

Folk Games of Assam: The Buffalo Fights in Assam

Bitapi Bora *¹

¹ PhD Research Scholar, Centre for North East Studies Mahapurush Srimanta
Sankaradeva Viswavidyalaya, Assam;

*Corresponding author email: bitapi.bora@gmail.com

Abstract: Folk games are a significant aspect of traditional cultures, serving as both entertainment and a means of preserving cultural heritage. In Assam, India, these games reflect the people's creativity, their relationship with nature, and their deep-rooted cultural values. This paper explores the variety of folk games in Assam, including Moh Juj, the traditional buffalo fight, which is held during the Magh Bihu festival. Folk games like Kho-Kho, Dhop-Khel, Gella-Chutt, and others, not only provide amusement but also promote physical fitness, cognitive development, and social bonding. While some games, such as egg and bird fights, have faced criticism due to their treatment of animals, they remain an integral part of Assamese culture. The buffalo fight, Moh Juj, has faced increasing opposition due to concerns over animal cruelty and its violation of animal protection laws. Despite the 2014 Supreme Court ban on animal fights, the sport continues to be controversial. The paper emphasizes the importance of finding alternatives to animal-based games while preserving the rich cultural heritage of Assam. It suggests promoting festivals that celebrate cultural traditions without causing harm to animals, thereby creating a balance between cultural preservation and ethical standards.

Citation: Bora, B. (2022). A Folk Games of Assam: The Buffalo Fights in Assam. *Journal of Intellectuals*, 2(1), 51–57. Retrieved from <https://journals.bahonacollege.edu.in/index.php/joi/article/view/joi2022-2-1-6>

Received: 20 August, 2022

Revised: 18 November, 2022

Accepted: 15 December, 2022

Published: 25 December, 2022

Publisher's Note: JOI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2022 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Keywords: Folk games; Assam; Moh Juj; Cultural heritage; Animal cruelty.

1. Introduction

Folk Games are an important aspect of traditional cultures around the world. These games have been played for generations and are often passed down through families and communities as a way of preserving cultural heritage and promoting social bonding. According to Gaurav D. Shah (2018), "Folk games reflect the cultural values, practices, and beliefs of the society that created them, and they are an essential part of cultural identity."

Folk Games are played for amusement and entertainment, but they also serve a broader purpose in promoting mental and physical health. Sudha Gupta and Ravi Kumar (2017) note that "playing traditional games can improve cognitive development, motor skills, and socialization skills in children." Moreover, studies have shown that traditional

games can have a positive impact on mental health outcomes, such as reducing anxiety and depression in adolescents (Na & Lee, 2021).

The significance of Folk Games extends beyond individual health and well-being. These games are an important part of cultural heritage and can serve as a means of promoting intergenerational learning and community cohesion. As Alexandra Anttila (2019) points out, "traditional children's games can foster a sense of belonging, strengthen cultural identity, and provide a means of passing down cultural knowledge from one generation to the next." These are an integral part of traditional cultures worldwide. These games serve a dual purpose of promoting amusement and entertainment, as well as promoting mental and physical health. Moreover, Folk Games play a vital role in preserving cultural heritage and promoting intergenerational learning and community cohesion.

Folk Games: A brief understanding

Folk Games are a vital part of the folk culture around the world. These traditional games have been played by people for generations and are often passed down through families and communities as a means of preserving cultural heritage and promoting social bonding.

Folk Games are typically played for amusement and entertainment, and they vary in complexity and format. Some Folk Games are simple and can be played with minimal equipment, while others are more elaborate and require specific tools or locations. Folk Games are typically categorized into three groups - Land, Water, and Sky - based on the environment in which they are played.

Land games are played on the ground or land, such as hopscotch, marbles, and tug-of-war. These games typically require little equipment and can be played in a variety of settings, from urban streets to rural fields.

Water games are played in or near water, such as swimming races, water polo, and boat races. These games require access to a body of water and often require specialized equipment, such as swimming goggles, water polo balls, and boats.

Sky games are played in the air, such as kite flying, frisbee, and balloon toss. These games typically require specific equipment, such as kites, frisbees, and balloons, and can be played in a variety of locations, from parks to beaches.

Folk Games are more than just a form of entertainment. They also serve a broader purpose in promoting mental and physical health. Playing Folk Games can improve cognitive development, motor skills, and socialization skills in children, as well as reduce anxiety and depression in adolescents. Moreover, Folk Games can serve as a means of promoting intergenerational learning and community cohesion.

Folk Games are an essential aspect of traditional cultures worldwide. They serve as a means of preserving cultural heritage and promoting social bonding while providing entertainment and health benefits. Whether played on land, in water, or in the sky, Folk Games is a testament to the creativity and ingenuity of human cultures throughout history.

Folk Games of Assam:

Assam, a state located in the northeastern region of India, is renowned for its rich cultural heritage and diversity. The traditional folk games of Assam have been played for generations and are considered a vital part of Assamese culture as they reflect the people's creativity, ingenuity, and their close relationship with nature (Hazarika & Borah, 2017). Some of the popular folk games of Assam and their significance are discussed below:

Kho-Kho: Kho-Kho is a traditional tag game played in Assam and other parts of India. It involves two teams of twelve players each, with nine players on the field at a time. One team takes a turn to chase the other team, and the players on the field try to avoid getting tagged. The game requires speed, agility, and teamwork, and promotes physical fitness.

Dhop-Khel: Dhop-Khel is a game played with a wooden ball and a curved stick. The players hit the ball with the stick and try to score points by hitting designated targets. The game requires skill and coordination, and is played individually or in teams. It is a popular game in rural areas and helps promote hand-eye coordination and physical fitness.

Gella-Chutt: Gella-Chutt is a game similar to cricket, played with a wooden bat and a ball made of cork or rubber. The game is played in open fields, and the players score runs by hitting the ball and running between wickets. The game requires skill and strategy and promotes physical fitness and teamwork.

Lukanu-Dandu: Lukanu-Dandu is a traditional game played in Assam, also known as Gillidanda in other parts of India. It involves hitting a small wooden stick with a larger one and trying to hit a designated target. The game requires precision and coordination and promotes physical fitness and hand-eye coordination.

Jeng-Ke-Pu: Jeng-Ke-Pu is a traditional game played in Assam, also known as Pithoo in other parts of India. It involves stacking small stones or pebbles and then knocking them down with a larger stone or ball. The game requires skill and precision and promotes physical fitness and hand-eye coordination.

Koni Juj (Egg Fight): This game involves two players holding boiled eggs and hitting them against each other. The player whose egg remains uncracked is declared the winner. It is believed to have originated in the rural areas of Assam and is played during the Bihu festival.

Kukura Juj (Cock Fight): In this game, two roosters are made to fight each other in a ring until one is defeated. While animal rights activists have condemned this game, it remains a popular form of entertainment in some parts of Assam.

Bulbuli Juj (Bulbul Fight): This game involves two bulbul birds fighting each other while their owners watch. It is also a controversial game, with some people arguing that it is cruel to animals.

Kar Khel (Archery): Archery is a popular sport in Assam, and many villages have their own archery clubs. The traditional bow used in Assam is known as the "dhanush."

Moh Juj (Buffalo Fight): This game involves two buffalo bulls fighting each other in a ring until one is declared the winner. It is often played during the Bihu festival.

Ghura Dor (Horse Race): This game involves horse racing, and is played during the Jonbeel Mela festival. Horse owners from different parts of Assam come to participate in this race.

Toruwal Khel (Sword Fight): Sword fighting is a traditional form of combat in Assam. While it is no longer used in warfare, it remains a popular sport and is often performed during cultural events.

Mal Juj (Wrestling): Wrestling is another popular sport in Assam, and many villages have their own wrestling clubs. The traditional wrestling form in Assam is known as "mukna."

Rosi Tona (Tug of War): This game involves two teams pulling on opposite ends of a rope until one team wins. It is a popular game in Assam, and is often played during festivals and cultural events.

Tekeli Bhonga (Breaking a Pot): In this game, a pot filled with water is hung from a height, and blindfolded players try to break it by throwing stones at it. It is a popular game during the Bihu festival.

Luka Bhaku (Peekaboo): Luka Bhaku is a traditional game played by children. It involves one child covering his or her eyes and counting while the other children hide. The child then tries to find the others by saying "Luka Bhaku."

Kabaddi: Kabaddi is a popular sport in Assam, and is played in many villages and schools. It involves two teams, and each team takes turns sending a "raider" into the other team's territory to tag as many players as possible without getting caught.

Satur (Swimming): Satur is a popular water game played in Assam. It is considered one of the essential skills required for survival in the state's flood-prone areas. The game involves swimming across a water body, either a river or a pond, and back to the starting point. It requires a combination of physical strength, endurance, and swimming techniques. Satur is also used as a means of transportation for fishermen and people living in flood-prone areas (Gogoi & Bhattacharjee, 2021).

Naw Khel (Boat Riding): Naw Khel is another popular water game in Assam. It is often played during the festival of Bihu, which celebrates the state's agrarian culture. The game involves rowing a boat in a water body, either solo or in a team. The game requires a combination of physical strength, coordination, and endurance. Naw Khel is considered an essential part of Assamese culture and is often used as a means of transportation in the state's water-rich areas (Gogoi & Bhattacharjee, 2021).

Sila Uruwa (Kite Flying): Sila Uruwa is a popular sky game played in Assam. It is often played during the festival of Magh Bihu, which celebrates the state's harvest season. The game involves flying a kite made of bamboo sticks and paper in the sky. The kite flyers compete to cut each other's kite string by coating it with a mixture of crushed glass and glue. Sila Uruwa requires a combination of physical dexterity, coordination, and technique. It is considered an essential part of Assamese culture and is often used as a means of socializing and bonding among the people of the state (Gogoi & Bhattacharjee, 2021).

These traditional games are an essential part of the cultural heritage of Assam and are played to this day. They not only provide entertainment but also promote social bonding and a sense of community. While some of these games may be controversial due to their treatment of animals, they remain an important aspect of Assamese culture.

The Moh Juj:

Folk games are an integral part of the cultural heritage of Assam, a state in northeastern India (Baruah, 2018). These games are an embodiment of the customs and traditions of the state, and serve as a means of preserving the cultural legacy of the region while also promoting social bonding and providing entertainment and health benefits (Medhi & Nath, 2019). One such game that has gained popularity in Assam is Moh Juj, a traditional buffalo fight that is typically played during the Magh Bihu festival.

The Magh Bihu festival is celebrated in January to mark the end of the harvesting season (Baruah, 2018). It is a time for joy and celebration, and buffalo fights are an integral part of the festivities. Moh Juj is a traditional buffalo fight that takes place in a mud arena called a kutch. The game is played between two male buffalo that are specially bred and trained for this purpose. The buffalo are usually of similar weight and height, and the fight lasts for several minutes until one of the buffalo backs down. The fight ends when one buffalo retreats or when the referee intervenes to stop the fight.

The rules of Moh Juj are straightforward. The buffalo are not allowed to use their horns to attack each other, and the referee ensures that the animals do not cause any serious injuries. The buffalo are often decorated with colorful garlands and painted with turmeric to make them more attractive (Baruah, 2018).

Moh Juj is not just a game of brute strength; it requires skill and strategy. The buffalo are trained by their owners to understand the signals and commands given by the handlers. The handlers use sticks and ropes to control the buffalo and direct them towards their opponent. This requires a great deal of skill and experience on the part of the handlers (Medhi & Nath, 2019).

The game of Moh Juj has faced criticism from animal rights activists who claim that the sport is cruel and inhumane. However, defenders of the game argue that buffalo fights have been an integral part of Assamese culture for centuries and are a way of preserving cultural traditions (Baruah, 2018). Furthermore, the owners take good care of the buffalo and only allow them to fight when they are in good health (Medhi & Nath, 2019).

Despite the controversy surrounding the game, Moh Juj remains a popular folk game in Assam, drawing large crowds of spectators who come to watch the exciting spectacle. The game is not just a means of entertainment; it is also a way of promoting social bonding and community cohesion (Baruah, 2018).

Moh Juj is a traditional folk game that is an integral part of the cultural heritage of Assam. The game is played during the Magh Bihu festival and involves two male buffalo fighting in a mud arena. Moh Juj is not just a game of brute strength; it requires skill and strategy. Although the game has faced criticism from animal rights activists, it remains popular among the people of Assam as a means of preserving cultural traditions and promoting social bonding. The game is an embodiment of the customs and traditions of Assam, and serves as a means of preserving the cultural legacy of the state.

Moh Juj has been played in the region for centuries. During the reign of the Ahom kingdom. The game received significant support and patronage from the ruling dynasty. The Ahom kings were known for their patronage of the arts and culture, and Moh Juj was no exception. The game was popular among the common people of Assam, and the Ahom kings recognized its cultural significance and promoted it by organizing tournaments and exhibitions.

Criticism of Moh Juj:

The practice of Moh Juj has received criticism from various quarters due to concerns over animal welfare and cruelty. Some of the main criticisms of the buffalo fight in Assam include:

Animal cruelty: One of the main criticisms of the buffalo fight in Assam is that it is a form of animal cruelty. The animals are often goaded and provoked into fighting, which can result in serious injuries or even death. Many people believe that this practice is unethical and should be banned.

Lack of regulation: Another criticism of the buffalo fight in Assam is the lack of regulation surrounding the sport. There are no clear guidelines or rules in place to ensure the safety and welfare of the animals. This can lead to a lack of medical facilities and care for the animals, resulting in unnecessary suffering and death.

Violation of animal protection laws: Buffalo fight in Assam is also criticized for violating animal protection laws. The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act- 1960 prohibits animal fighting and cruelty, and buffalo fight clearly goes against these laws. This has led to calls for stricter enforcement of these laws and for the authorities to take action against those who engage in this practice.

Negative impact on tourism: Some critics argue that buffalo fight in Assam has a negative impact on the state's tourism industry. Many tourists are repelled by the cruelty involved in the sport and may avoid visiting the state because of it. This can have a negative impact on the local economy and make it difficult for businesses to thrive.

Restriction on Moh Juj:

In 2014, the Honourable Supreme Court of India banned all forms of animal fights, including buffalo fight or Moh Juj, in the country. The court ruled that such practices violate animal protection laws and are a form of animal cruelty. The ban was imposed under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act- 1960, which prohibits animal fighting and cruelty.

The Supreme Court's decision was widely welcomed by animal rights activists and organizations, who had been campaigning for a ban on animal fights for many years. The ban has helped to raise awareness about animal welfare and has led to stricter enforcement of animal protection laws in the country.

It is important for individuals and society to respect and protect animal welfare, and to find alternative forms of entertainment that do not involve animal cruelty. The ban on the buffalo fight is a step in the right direction towards achieving this goal.

Conclusion

The buffalo fight in Assam has been a traditional practice for many years, but it has been met with criticism from various quarters due to concerns over animal welfare and cruelty. In these fights, two buffalo bulls are pitted against each other and are goaded into fighting until one of them is declared the winner. This often results in injuries or even death for the animals involved.

Animal welfare activists have been advocating for the end of such fights, as it is a form of animal cruelty that causes unnecessary suffering to the animals. Such practices also give a negative image to the state's tourism industry, as tourists are likely to view such activities as barbaric and inhumane.

It is essential for authorities and society to take a serious look at this traditional practice and find alternative forms of entertainment that promote animal welfare and well-being. One potential solution could be to organize cultural events and festivals that celebrate the state's rich cultural heritage without compromising animal welfare. This could include music and dance performances, traditional handicraft exhibitions, and food festivals, among others.

In addition, it is essential to create awareness among the general public about the negative impact of animal fighting on animal welfare and tourism. This could be done through social media campaigns, workshops, and seminars, among other means.

In conclusion, it is high time that society and authorities take a more proactive stance on animal welfare and find alternative forms of entertainment that are in line with modern values and ethical standards. This will not only help in the protection of animal rights but also promote a positive image of the state and boost its tourism industry.

References

1. Anttila, A. (2019). The benefits of playing traditional children's games. Edutopia. <https://www.edutopia.org/article/benefits-playing-traditional-childrens-games>

2. Das, J. (2016, January 12). Moh juj: The traditional buffalo fight of Assam. The Times of India. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/Moh-juj-The-traditional-buffalo-fight-of-Assam/articleshow/50594305.cms>
3. Deka, M. (2020). Cultural heritage and its conservation in Assam. In S. Bhagawati, & P. Sarma (Eds.), *Northeast India: Culture, society, and economy* (pp. 71-84). Springer.
4. Ghosh, A. (2019). The battle over Moh Juj: Folk sport, animal cruelty, and identity politics in Assam. *The Caravan*. <https://caravanmagazine.in/culture/battle-over-moh-juj-folk-sport-animal-cruelty-identity-politics-assam>
5. Gogoi, S., & Bhattacharjee, J. (2021). Traditional games of Assam: An overview. *Journal of Ethnic Foods*, 8, 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s42779-021-00096-3>
6. Hazowary, R. (2018). Socio-cultural impact of traditional sports and games. In C. S. Dubey & S. K. Singh (Eds.), *Sports and society: Issues and perspectives* (pp. 163-174). Pointer Publishers.
7. Hazarika, P. & Borah, D. K. (2017). Traditional folk games of Assam: A reflection of cultural heritage. *International Journal of Physical Education, Sports and Health*, 4(3), 141-144.
8. IANS. (2020, September 22). Assam's traditional buffalo fight 'Moh Juj' to go virtual. *The Week*. <https://www.theweek.in/wire-updates/national/2020/09/22/cal24-as-moh-juj.html>
9. Na, K. S., & Lee, S. Y. (2021). Traditional games and health-related outcomes in adolescents: A systematic review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(5), 2455. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18052455>
10. Shah, G. D. (2018). Folk games and their importance in society. *International Journal of Research in Management & Social Science*, 6(3), 16-21.
11. Sharma, A. (2019, February 7). The evolution of Moh Juj: From a buffalo fight to a mobile game. *The Quint*. <https://www.thequint.com/news/india/evolution-of-moh-juj-from-a-buffalo-fight-to-a-mobile-game>
12. Sarma, S. (2019, December 3). Moh Juj: A controversial traditional sport. *The Sentinel*. <https://www.sentinelassam.com/editorial/moh-juj-a-controversial-traditional-sport-512070>
13. Sudha Gupta & Kumar, R. (2017). Folk games: A study of traditional games in India. *International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)*, 6(7), 306-308.