

# **Bohua Dance: A Unique Performing Art Of The Sonowal Kachari Tribe Of Assam**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Folklorist Richard Dorson has divided Folklore into four categories. Oral Literature, Material Culture or Physical Folk life, Social Folk Customs and Folk Performing Art. Folk Performing Art is an important sector of Folklore and Folk life. This sector concerns primarily traditional music, drama and dance. The area of folkdance is very vast. Most of the time they go together and share many important characteristics (Sen 2014). According to regions, occupations and caste folk dances differ in form and rhythm.

People of a particular region, community, class or clan dance in a specific manner and the dance form is a reflection of their traditional way of life. The spontaneous performances of the dancers are seen in a folk dance. They dance effortlessly and with great ease. The Folk dance forms are an integral part of the religious beliefs, customs and traditions.

Here in this paper an attempt has been made to study and know about a unique folk dance of the Sonowal Kacharis, a plain Scheduled tribe of Assam.

## **Objectives of the paper:**

- To know about the folk dance of the Sonowal Kachari tribe of Assam
- To highlight the customs and traditions related to the performance of this dance form.

## **Methodology:**

Both primary and secondary data has been used for the collection of study. For primary data field work has been carried out in Dhamalgaon area of Dibrugarh District. Participant observation method and interview method has been adopted for the study of this topic. Books, journals and other printed materials are used to get collect data on this topic.

## **About the tribe:**

The Sonowal Kacharis who live mostly in the Brahmaputra Valley belong to the great Bodo group. They nostalgically trace their close relationship with the Burmans of Cachar, Dimasas of North Cachar. It is believed that the prefix Sonowal in the name of the tribe came to be used during the

reign of the Ahom Kings when the Kacharis in the Brahmaputra Valley took to the trade of gold washers (Thakur1972).

Regarding the origin of the Sonowal Kacharis the history is almost silent. Rev. Sidney Endle has stated that the origin of the Kachari race is still very largely a matter of conjecture and inference, in the absence of anything entitled to be regarded as authentic history. In feature and general appearance they approximate very closely to the Mongolian type, and this would seem to point to Tibet and China as the original home of the race. (Endle 1997). As mentioned in the Mouthpiece of the All Assam Sonowal Kachari Students Union, Second Issue by Sonowal, the Kacharis are one of the prominent tribal groups who are called as the original autochthons of Assam. According to the Epic Mahabharata and Manusmriti, they were earlier known as 'Kirata' and Khastriya' respectively. It may however, be noted that the 'Kirata' is a general term referring to the people of the Mongoloid origin especially the Bodos of Assam (Sonowal 1987).

It can be understood from the above statements that the Sonowal Kacharis can be said to be an integral part of the great Kachari race, which is found scattered in the districts of Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Golaghat.

The use of the term Sonowal also has many explanations and opinions. Some authors opine that the Kacharis who worked with gold were known as Sonowals. Sonowals were expert in collecting gold particles from the sands of the river Subansiri (Bordoloi & Thakur 1988). L. A. Waddel has written, "The Sonowal or Sadiyals are mostly gold washer of the Lakhimpur District of Assam" (Waddel 2000). Another opinion is that during the reign of Ahom King Gadadhar Singha, Kacharis living in Sadiya region used to offer gold at the altar of Keshadeo Gossai of Auniati satra. Coming under the influence of Vaishnavism this segment of Kacharis eventually came to be known as Sonowals. (Sonowal 2015). Oral literature says that the Badu honoloy group established their territory named as Hemali or Halali (Chatterji 1974). This territory was situated in and around Sadiya and along the bank of the Subansiri River, and these people came to be known as the Sonowal. Legends prevalent among the Sonowal Kacharis tell that either Ban Raja or some other contemporary king of his time had four sons (Chatterji 1974).

The Sonowal Kacharis are very rich in their traditions, rituals and practices, oral traditions, material culture and performing arts. All these make the Sonowal Kachari tribe to be different from other tribal group. Some of the folk practices such as Baithou Puja, Swaragdeo Puja, Hogra dance, Haidang Geet, Huchari Geet, Bohua Nritya etc. has given a unique identity among the tribes of Assam.

#### **About the origin of Bohua dance:**

There are many narratives regarding the origin of the Bohua Dance. One such story related to this dance is that the marriage of Lord Shiva and Sati, the daughter of King Daksha, the Kingdom of

Daksha was in a very chaotic situation. There was no peace at all. So the King offered a jagya i.e. offering and worship so that everything would be well in his kingdom. The King invited all the Kings of his nearby kingdoms along with the gods and goddesses. But he did not invite Lord Shiva and Parvati. Having the information of the Yagya, Parvati insisted that she will go to the Yagya. So Lord Shiva permitted her to go there. When Parvati was present in the Yagya everyone greeted her and welcomed her. But her father furied at her unwelcome visit and said bad about Lord Shiva. She was not able to tolerate all these. She was not in her senses and laid her body there. When this information reached Shiva, he couldn't tolerate to see the body of Parvati lying down dead there. He was furious and a drop of sweat fell down in the ground. From that drop of sweat, a brave man named Virbhadra, emerged. Virbhadra with the permission of Shiva destroyed the rituals and practices of the Yagya and the gods and goddesses who were present there were badly insulted by the brave man. King Daksha was beheaded and his head was thrown into the pyre of the Yagya. The wife of Daksha prayed to Lord Shiva to give back the life of her husband. Lord Shiva then replaced the head of the king with a goat's head, which was offered in the Yagya. Getting back the life of her husband both the King and the Queen started dancing. While dancing their clothes were not in proper manner. So the banana leaves which were used in the Yagya were given them to cover their body. This is why banana leaves are worn by the Bohua and Bohuani while performing the Bohua Dance.

**Instruments used:** Mridongo, Taal, Dhol, Pepa, Baahi, Bhur Taal

**Costumes:**

The body of Bohua and Bohuani is covered by split banana leaves. Mask made of outer shell of dried gourd and a group accompany them. The group which accompany them are painted in black and wear banana leaves like a dress. A group of People perform Bihu Dance along with this group.

**Folk belief associated with the dance:**

The Sonowal Kacharis believe that the celebration of Bohua dance eradicates any kind of misfortunes in the life of the villagers. This also helps in the good production of crops for that year. They have a belief that there will be no rainfall during the performance of the Bohua Dance. It can be said that the Sonowal Kachari consider this dance to be a sacred occasion and offer prayer and worship for the wellbeing of the people of that region.

**Performance of the Bohua dance:**

Bohua Dance is performed in the month of Bohag, the first month of the Assamese calendar. On the seventh day of the bohag month this dance is performed in various places of Assam. The preparation for this dance is done few days prior to the performance of Bohua. They offer prayer under a tree before the performance starts. The Bohua and Bohuani remain in fasting from the previous day. The performance of Bohua begin with the emergence of the Bohua and Bohuani accompanied by musical instruments. The place for the performance of the dance is often an open

space where people from the neighbouring areas could come and enjoy the performance. Women are restricted from entering into the Bohuatholi, i.e. the place where the performance take place. Along with the Bohuas some 'onusors' group which accompany them laugh at them and there is a tradition that the Bohuas beat the Onusors(evil spirit) with sticks of the banana leaves. The whole group move around the open space. A group performs Bihu along with this group by wearing traditional attires. They show their respect by bowing to the elderly people and the audience and go out of the place of performance by the same way that they entered. From this place they immediately go to a pond or a river which is near to their place and dip themselves in water to wash away the ills and the evils. They also believe that the performers should open the knot of their dress in a single breathe and change their dress and return back without looking back.

As soon as the Bohuas come out from the place of performance an elderly women sing,'

Agoloi saba pasoloi nasaba  
Oi Bohua Gurudeo Agoloi diba khuj  
Agoloi diba khuj

Which means, Bohuas please do not see back, see to your front.

The accompanied group leaves the thorns and leaves of berry plant on their way back. This symbolizes that they are restricting the entry of any evil and ghostly spirit into their village, so that the villagers will stay in peaceful state. The celebration of Bohua Dance ends with merrymaking. They end the day with a feast.

The celebration and performance of the Bohua is still there in various places of Assam. With the passage of time some slight changes have been observed with regards to the costumes. But the customs and the manner in which they originally performed the dance is still there. This dance is performed in Dhamalgaon of Dibrugarh, Nahoroni of Khowang, Laina Gaon of Tinsukia, Bhebeli of Dhemaji, Bihpuria and Boginadi of Lakhimpur.

The unique form of dance performed by the Sonowal Kacharis is a rare form of art and this represents their socio-cultural identity. Efforts have been taken to continue with their tradition and preserve the unique art form in its original form.

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