

Agricultural Knowledge Sharing through Indigenous Communication Systems: Insights from Ethnic Communities

Abstract

Developing countries like India are having latest method of communication, but their effective utilization by people who are less exposed is doubtful. In those rural areas indigenous means of communication still play a vital role in social functioning, maintenance and social change. A study with descriptive research design was conducted in the Dhemaji district of Assam for which an interview schedule was developed and data were collected through personal interview technique, followed by a camera to document the content and style of folk media among the selected 100 respondents belonging to the ethnic groups of Ahom, Kachari, Mising and Deori in Dhemaji district of the state. The findings of the study revealed that the different traditional folk media prevalent among the selected ethnic groups were Folk songs (Bihu, Oi:nitom), Folk dances (Log, Gumrag), Festivals (Bihu, Ali-Aye-Ligang), Folk theatres like Bhaona and different proverbs, idioms and riddles related to agriculture. The study further revealed that majority of the respondents used folk songs, folk dances, proverbs, festivals, fair regularly and it was found popular and effective for agricultural communication. The findings of the present study hold a great potential in the field of communication research as well as for planning and dissemination of need based information among rural families for agricultural development.

Keywords: Agriculture, Ethnic Groups, Folk Media, Indigenous Communication

Introduction

Communication plays a vital role in the process of development of a nation. Communication is believed to be the life stream of every society. In every human society there are various forms and channels of communication which are deeply rooted in the culture, characterize its existence and passed down from generation to generation. These channels and forms of communication are known as Indigenous/Traditional Folk Media. It refers to "People's Events," such as village folk dance, rural drama, and musical variety. This term applies to certain types of performance art that have become cultural

icons for people. They were existed much before the arrival of mass media, and still exist today as an important tool of communication in different parts of the world despite changes (Wang and Dissanayake, 1982).The desire to express different feelings and to communicate certain situations our fore fathers must have created these forms of communication through which they can exchange message and share common ideas. These are the indigenous tool that exist in the form of traditional music, theatre, dance and puppetry each with distinct characteristics in every society and are based on sound, image and sign languages.Folk media can be used to conserve and disseminate messages in a vibrant manner as well as to pass on the ideals and culture of our forefathers to future generations.They are significant because they are used for moral, religious and socio political reasons. For both literate and illiterate rural masses, they are personal and familiar reliable means of communication. It also serves to convey the internal feelings of the group and to reflect social identity (Bayable,2020).Folk media has a true position in the field of media communications because of its uniqueness and practical existence. Folk-media-mediated communication (FMC) is extremely important for development communication(Iyyanar and Chelladurai, 2019).

The importance of indigenous communication systems originates from the fact that they address local interests and problems in the language and idioms that the audience is familiar with and understands better. These indigenous channels of communication as informal interaction plays an important role in influencing people to change and can trigger development in the rural areas. The traditional media mainly targets rural people because 70 per cent of them live in remote rural areas of the country with little or no access to mass communication networks. They believe that the folk media's message communication is very straightforward, concentrated, and combined with local dialect and entertainment (Mathiyazhaganet al. 2015). No doubt, rural people find radio and television initially very fascinating, but they understand ideas, about family planning, hygiene, agricultural technologies and rural development more when the topics are expressed in a medium familiar to them. Farmers are more likely to comprehend agricultural knowledge if it is transmitted by conventional media. Since he/she is accustomed to receiving information in that manner, the message becomes more accurate (Rathore, 1975). In order to reach closer to the rural masses, it is important to touch their responsibilities and duties. Indigenous communication is important in locating location-specific solutions to challenges based on the microclimate of the farm family, access to land, and accessible inputs at various seasons of the year (Vineetha et.al., 2023). To make

aware and appeal them it is essential to use their language with appropriate dialectical touch (Sultana, 2017).

India has always been known for its traditional arts and crafts, which represent its cultural and traditional vibrancy. Every area of India has its own folk art style and pattern (Sharma, 2015). Researches in rural areas have shown that rural communities need to be properly developed in order to create the basic awareness for appreciation and participation in any communication process. It is necessary to establish a traditional knowledge management network that includes numerous stakeholders, including traditional knowledge scholars, traditional knowledge institutions, indigenous people, and communication specialists, in order to ensure long-term traditional knowledge communication (Mahesh, 2023). No communication strategies would be complete unless it includes the traditional folk media, which must rank alongside the more commonly accepted channel of communication. Every Indian state has its own unique cultures, customs as well as its own traditional folk media and Assam is no different. People used to celebrate their joy of sowing or harvesting the crop with traditional music, dance, or both, such as Baisakhi in Punjab or Bihu in Assam, which is practiced during paddy harvesting. This region's rich cultural legacy is still preserved and portrayed through folklore, folk music, local paintings, and so on (Bhalerao *et.al.*, 2016). As a result, it is required to determine what forms of traditional folk media exist in society, what their content/message is, how prominent they are in society, how they are used in society, their role in rural growth and how important their content is in the modern stage. The systematic use of Indigenous Communication systems in development efforts is now widely known, but only a few studies have been conducted on the subject. Thus, it is in this context and background that a study entitled “Agricultural Knowledge Sharing through Indigenous Communication Systems: Insights from Ethnic Communities” was planned to document various indigenous communication systems related to agriculture in the local community.

Methodology

Dhemaji district of Assam was purposively selected for the study, as the researcher was familiar with the area, local language, history, values, and attitudes. Out of the 5 blocks two blocks viz. “Machkhowa” and “Bordoloni” block was selected based on cultural diversities. The two selected blocks comprises 51 and 201 in habitat villages respectively

and only two villages were chosen from each of the two blocks resulting in 4 villages total. The selected villages with ethnic groups are viz. Gohain Bilotia (Ahoms), Begenegora (Misings), BorbamDeori (Deoris) and Borbam Gaon (Sonowal Kacharis). A list of farmers was compiled from each village based on farming and usage of folk media. Every list had 25 respondents including both male and female, resulting in a total sample size of 100 for the study. Since, some traditional folk media are done solely by women so both male and female respondents were chosen for the study. For data collection, an interview schedule was created in English and Assamese that included both structured and open-ended questions. Personal interviews were used to gather information and also camera was used to document the various folk media existed in the selected ethnic groups.

Results and Discussion

Documentation of various Indigenous Communication Systems related to Agriculture in the local community of selected Ethnic Groups

The various indigenous communication systems related to agriculture were identified from the local community during the data collection and it was documented as follows.

1. Folk Songs

Songs of Seasonal and Agricultural activities

- 1.1 **Bihu songs:** Bihu songs are sung mainly during the time of Bohagbihu. They are the most distinctive type of folk songs of Assam, both for their literary contents and for their musical mode. Bihu songs describe the beauty of nature, their beloved, glorify the youth and also represent frustration and sorrow. Some bihu songs also take the pride of representing contemporary issues, agricultural activities as well as history like freedom movement, attainment of independence and the like. The physical feature of the land, hills and rivers, especially Brahmaputra is also reflected in bihu songs. These bihu songs are enjoyed by all age groups.
- 1.2 **Oi-nitom:** The most popular folk songs among the Mising people is “Oi-Nitom” which refers to love songs through which the lovers express and exchange their romantic thoughts over the love affairs and communicate to each other secretly or openly. ‘Oi’ signifies love and affection, ‘Ni’ meaning to console or lull and ‘tom’

refers to one who is consoled and lulled. The songs (Ni:tom) are also known as 'BrirogNi:tom'. The meaning of BrirogNi:tom is the festive songs. These songs are enjoyed by Misings of all ages because of their rich imagination and soothing melody. They are very rich in imagery and other figures of speech. The extempore composition of these songs reflects the socio-cultural life of the people (Dipen, 2017).

1.3. Bisugeet: Deoris are mad for Bisuthus they have abundance of bisugeetin their disposal. Before the 20th century, the men and women folk separately used to perform siribisuor night bisu for the whole month of April, in the big courtyard of any villagers houses (Deori, 2009). The themes of bisugeets revolve around love, likings amongst youths, traces the societal norms, codes and lives of women of the Deoris.

2. Folk Dances

The Bihu dance is a traditional Assamese folk dance associated with the Bihu festival and is an important aspect of Assamese culture. Bihu dancers are mainly young men and women who perform in a group and the dancing style is characterised by quick steps and rapid hand movements. The traditional attire of the dancers is bright and centred on the red colour motif, which represents excitement and energy. Bihu dance is meant to honour and reflect the spirit of the season, with a focus on fertility and love. The association of the Bihu dance with fertility refers to both human fertility (sensual aspect of the dance) and natural fertility (celebration of spring and the embracing of the life-giving spring rain). The usage of instruments like drums and horn pipes is thought to imitate the sound of rain and thunder, as a way to provoke a real-life performance (Debasis, 2015).

The "Gumrag" so:man also called as "GumragPakach" is a dance form seen in the study area associated with the harvest festival "Ali-aye-ligang". In this dance form both young boys and girls participate for the praying of their holistic local deity for better harvesting. After the rituals of sowing are done, the young men and women dance "GumragPakach" in a circle. They participate in this event wearing traditional attire and perform Bihu songs, Oi ni:tom or Aaliaay. In the Bihu of Ali-Aye-Ligang, importance is given to the dance than the songs as in this Bihu performance, the female dancers represent various activities like hunting, fishing, reaping crops, weaving etc. The beats of the drums performed in this dance form are different from that of other festivals (Dipen, 2017). According to the popular belief, if Gumrag is not performed or Borkanh (Bel metal instrument) is not played in Ali-Aye-Ligang, the seeds do not grow.

Leseri Dance is a mix performance of song and dance which is one of the remarkable assets of the cultural life of Sonowal Kachari tribe. By leg movement in rhythm, woman of Sonowals dance and sing songs (Chetia, 2018). As the left over in the field of the paddy cultivation is known as “Leseri” in Assamese, similar to this the selected portion of the songs of Sonowal Kacharis are rearranged and the woman gather under a tree with traditional attire perform dance and sing these selected songs (Barooah,2020). The main purpose of these singing and dancing is to awaken the mother earth for production of paddy grains in the New Year.

3. Proverbs

Proverbs (Dakor boson) are one of the important verbal forms that act as an expression to communicate and to spread moralities and traditions. They are short, commonly understood folk sentences that embody knowledge, truth, values and traditional ideas in memorisable form which are handed over generation to generation (Saikia, 2017). Although proverbs are created by unknown composer, they throw glimpses on different places like agricultural management, social conduct, patriotism, superstitions, status of women, medical remedies, etc.

Proverbs related to agricultural activities

3.1. *“Uttaregajilejaniba khor, Dhokhinegajilemariba lor,*

Pube gajilejaniba paan, Paschimegajilejanibabaan.”

(Meaning: If there is lightning on the northern side, it indicates drought; Run for cover, if it is on the southern side; if it’s on the eastern side, there will be a good production of betel vine; and if it’s on the western side, there will be flood.)

3.2. *“Ame baan Kothale dhan”.*

(Meaning: If the bearing of mango is very high, flood is almost certain whereas if jackfruit bearing is more, bumper harvest of rice is predicted.)

3.3. *“Puhath ahu jethatsali, Tebe janibagrihasthali.”*

(Meaning: That is a proper household which sows Ahuin December & January and Sali in May & June.)

3.4. *“Pube hanh, pachime banh, Uttaregua, dakhinedhowa.”*

(Meaning: This verse refers that on the eastern part of the household, the duck-rearing house should be constructed while planting of bamboo should be done on the western side. It was suggested to plant areca nut on the northern side while on the southern side one should dug a pond for rearing fishes and also it will act as a source of water for washing and cleaning.)

3.5. “*Ahin katitrakhibapani, Jenekoiraakherojai rani.*”

(Meaning: A king provides all the comforts and adores his queen with many ornaments. Similarly, the farmers must keep water in the rice field until Aahin/Kati (October/November), when panicle initiation of long-duration, photoperiod-sensitive Sali rice occurs.

3.6. “*Ahu rubakhujot buri, Sali ruba begot juri.*”

(Meaning: Ahu paddy (autumn rice) should be planted in ankle deep water rice while Sali (winter rice) must be planted 5 inches apart for the best growth.)

4. Riddles related to Agriculture

Riddles are short speech often said in social gathering which is metaphorical in nature, humorous contents giving clue regarding the answer asked. Mostly riddles are related with agriculture, nature, human body, food, animals and other types of cultural habits. Some of the prevalent riddles in the area are as follows.

4.1. Plough

“*Jeeva re seleki jai, Tinirmajothodai,
Manuhokdiye, Jiyai thokarupai*”

(Here ‘Jeeva’ means the tongue-shaped sharp iron blade that cuts the ground and prepares it for agriculture. ‘Tinirmajothodai’ means the two cows and a man who are required to plough the land. ‘Manuhokdiye, jiyajithokarupai’ means that the plough helps people to cultivate the ground and provides a way of life.)

4.2. Paddy

“*Muke Kate, Muke mare,
Muke Khai, Jibon tore*”

(Cultivators harvest paddy in the field and bring back to the farm. They clean the crops and store them in a storehouse. They collect rice from paddy and eat to survive.)

4.3. Wheat

*“HaariHaari Guti, Jura Jurapaat,
ThakunuKenekoi, Nukhuwakoitaak”*

(The seeds of wheat are long and slender, with a sharp tip. The seeds are similar to rice in appearance and can be obtained in the same way. As a result, everytime they see it, people desire it.)

4.4. Maize

*“Yaar Suli Pokile Muga, Taar Gaat Bohut Sula,
Sula KhulileDekha Jai, Mukuta Monire Bhora”*

(Inside the top of the cob, there appear some golden hairs. These were originally green in colour, but as they matured they turned golden. Cob is wrapped with several leaves like wearing dress. When the seeds are exposed or undressed, they shine like pearls and gems.)

4.5. Sickle

*“Ajoni Koli Gai,
Haatkhonpotharor Pani Khai”*

(The sickle here resembles a black coloured cow (Koli gai) as it is made of black iron. Only one sickle can cut lot of paddy.)

5. Agricultural based Festivals and Rituals

5.1 Festivals

5.1.1. Bihu: Bihu is a popular festival of Assam which is largely based on agriculture. Bihu marked the symbol of joy, reflects the rich culture of Assamese society and celebrated in each and every corner of the state. ‘Bohag Bihu’, ‘Kaati Bihu’ and ‘Maagh Bihu’ are three types of Bihu observed in three seasons in a year. Bohag or Rongalibihu is the festival of merriment, singing, dancing, expressing love and honour. Bohagbihu is the time when the farmers starts sowing and thus they wish and hope for a good harvest. “Kati Bihu” is the festival of hope which is celebrated to mark rice panicle initiation. “Maagh Bihu” is the festival of harvest with satisfaction after harvesting of grains.

Bohag or Rongali Bihu begins as the welcoming of the Assamese New Year. In Assamese calendar, ‘Bohag’ is the first month and thus, New Year starts from this month. This festival represents the happiness of the society as the term ‘Rongali’ resembles to happiness and celebration. It is started with the Sankranti of Sot and Bohagmonth of Assamese calendar and remains for seven days. With the arrival of spring in the mid of

April, this festival is celebrated with zest and zeal. This festival is also celebrated in Odisha, Bengal, Punjab, Kerala, Tamil Nadu etc. with different names (Pongol in the south and Baisakhi in the north) as this is the first day of Hindu solar calendar. Earlier Bohagbihu was celebrated for seven days together and each day had a different name like Goru Bihu (for cattles), Manuh Bihu (for mankind), Tator Bihu (for loom), Gossain Bihu (for Gods), Nanglor Bihu (for plough), Bihu for domestic animals and Chera Bihu (concluding day of the Bihu). Since, cattle are an important aspect of Indian agriculture, the first day of the Bohag Bihu festival is dedicated to them. In rural areas, men continue to collect important items such as “Tara Pogha” (cattle ropes) made from slices of “Tara” - (an indigenous vine) and vegetables such as raw turmeric, brinjal, and gourd etc. for the cattle. On the eve of Bihu, the ladies clean their clothes, homes and prepare unique bihu delicacies such as “Chira”, “Pitha” etc. which are served to the guests.

Kati Bihu, also known as Kongali Bihu, is an agricultural festival. This festival is celebrated when the rice crops are at growing stage and there is not enough food to eat and the granary is empty hence this bihu is also called as Kongali Bihu (Kongal means Poor). It is mainly performed by the women folks by lighting Saki (earthen mustard oil lamps) in the paddy fields, under the Tulsi plant, Bharal ghar (store house) etc. on the first day “Kati” (seventh month of Assamese calendar). In the rice fields, a particular sort of lamp called as “Akaxh Banti” (Sky candle) is set up high on the points of tall bamboo, which attracts insects and keeps the crops healthy and insect-free. Through this lamp farmers recite spells to ward off negativity and pests in the field and to pray for a good harvest. There is also a belief that this is done to ease the soul of the deceased into the next world.

Magh bihu, also known as Bhogalibihu is a festival of harvest with satisfaction after harvesting of grains. This festival is celebrated on 1st and 2nd Magh (tenth month of the Assamese calendar) usually held on the mid of January (14th-15th January). The young folks on the eve of Magh Bihu build a makeshift cottage called “Bhelaghar” using the hay of the harvest rice fields preferably near a river. They prepare “Meji” (a pile on split fire-wood) in a conical shape of a temple. The entire night (Uruka) is spent around the Meji with people preparing food, singing bihu songs dancing with the beats of “Dhol”, (typical kind of drums) and arrange a community feast. In the next morning, people burn the Meji by taking bath in the river and worship to the fire god. They believe that scattering the ashes of the burned Meji over the fields will boost the fertility of the soil. It

is also claimed that the Meji fire burns out the winter because the event is held when the winter season is nearing to end.

5.1.2. Ali –Aye- Ligang: It is the most significant and colourful festival of the ethnic Mising community celebrated with zest and zeal. Ali-Aye-Ligang is celebrated in the spring season with pomp and grandeur on the first Wednesday of the month ‘*Ginmur*’ as per the Mising almanac (First Wednesday of the month of Fhagun, mostly falls in the month of February all over Assam) when the nature dances in its youthful beauty and joy. ‘Ali’ means roots, ‘Ai’ or ‘Aye’ means seeds or fruits and ‘Ligang’ means first sowing or planting. So the meaning of ‘Ali-ai-li’ gang’ would be first sowing or planting of roots or seeds as the name itself, conspicuously signifies as the festival of the peasant people.

Ali-Aye-Ligang is not only an agricultural festival but also it reflects the socio cultural scenario and religious thought. The invocation of “Sedi –Melo”, “Do:nyi –Polo” accompanied by ritual songs praying to witness the sowing function on the bosom of the mother earth, appealing to her to make the soil fertile without any harmful effect of animal, insects and birds which makes us understand about the religious touch in this festival. Thus this festival is a symbol of greenery, nature and thanks giving to fore fathers. Prayers, dancing, singing are the distinguishing feature of this festival which is celebrated by men and women in the courtyards of every household in the village. Essential food items of this festival include pork, Apong (homemade rice wine), namsing and purang (a kind of sticky rice, boiled and wrapped with wild cardamom leaves). ‘Lilen’ is the last day of the festival which is marked by a community feast.

5.1.3. Po:rag: It is one of socio religious festivals of the Mising community also called as ‘Nora Chiga Bihu’. The festival is celebrated for three days as a post-harvest festival i.e. after complete harvest of Guni Amro (Ahu) crops. The main function of the Po:rag begins on any wednesday after the harvest. Po:rag is celebrated in “Murong” with zest and zeal in front of “Donyi: Polo” and asking for peace and harmony of the village. The Mibu performed all the sacrificial rituals of the festivals. The celebration takes place for around three to four days. Various traditional delicacies like Purangapin(boiled rice on plaintain leaves), PeyredOying(black gram) with pork and PitangOying(rice flour) etc. are prepared during the festival. Apong and pigs are essential food items for the celebration since pork and apong are considered indispensable in various ceremonial functions. Although this festival is not customary, it is a part of the Mising traditional

festivals and it has been found that celebration vary from village to village (Boruah, 2016). It was found that this festival is celebrated when the economic condition of the particular village is stable and the village folks are happy with their harvest.

5.1.4. Bisu: The Deori people observed two major festivals in a year and both the festivals are connected with agricultural activities (Borah, 2020). The first is called “BohagiyoBisu” or Bohag Bihu and the other is “MaghiyoBisu” or Magh Bihu. The Deoris called their Bihu as “Bisu”. “BohagiyoBisu” is the most important festival and they observed this festival for a period of seven days with unlimited joy and happiness. On the first Wednesday of the Bohagmonth, the festival starts and continues till Friday. The Deoricommunity performs Bisu from Wednesday when the sangkrantiof chot(an Assamese month) falls on that day (next to transition of Chot and Bohag). The actual festival begins with the sacrifice of thirteen fowls at the sal (shrine) of the priest in honour of their god Kundi-Mama (Hara-Gauri). On the first day both the young and age old people goes to the house of the chief priest and spend the whole night singing and dancing over there. In the very next morning they go to the river and take common bath and also bath their cattle. This feativel is observed before starting the agricultural operations. Households entertained the guest by providing Suje (rice beer). Young male and female together performed Bisudance by singing different Bihu song at chhaje khula (a middle place of the village). Maghiyobihu is observed in the first Wednesday of the month of Magh. The Maghiyo festival is a grand feast arranged in the premises of Morong attached to the temple wherein fourteen fowls are sacrificed as a ritual activity for the well-being of the villagers. Early in the morning of the next day the youth put fire on in the meji.

5.2 Agriculture based rituals

5.2.1. Narasiga Sabah: It is directly associated with cultivation, which is performed three times in a year- before starting to plough in the paddy field, before collecting the seeds and after finishing the paddy cultivation. It is arranged publicly with a feast in the villages. For the auspicious preparation of paddy cultivation, with a hope of its successful concluding and for the safety of the cow, cowherds and the land of cultivation, it is observed.

5.2.2. NakathiaSisha (Sowing of Paddy Seeds): On the day of first sowing of paddy seeds the Ahoms till today perform Dam puja (worship of the dead) near the main pillar

of the Borghor(kitchen). After the field for sowing seeds was made ready some bunches of bitter flowers (Tita Phool) are planted around the field. The Ahoms believed that in doing so insects and birds could not do any harm to the seeds (Bijoy, 2015). They also put one stone, one chalon and few branches of 'kachu' plants in the field so that the birds cannot enter the field to destroy the seeds. The person who sows the seeds should also be very careful. While sowing seeds if he keeps the seeds tight in his fist then there may occur some trouble at the time of extracting the kathiya (newly grown seedlings). He should also take care that seeds are not sown thickly or thinly.

5.2.3. GuchLuwa (transplanting seedlings): On the day of first transplanting of rice (whether it may be Sali, Ahu or Bao) a ritual is observed which is called GuchLuwa. On that day of GuchLuwathe main house wife of the family goes to the paddy field, made ready for transplanting of rice plants. She takes with her a forepart of a plantain leaf and upon that leaf a pair of thuriatamul (areca nut wrapped in areca leaf), a guava, a bhimkal, (Musa balbisiana) and a branch of a 'helos' tree is kept. The woman prays to Goddess Lakhimito grow their rice in abundance and have seeds just like that of guava or bhimkal. On that very day a kind of family feast is arranged and to that feast men and women who are engaged in transplanting of rice are invited.

5.2.4. Nangal Dhowa (plough washing festival): When the tilling and transplanting works are completed feast is arranged in the family and this function is known as nangaldhowa or plough washing festival. On that day along with the plough, the pair of oxen is also washed very properly. Some of the families on that day, prepare a kind of pitha (e.g. cake) called bhat-pitha or nangaldhowapitha. This pitha is prepared from pithaguri (e.g. rice powder). The rice powder is mixed semi tight with half boiled water and then put in boiling water pressing over by a chalon. The belief attached in this preparation of bhatpitha is that it increases not only the fertility of soil but also of human being.

Conclusion

The indigenous form of communication plays an important role in social functioning, maintenance and social change. It is important to consider ethnic groups current communication structures which come in a variety of shapes and sizes. The above documented indigenous communication systems are very beneficial to farmers as observed and should be further investigated for scientific details. The discovery of these indigenous communication systems would assist extension staff, politicians, scientists

and other interested citizens in developing effective communication methods by integrating modern media with indigenous practices for sustainable agriculture and overall development with active participation of villagers.

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