

Ritual Roots and Literary Wings: Examining Maah-Halodhi as an Assamese Cultural Motif

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Abstract

Assam serves as a nexus for several cultures. The Assamese culture is a unique and colorful tapestry of several races that has developed over a protracted assimilation process. One of the distinguishing characteristics of Assamese culture is "Maah- halodhi". Turmeric, or halodhi, is an aromatic, stimulant, and carminative that has a slight diuretic effect. One of the most potent natural medicines is turmeric. Curcumin is the halodhi's primary active component. Maah, also known as Black gram has a high mineral and vitamin content, which helps it calm irritated skin. Two more advantages include healing and exfoliating our skin, as well as reducing scarring and getting rid of blemishes and spots. Black gram is also helpful for eliminating tans, clearing up acne, and curing sunburns. In the Ayurvedic medical system, turmeric is also classified as a "rasayana" herb. Turmeric has been used as a traditional medicine and for cosmetic purposes since ancient times. Turmeric is a key herbal medication used for treating a variety of ailments in the Indian medical system known as Ayurveda. In fact, modern radiator leaks in water-cooled radiators are even sealed with turmeric. Using maah and halodhi paste in various occasions is part of Assamese custom. Without maah- halodhi, certain of the rites of Assamese culture are incomplete. This paper is an attempt to analyze the cultural importance of maah- halodhi in Assamese culture. In Assamese culture, it is seen as an auspicious ritual as well. Aside from cultural practices, it also contains an irreplaceable element of Assamese literature and oral heritage.

Keywords: Turmeric, Maah- Halodhi, Assamese, Culture, Ritual

Introduction

One of the eight sister states that make up northeastern India is Assam. Assam is well-known for its vibrant culture and multicultural people. The "land of red rivers and blue hills" is a picturesque region with pristine natural sceneries that is worth seeing for its unspoiled beauty. The state's inhabitants are referred to as Axomiyas collectively, and Assamese is the most extensively used official state language. Numerous variations exist within Assamese culture. This area has been transformed into a garden with a variety of vibrant blooms by many cultures

and their customs. Therefore, there are countless rituals, beliefs and traditions associated with social celebrations. Maah- halodhi (black gramme and turmeric paste) holds a special place in Assamese culture. This paper is an attempt to discuss the cultural significance of maah- halodhi. Turmeric is a natural antimicrobial and contains anti-inflammatory and anti-aging qualities. Black gramme is a natural exfoliator that cools the skin while removing dead skin cells. Summer in Assam begins shortly after Bihu. Some people experience skin issues as a result of the intense heat, and it is thought that the paste enhances skin quality and summertime resistance.

Even though there has been a lot of research on maah- halodhi, particularly on halodhi (turmeric), there hasn't been much discussion of its cultural importance. Many Assamese folk songs mention Maah- Halodhi. There are references to Maah- Halodhi in some Assamese books, songs, and poems. Kaushik Nandan Baruah, in his novel *Niribili* (2022), mentioned about maah-halodhi while describing about the festival Bihu. Sandhya, one of the protagonists of novel, feels very excited while mentioning about the different rituals of Bihu, including the usages of maah-halodhi. In order to highlight some of the Assamese customs, Assamese singers like Beauty Sharma Barua, Jayanta Hazarika and Zubeen Garg also include maah-halodhi in their melodious songs.

Maah- halodhire nuwale dhuwale

Koina xojale kune dapunmoti

Koina xojale kune (Beauty Sharma Barua)

Being fragrant, stimulating, and carminative, turmeric has a modest diuretic effect. One of the most potent natural medicines is turmeric. Curcumin is turmeric's primary active component. In India, where it has been used for more than 2500 years, turmeric was probably first employed as a dye. Over the years, this spice's therapeutic benefits have gradually come to light.

Ayurveda and turmeric go hand in hand. Turmeric has been used since the Vedic era in India, when it was employed both as a spice for food and as a symbol of ceremonial importance. It is believed to have arrived in China by the year 700 CE, East Africa by the year 800 CE, West Africa by the year 1200 CE, and Jamaica in the year 1800 CE. This vegetable, which demonstrated properties as comparable to those of saffron as early as 1280 CE, received acclaim from even Marco Polo.

Turmeric has been employed in folk medicine for countless years in many regions of the world as a medicinal ingredient in preparations. Turmeric is said to offer several medical benefits in Ayurvedic traditions, including boosting bodily energy, reducing gas, getting rid of worms, enhancing digestion, controlling menstruation, removing gallstones, and alleviating arthritis. It is widely used in several South Asian nations as an antibacterial agent and as an antiseptic for bruises, wounds, and burns. Turmeric is used in India to treat skin issues and cleanse the blood in addition to its Ayurvedic uses. Women in various regions of India use turmeric paste to get rid of extra hair. In some regions of India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, turmeric paste is applied on the skin of the bride and groom before to the wedding because it is said to make the skin shine and

keep dangerous bacteria from entering the body. Several sunscreens are now made with turmeric as an ingredient. Turmeric-based face creams are produced by a number of global corporations.

Turmeric is a well-known remedy in Ayurvedic medicine for a number of respiratory issues, including asthma, bronchial hyperactivity, and allergies, as well as liver problems, anorexia, rheumatism, diabetic wounds, runny nose, cough, and sinusitis (Araujo and Leon 2001). According to Aggarwal, Ichikawa, and Garodia (2004), it is used in traditional Chinese medicine to treat illnesses linked to stomach discomfort. Turmeric has been used for treating sprains and swelling as recommended by Ayurveda from the beginning of time (Araujo and Leon 2001). Turmeric is regarded as a bitter digestive and a carminative in both Ayurvedic and traditional Chinese medicine. In addition to improving blood circulation, unani practitioners employ turmeric to eliminate phlegm or kapha and to widen blood vessels. It may be used to enhance digestion, lessen gas and bloating, and flavor meals like rice and bean dishes. It is a cholagogue, promoting the liver's synthesis of bile and the gallbladder's output of bile, which enhances the body's capacity to digest fats. When combined with milk or water, turmeric can be used to treat digestive issues as well as colds and sore throats.

Data Source and Methodology

For the study, secondary data is used in the form of books and essays that address the theoretical perspectives and historical information required for the present study. Secondary data is research information that has already been obtained and is available to researchers. Primary data, or information gathered directly from its source, is what the phrase contrasts with. The sources of secondary data are reputed journals, books, magazines, newspaper articles, interviews, web sources, etc.

“Maah- Halodhi” and Assamese Culture

The culture of Assam is a combination of Indo Burmese, Mongolian, and Aryan influences. Assam is well renowned for its rich culture and diverse population. The lovely land is a tiny paradise on rocky terrain and is worth exploring for its unspoiled charm. The locals are known as Axomiya. The artists of ivory, wood, bamboo, cane, pottery, weavers, sculptors, masons, farmers, and jewelers among other professions have long prospered among the people of Assam.

Bohag Bihu is one of the integral parts of Assamese culture. The Assamese New Year is ushered in with the seven-day spring festival Bohag Bihu, also known as Rongali Bihu. Essentially a harvest festival, Rongali Bihu encourages the celebration of ethnic diversity while also attempting to bring together the various Assamese local communities. It is celebrated till the seventh day of Bohag. "Goru Bihu," the first day of the festival, is observed on the last day of Chait, the last month of the Assamese calendar. On that day, Cattle are brought into a body of water, such as a river or pond, and then washed with a mixture of mah-halodhi (black gramme and turmeric paste). Since the majority of Assamese people depend on agriculture, cattle are quite essential to them. Lakshmi Nandan Bora's short story "Sakha – Damodar" illustrates the affinity that exists between Assamese people and bulls. It also represents several bihu- related customs. Maah- halodhi is thought to shield the cattle from all diseases and ensure good

performance in the following harvest. Additionally, it shields cattle from several skin-related diseases. Lots of bihu songs, husori naam describe about the usages of maah- halodhi during the Bohag bihu in their melodious lyrics.

Dodaideu oo, Husori gaboloi aahu,

Maah- halodhire, goruk gaa ghuwai loi,

Torali poghare bandhu.

On the first day of Bohag, the Assamese have a ritual that involves taking a bath with maah- halodhi, however relatively few people are curious about the practice. There were no chemical- filled soaps and body washes back in the good old days to clean our body. During that time Black Gram Flour was primarily used for bathing. However, the Assamese community participates in a ritualistic bath with Maah- Halodhi (Black gramme dal and Turmeric paste) on the first day of Bohag Bihu, which is still practised today because of tradition. Curcumin, an anti-inflammatory, anti-aging, and well-known natural antiseptic, is present in halodhi. As opposed to Maah, which helps remove dead skin cells, tans, and cools skin, Maah is a natural scrub. After Bohag, the ruthless summer arrives, which brings with it a variety of skin problems. The practise of taking a Maah Halodhi bath was created as a defense against the skin issues that summer brings, and their advantages go beyond the surface. On the first day of Bohag, it is considered auspicious to take a bath with maah (black gramme) and halodhi (turmeric paste). The germs are removed, and it provides defence against illness for the upcoming year.

Even the Assamese marriage system is observed to be practised in various ways across the state of Assam. Marriage is known as “biya” in Assam, and the “dora” (groom) and “koina” (bride) celebrate this beautiful relationship in a certain fashion. “Chaklang” is the Ahom community's name for this extremely unique marriage custom. In Chaklang, the bride and the bridegroom take separate ceremonial baths, known as the “Noani”, in their respective homes. The bride and the groom are covered in maah and halodhi paste for each ceremonial bath that is given throughout the wedding. The maah- halodhi purifies and cleanses the mind, body, and soul, according to Veda. The ceremony marks the beginning of a prosperous life together for the bride and groom by cleansing their hearts and souls in preparation for their holy union. It signals the start of a brand-new life together. Additionally, it also has certain documented health advantages according to science. The paste has anti-stress properties as well.

“Halodhi maahere ghohi pihi nowali

Xomoniya hokhi hote dise uruli

Aai mur oo

Jonmo dili tuli-tali aanok xopili

Pitai oo

Majoni majoni buli porhe korili

Halodhi maahere ghohi pihi nowali

Puberty ceremonies in Assam are one Assamese tradition that genuinely raises a lot of concerns for everyone. A few days following the girl's first period, a ritual wedding called a tuloni biya is held. It is a rite that is unique to the Hindu community and was first practiced by

the Tai Ahoms before spreading to other Assamese clans and tribes. This age-old custom is still carried out to honour a girl as she reaches full womanhood here in Assam. It goes by various names, including Tuloni Biya, Santi Biya, and Nua-Toloni Biya. The young bride is cleansed with maah-halodhi as part of the bathing process in tuloni- biya as well. Halodhi is mostly used at tuloni- biya ceremonies since it is regarded as a sign of blessing for the young bride. Halodhi is frequently utilized in this ritual to purge the young bride of the evil eye. Halodhi is well known for brightening skin and for its numerous real skin benefits. Halodhi application guarantees that the young bride will have luminous skin on your tuloni- biya day. Dead skin cells are helped to be removed, revealing fresh, young skin.

Oral literature can play a significant role in preserving a community's culture, history, and traditions. It alters and moves with the ebb and flow of time. An essential component of Assamese culture is the singing of the “biya naam”, or wedding songs, at a traditional wedding ceremony. These wedding songs, which are sung by the women present known as ayoties during various rites, are practically essential to an Assamese wedding.

“Hatote dulori kakhate kolochi loi
gawore gopini pani tulibo goi
maah halodhire nuwabo oii
aayotiye gabo biya naam oii” (Zubeen Garag)

One of the many diverse elements of Assamese folk songs is the marriage song. Assamese weddings are extravagant musical occasions. The songs sung at weddings have enhanced Assamese folklore in a variety of ways. During puberty ceremony too, while giving the young bride a bath beneath the banana tree, the women sing to her as-

“Oi aare xonore batite maah-halodhi,
Oi aare rupore batite til naal o,
Maat ki bosone rohila o,
Oi aare melki mayeke melkhan patise,
Tok kolor gurit thoi naal o,
Maat ki bosone rohila o.”

An Assamese first menstruation celebration has several customs and rituals similar to these. These wedding songs, which are commonly spoken after every wedding ceremony, eloquently capture the regional cultural distinctiveness.

Similarly, in case of elder marriage also, the women sing a variety of songs when the bride or groom bathes. A few of them are mentioned below-

saraswati aair hatot bin

mah haladhi ghaha baidew ghuri nahe ene din
 abhagiya pape, saraswati aair hatot bin
 biya nami ahe saraswati aair hatot bin
 nichige kapalor gathi he saraswati aair hatot bin
 ghuri nahe ene din.

This song is sung by the aayotis when they invite the bride to take bath. It means- Come, sister, sit beneath the banana tree and drink some holy water to put on your head. Mah-halodhi (black gram and turmeric paste) is served in one dish while curd is served in another. Come sister; take a holy bath, for this day will never again occur in your life.

Maah- halodi batise kuneu kharsiya hal
 chitalia bapur ga pichaliya hol
 aaideur gharar pachilate hali ache nol
 kalahe kalahe dhale jamunare jol.

During the groom's bathing ritual, the aayoti, or village ladies, sing this song. Groom takes bath, while the village women are preparing the maah- halodhi paste.

All of these songs feature the bride or the groom as the center of attention. Most often, the women perform songs about the newlywed bride or groom, which consistently provides for good entertainment. After taking a bath, the bride or groom gets dressed in traditional attire.

Maah-halodi is also used in Assamese funeral rites. Typically, the final rituals are performed on the day of death. While sects' customs differ, the dead body is typically cleansed with the maah-halodhi paste. This serves as the family's final homage to the deceased.

People from various tribes, in addition to Assamese, use maah- halodhi for a variety of cultural occasions. During the Bihu, the Missing community also uses maah- halodhi. Using maah- halodhi is an emotional experience for these people, in addition to its health benefits.

Superstitions Related to Maah and Halodhi

Several superstitions can be found in Assam, in addition to a diverse range of religions, cultures, languages, and beliefs. We frequently have a tendency to practise and adhere to a number of superstitions since they are so firmly rooted in our hearts and minds. Among human emotions, fear and hope are among the strongest. We are thinking about getting lucky and fearing negative things will happen. Probably with good intentions, the ancient people who created all these strange beliefs wanted us to be responsible for ourselves and those around us. So, they made the decision to capitalize on these two feelings to ensure that we stayed healthy and did not make any silly mistakes. Various superstitions are also related to maah and halodhi.

All Vedic rites involve halodhi (turmeric), which is also employed as religious offerings and puja materials. The spice is used to ward against bad luck and protect a house, car, or place of business. It is said to be auspicious. According to certain customs, if someone senses any sort of negative energy within the home, they should combine halodhi and water and use that mixture for mopping the floor. Another notion is that taking a bath in water that has some halodi added to it will shield us from evil energies. Spilling grind halodi on the floor is considered as a bad luck. It's also thought that after dawn, one shouldn't lend or give turmeric to another. Venus and halodi, or turmeric, are related. Giving or lending turmeric to someone after dusk weakens the guru, which causes the person to experience problems with money and finances. Certain communities in Assam hold the belief that displaying turmeric in red bags throughout the house can prevent bad luck. However, the main reason it is utilized in this fashion is because it is a natural insect repellent.

Certain Assamese communities also hold the view that maah or mahor dali (black gram) should at least be consumed once in a year. It will shield us from a range of illnesses.

Findings

Maah- halodhi is still often used in the state for a variety of Assamese rituals. It may be considered a component of the cultural identity of the Assamese people. Maah- halodhi is valued for its cultural significance as well as certain established health benefits. Maah- halodhi is a significant custom that is deeply ingrained in Assamese culture throughout the whole life cycle, including puberty, marriage, festivals like Bihu, and even the funeral process. Using maah-halodhi paste on various occasions is an Assamese ritual. Without maah- halodhi, many Assamese traditional ceremonies are incomplete. Without maah- halodhi, no celebration would be complete since it is so deeply ingrained in Assamese culture and custom. The Assamese people swear by Maah- halodhi for everything, including marriage, Bihu, and death.

Conclusion

India has long recognised turmeric (halodhi) as an Ayurvedic remedy and as a colourful, tasty condiment. The health and medical benefits of turmeric (halodhi) are still being studied, and new findings indicate that these benefits go beyond what was formerly believed. Researchers have shown that turmeric contains natural phenolic compounds that have a wide range of antioxidant capabilities. Curcuminoids are what give these antioxidant characteristics. In addition to its medical value, maah- halodhi it also has cultural significance.

Thus, we can conclude, say that the usage of halodhi dates back thousands of years. The Atharva Veda, one of Hinduism's four Vedic books, has its first recorded mention of it. Due to its usage in food, cosmetics, traditional medicine, dye, and Hindu cultural and religious rites, it has more than fifty names in Sanskrit. In Sanskrit, the word for turmeric is likewise gendered; it is feminineized as gauri (to make fair; also a woman's name), jayanti (to triumph over sickness; also a woman's name), and Lakshmi (prosperity; again a woman's name; also the name of the goddess Lakshmi). It serves as the primary ingredient in "curry," is essential to Indian cultures' religious and marital ceremonies, and is frequently used in traditional medicine to treat a variety of ailments. Assam is the crossroads of multiple cultures. After a long process of integration, the

Assamese culture emerged as a distinctive and vibrant mosaic of several races. Furthermore, Maah-halodhi is a part and parcel of Assamese traditional and cultural significance. It might be considered a facet of the Assamese people's culture. Maah-halodhi has several known health benefits in addition to its cultural importance. The identity of a community is carried by its folk culture. The marriage songs provide an important contribution to folk culture. The women of a community own all rights to marriage songs. Assamese tradition includes using maah and halodhi paste on different occasions. Certain rituals in Assamese culture are incomplete without maah-halodhi.

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