki.

### **About the Mela:**

Jonbeel mela is perhaps the only occasion that brings the barter system alive in India today. Money is literally no object during the three-day-long community fair at Jonbeel, near Guwahati, which brings thousands of people from the hills and plains of the North-east together for a barter fest once a year.

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 of 18 bighas (1 acre = 3.025 bighas), composed of land and water bodies. The Mela is started by offering prayers and sacrifice 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 'mamamami' 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, 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. However narratives reveal that 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 24000 (2000 per month).

### **Significance of Jonbeel Mela:**

During the medieval time the Gobha kingdom was an open ground of marts and markets. Favourable geographical location endowed it with abundant fish, forests with valuable trees, bamboos, medicinal plants and animals so on and so forth. Due to the abundance of forests and agricultural products various crafts and industries like pottery, bamboo and cane works, weaving etc, also grew up which were in need of marts and markets to sale their products. Further hill Tiwas practicing Jhum cultivation and plain Tiwas practising settled cultivation were interdependent upon each other because they were not self sufficient and neither the people of the hills nor the plains could produce everything they need or want. These made marts and markets inevitable. Thus, to fulfil the needs of the people marts and markets were gradually established. Further Gobha kingdom, as was subordinate to the Jaintia kingdom, did not have the authority to mint coin. Due to lack of currency system, people had to depend upon barter. Poor communication system also compelled them to depend upon barter system. (Kakati. 2010).

However in the contemporary time, the erstwhile existing constraints which compelled people to depend on barter have almost disappeared. Monetary transactions have begun to dominate market, and communication system has also developed to a certain extent. Yet economic importance of the Mela cannot be completely ruled out. Narratives reveal that both the people from the hills as well as the plains see the Mela as a hub, where they can, in a convenient way procure all their necessary things in one go and that too at an affordable price. In addition to this, the people involved in the Barter also try to get the best bargain out of this exchange. For them it is an opportunity to get things produced either in the hills or plains at a lesser cost.

This Mela or Fair has an inherent religious significance as after bartering off their products in the Mela, they take fish, pitha etc, from here and offer a special prayer which is expecting and wishing well being of the members of their family and community with those things in the hills. Again, the 'Nowan festival' celebrated by the Gobha King which is the annual feast after the harvest with the commodities is celebrated by the money he collects during his visit

to this Mela in form of taxes. Hence this ritual indeed has an underlying economic and cultural significance too. This also makes the mela a significant event which continues even today. Another noteworthy significance of this festival is the idea of Universal Brotherhood which comes up with the 'Agni Puja' or fire worship performed before the mela begins. It is for the well being of the mankind. The significant point of this mela is its theme of harmony and brotherhood amongst various tribes and communities.

### **Conclusion:**

Though Assam has often been regarded as 'Dark-Magical Prohibited Corner' of India by many and its inhabitants as 'backward', what people tend to miss is the unexplored bright and radiant Assam which is full of grand history, culture, tradition and living.

Jonbeel mela though is a community-cantered fair and festival today, its significance and origin is immensely rich. This treasure is undoubtedly not discovered and hence neither celebrated nor conserved or preserved by the people of India and abroad, except the tribal community themselves. This is an event which has socio-political-economic-cultural impact on the society of Tiwa tribes and Assam and hence add to the Cultural Heritage of not just Assam but India. Proper knowledge of the same will not only help us take pride in it but will encourage policy-makers and Government to take necessary steps to expand and keep the only existing Barter-system alive for long.(Getz, 2008) highlights the importance of event management as "a fast growing professional field in which tourists constitute a potential market for planned events and the tourism industry has become a vital stakeholder in their success and attractiveness" (p.403). Different events enable to boost the tourists' inflow to destinations characterized by a seasonal tourism industry. Felsenstein& Fleischer (2003) also states promotion of a festival as a tourist attraction usually means public sector assistance. Infusing effective management practices in the whole course of managing the event would enable better use of resources and also ensure the adequate participation of the stakeholders and their rightful outcomes. Further, appropriate event management attempts to manage Jonbeel Mela can result in transforming this community event into a major festival of the state followed by global recognition. However, more research and measures on the part of the state, academics and industry is crucial to attain this objective.

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