

# The Joonbeel Mela: Integrating the Hills and Plains of Assam

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**Abstract:** *The Joonbeel Mela is a three day annual fair organised by the Tiwa community in a historic place named Dayang Belguri, in the district of Morigaon in Assam. The fair is held in the month of January (Magh) a few days after the Magh Bihu in the state. It is a social and economic fair wherein the tribal folk, mainly the Tiwa, the Khasi, the Garo, the Rabha, the Karbi and the Jaintias residing in the hills of Karbi Anglong in Assam and Jaintia in Meghalaya descend to the plains for a three day stay and exchange their regionally available items like ginger, potatoes, berries, turmeric, etc for various items from the plains which the plains folk offer through the medium of barter system. Starting around 15<sup>th</sup> century AD, this fair is organised under the patronage of the Tiwa King, the ruler of the ancient Gobha Kingdom, the "Gobha Raja", on whose invitation the various tribes from the hills and plains of Assam and Meghalaya assemble in the aforementioned place to participate in this iconic fair.*

**Keywords:** Joonbeel Mela, Hills, fair, Tiwa Community, Dayang Belguri

## 1. Introduction

### The Joonbeel Mela

The Joonbeel Mela is a three day annual fair organised by the Tiwa community of Northeast India. (Picture 1). The fair is held in a historic place named Dayang Belguri, in the district of Morigaon in Assam (Picture 2), in the month of January (Magh) a few days after the *Magh Bihu* in the state. It is a social and economic fair wherein the tribal folk, mainly the Tiwa, the Khasi, the Garo, the Rabha, the Karbi

and the Jaintias residing in the hills of Karbi Anglong in Assam and Jaintia in Meghalaya descend to the plains for a three day stay and exchange their regional food items like ginger, potatoes, berries, turmeric, etc for various items from the plains which the plains folk offer. This fair holds special place in the series of different festivals and events held in this part of the country for its practice of the barter system. Here, people from the hills and the plains exchange articles with one another through the traditional medium of barter system, without the use of currency.



Picture 1: Entry to the Joonbeel Mela



Picture 2: Location of Morigaon in the map of Assam

### The Tiwa Community

The Tiwa is an ethnic group of North East India. (Picture 3). Literally, Tiwa means people who were lifted from below.<sup>1</sup> They are mainly concentrated in Assam and Meghalaya. Apart from these two states, smaller concentrations are also found in some regions of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Nagaland. (Picture 4)

Indigenous narratives give various accounts on the migration of the Tiwas to their present habitat.<sup>2</sup> Some of these narratives claim that the tribe came originally from Tibet while, some others say the Tiwas had to flee the oppression of the Dimasa king of the Kachari kingdom. The *Buranjis* (Assamese chronicles) recount the meeting of Assamese soldiers with “people of the margins” (datiyaliya) and the settlement of 12 families of Lalung and Mikir, i. e. Tiwas and Karbis, in the plains in the 17th century.<sup>2</sup>

The major subdivision of the entire Tiwa community is between the “Hills Tiwas” and the “Plains Tiwas”. The Hill Tiwas live in the westernmost areas of "The Ancient Lalung - Tiwa Hills" now known as Umswai Valley of Amri block in West KarbiAnglong district of Assam<sup>2</sup> as well as in the Northeastern corner of Ri - Bhoi district in Meghalaya. They speak their own Tiwa language which is a part of Tibeto -

Burman language of the Bodo - Garo group. They are divided into a dozen clans recognized by specific names which they use as patronymics.<sup>2</sup> Their descent system can be said to be ambilineal. In most cases, the community follows a matrilineal pattern of residence and subscribe to matrilineal descent. However, under the influence of the neighbouring communities, most of whom follows a patrilineal line of descent and patrilocal residence, an increasing number of Tiwa families are adopting this latter custom.

Plains Tiwas live on the flatlands of the Southern bank of the Brahmaputra valley<sup>2</sup> These are places namely Morigaon, Nagaon, Hojai, Kamrup (Rural and Metro), Sibsagar, Jorhat, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur and Dhemaji districts. The vast majority speak Assamese as their mother tongue although, Tiwa language is still spoken on the foothills and in rare villages of the plains. Their descent system is definitely patrilineal. Their patronymics are not derived from their clan's names but are common Assamese and plain Tiwas ethnic surnames instead (for example Lalung, Pator, Senapati, Manta, Dekaraja, Dewraja, Bordoloi, Konwar, Doloi, Kakoti, Deka, Dewri, Deuri, Deory, Deori, Bhuyan, etc.). Their religion too shares many elements with Assamese Hinduism.



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Picture 3: Tiwa community in their traditional attire



Picture 4: Tiwa concentrations in Northeast India

**The Gobha Kingdom and the beginning of the Joonbeel Mela**

The Gobha Kingdom was a powerful kingdom in northeast India. The kingdom spread across the regions of Nagaon, Morigaon, KarbiAnglong, and Kamrup in Assam. It was a customary practice of the Gobha Kingdom for the ruling king addressed as “Gobha Raja” to arrange an exchange fair in order to communicate with his subjects, get informed about their problems if any and have an understanding of the prevailing social, economic, political situation of his administrative region as a whole (Picture 5). Having a cordial relation with the neighbouring Jayantia kingdom in

Meghalaya, the Tiwa king, Gobha Raja also invited the tribesmen from the Jaintia hills apart from the Hills Tiwas in Karbi Anglong in Assam to take part in the market and exchange items with the plains folk over there in the the district of Morigaon, in Dayang Belguri on the banks of the *Joonbeel*. In subsequent periods, this festival transformed into a community market transcending the differences of geography, religion, castes and gender<sup>3</sup> and an annual festivals where the hills and the plains people from Tiwa, Karbi, Khasi, Garo, Khasi, Jaintia, Rabha and other indigenous Assamese people from across the state and also outside northeast India began to take part in this market.

Thus, the tradition beginning in the 15<sup>th</sup> century AD this day. remained alive and continues with greater vibrancy even to



Picture 5: Visit of Gobha Raja to the Joonbeel Mela

## 2. Review of Literature

The "JoonbeelMela", being the only fair or event in the country which functions through the barter system of economy has attracted a noteworthy scholarly attention. Studies on this very distinctive social and economic practice has been conducted by many such as those made by Dr. Rita Choudhury, a notable Assamese writer; Lakhi Prasad Medok and BirajSaikia, Professors of History and Political Science, respectively in Raha College of Assam, and a host of journalists like Niladri Shekhar Dutta, UtpalParashar, RishirajBhagawati and Sumir Karmakar, to name a few.

Rita Choudhury in her Sahitya Academy award winning novel "Deu Langkhui"<sup>4</sup> gives a vivid description of the social, economic, political and other aspects of the Tiwa Community. Here, she refers to JonbeelMela, a symbol of union between the eastern Assam and Western Assam, which becomes a place for exchanging merchandise and a place for exchanging hearts.

The article by Lakhi Prasad Medok and BirajSaikia, "JoonbeelMela: Study of an Aged Old Barter System from Historical Perspective"<sup>5</sup>embodies the various aspects of the JoonbeelMela, beginning from its origin, it's salient features, how the barter system functions in the Mela, the antiquity of this fair, the authority and relevance of the Gobha King in the community and the significance played by the JoonbeelMela in promoting harmony and brotherhood among the different groups of participants and also between the participants and the tourists.

Studies made by NiladriShekhar Dutta, UtpalParashar, RishirajBhagawati, SumirKarmakarand others highlights the historical origin of the fair, the participants of the fair (namely, Tiwa, Gari, Karbi, Khasi, Jaintia, Rabha, and other indigenous Assamese people and also people from other

corners of the state as well as the country). These studies also throw light on the detailed sequence of activities that take place in the fair, the different kinds of items bartered by the hills and the plainsfolk with each other, the vibrant traditional elements of their culture ranging from their traditional cuisine to their attires, their folkdances, folk music, local games, and the like. These studies, moreover, highlights the relevance of the tribal kings and refers to the Gobha King's visit on the final day when he holds a durbar and listens to his people's complaints.<sup>6</sup>

## 3. Method of Study

### 3.1 Introduction

The Joonbeel Mela is a three day annual fair organised by the Tiwa community in a historic place named DayangBelguri, in the district of Morigaon in Assam. The fair is held in the month of January (Magh) a few days after the *Magh Bihu* in the state. It is a social and economic fair wherein the tribalfolk, mainly the Tiwa, the Khasi, the Garo, the Rabha, the Karbi and the Jaintias residing in the hills of Karbi Anglong in Assam and Jaintia in Meghalaya descend to the plains for a three day stay and exchange their regional food items like ginger, potatoes, berries, turmeric, etc for various items from the plains which the plains folk offer through the medium of barter system. Starting around 15<sup>th</sup> century AD, this fair is organised under the patronage of the Tiwa King, the ruler of the ancient Gobha Kingdom, the "Gobha Raja", on whose invitation the various tribes from the hills and plains of Assam and Meghalaya assemble in the aforementioned place to engage in this iconic fair.

It was a customary practice of the Gobha Kingdom for the ruling king addressed as "Gobha Raja" to arrange an exchange fair in order to communicate with his subjects, get informed about their problems if any and have an

understanding of the prevailing social, economic, political situation of his administrative region as a whole. Later, by the 15<sup>th</sup> century AD, this centuries long practice took the form of this socio - economic fair where the tribes from the hills and the plains of Assam and Meghalaya<sup>7</sup> would assemble to exchange various items with each other in a barter system of exchange.

The following report is a brief study about this historic fair, unique to the country.

### Objectives of the study

- To understand the historical context of the fair.
- To discover the significance of the fair in contemporary context
- To analyse the trends of change
- To identify it's prospects for tourism.

### 3.2 Research Design

The term “design” refers to drawing an outline or planing details. “Research design”, accordingly, may be understood as planning or arranging details for conducting research. It is planning a strategy of conducting research.<sup>8</sup> It plans as to what is to be observed, how it is to be observed, when/where it is to be observed, why it is to be observed, how to record observations, how to analyse/ interpret observations, and how to generalize.<sup>8</sup> Research design, thus, refers to a systematic and detailed plan devised for the purpose of achieving the goals of research.

There are many functions of research design. A few very important ones are:

- It provides a<sup>9</sup> for the study. Thereby, it helps the researcher to avoid confusion as to such aspects as what is to be studied, what particular aspects of the problem to be studied, how to gather the required data, etc.
- It limits the boundaries of the research activity at hand. As a result, the researcher is able to move throughout the study in systematic manner.
- It enables the investigator or the researcher to anticipate potential problems.
- It helps the researcher to plan such techniques for collecting the data that gathering useless and irrelevant facts may be kept to a minimum in the interests of economy of time and money.<sup>10</sup>
- It ensures optimum reliability.
- Designing helps in giving useful conclusions.<sup>8</sup>

### Types of Scientific Research

Depending on the purpose of investigation, scientific research may of various kinds such as:

#### Exploratory Research

Exploratory research studies subject about which no information or little information is available.<sup>8</sup> It follows from the assumption that the researcher has no or little knowledge about the problem under study. This type of research helps in formulating and/or testing hypotheses and/theories.

#### Descriptive Research

Description research is a kind of research which describes social events, social structures, social situation, social phenomena, etc. Here, the researcher describes in detail whatever he finds in relation to the problem under investigation.

#### Explanatory/ Causal Research

This is a type of research wherein the researcher explains the causes of the particular social phenomena chosen for study.

#### Pure and Applied Research

Pure research is one which is primarily concerned with cultivating knowledge about the particular social phenomena with no apparent motive of its practical use. Applied research, on the other hand, is concerned with the use of scientific knowledge for the solving of problems in practical life, based on the principles of pure research.

#### Experimental and evaluation research

Experimental research is conducted by controlling one or more variables and comparing control and experimental groups whereas, evaluation research is a study which is concerned with the measurement of the effectiveness of an action programme.<sup>8</sup>

#### Quantitative and Qualitative Research

Quantitative research uses quantitative techniques of statistical measurement for the analysis and interpretation of data. Qualitative research, on the other hand, infer conclusions based on the subjective experiences of the people under study.

#### Comparative research

It is the study of resemblances and/or differences between different units - social and cultural groups.

#### Longitudinal research

Longitudinal research is such a type of study wherein the same body of phenomena is studied over a period of time. The present study falls under the category of *exploratory study or exploratory research*. Here, the purpose of the study is to develop an understanding of an economic fair, unique to the contemporary society.

### 3.3 Exploratory Research Design

Exploratory research is conducted in cases where the researcher possesses either a limited or little knowledge regarding the phenomenon chosen for study. Such studies are mostly qualitative.

Exploratory studies are conducted for various purposes:

- To satisfy the researcher curiosity and desire for better understanding.<sup>11</sup>
- To generate new ideas, views, and opinions on the research issue which will help in proper understanding of the problem.<sup>12</sup>
- To familiarise the researcher with the social context of the issue, i. e. details about relationships, values, standards and factors related to the research topic.<sup>12</sup>

There are different types of exploratory studies:

- Review of available literature: In this the available information on the research problem which has been already published in some form is analysed. This helps in making a comparative and historical study of the issue or phenomenon. Further, it may be helpful in reviewing a theory by looking at the ways other researchers have approached the topic.<sup>8</sup>
- Expert Surveys: Expert surveys involves interviewing persons who have substantial knowledge and are experts in the concerned field of study.
- Case studies: In this, specific cases relevant to the topic of research is selected for a detailed study. This helps the researcher to collect information for the main study.
- Experience surveys: These involve interaction with persons from the researcher's own discipline or from other disciplines who have worked on the topic.
- Secondary data analysis: Secondary data analysis involves the use of secondary sources of data to analyse and understand a given phenomenon. The various secondary sources of data collection may be books, reports, articles, and so on.

The present exploratory study conforms to the norms of *secondary data analysis*. It is a secondary data analysis of "Joonbeel Mela", a three day fair held in Assam.

#### Method of Data Collection

There are several methods for conducting scientific social research:

- Field study: The field study method involves a detailed study of the actual field situation. This method is employed in a systematic manner beginning with a preliminary planning in which the scope and objectives of the study is determined, followed by the scouting expedition, formation of the research design, presenting of research instruments and procedure, the full scale field operation and finally the analyses.
- Experimental method: The experimental method includes both field and laboratory experiments. In field experiments, the study is conducted by comparing experimental group with the control group. In laboratory experiment, the investigator creates a situation with the exact conditions he wants to have and in which he controls some and manipulates other variables.<sup>8</sup>The investigator then, observes and measures the effect of the manipulation of the independent variables on the dependent variables in a situation in which the operation if the other relevant factors are held to a minimum.
- Survey method: The survey method involves a detailed, systematic and comprehensive study of a specific social unit such as a community, or organisation, or group, etc. in order to analyse a particular social problem and recommend solutions for the same.
- Case study method: This involves a detailed and intensive study of a particular case. The case may be an individual, a group, a community, a society, an organization, a process or any unit of social life.<sup>8</sup>
- Statistical method: This involves the use of mathematical values in inferring generalizations about the population.

- Historical method: The historical method uses data from different periods in the past and uses these facts in understanding the problem at hand.
- Evolutionary method: This method studies development from simpler forms to forms of increasing complexity by analysing a series of small changes.

In the forgoing study, the data is collected by using the *historical and evolutionary methods*. With the application of the historical method, data from secondary sources like books, newspaper articles, reports, etc are collected for the study of the aforementioned topic. Also, its origin, subsequent development and the changes developing into its practices in course of time are analysed with the use of the evolutionary method.

#### Types of data

Research data can be classified into two kinds:

- Primary Data: Primary data refers to the first hand data collected by the researcher himself. This type of data raises the cost of the research process and the process of their collection consumes a long time. Primary data is always specific to the researcher's needs, and he controls the quality of research. Such data is real time data and is available in raw form.
- Secondary Data: Secondary data is already existing data, collected by the investigator agencies and organizations earlier. Secondary data collection is mostly rapid, easy, less expensive and quickly available. Such data is neither specific to the researcher's need, nor does he/she has control over the quality of the data. It is the refined form of primary data.

The present study is conducted with the help of *secondary data*, keeping in consideration the distance of the actual field of study and unavailability of primary respondents in that case.

#### Sources of data

Sources of primary data include observation, interviews (telephonic/ face to face/ virtual) surveys, experiments, etc. Whereas, the sources of secondary data include official records, newspapers, journals, books, online platforms, etc. In the present study, conducted with the application of secondary data, the required data are collected from such sources as *books, articles, reports and online sources of information*.

#### Area of study

The area of study for the forgoing project is an annual economic fair in Assam, where people from the hills and plains exchange commodities with each other's group through the medium of barter system. This three day fair is annually held in a village by the name "Joonbeel" located in the district of Morigaon in the state of Assam.

## 4. Analysis and Interpretation

Barter system in the contemporary age of cashless digital economic transaction seems to be a myth. Yet the very essence of this primeval economic system of transaction comes to live in a unique fair in a region in the state of Assam. This three day annual fair has a long history if its

origin dating back to some 5 centuries and continues to enthral people even to this day. The following section presents an analysis of this socio - economic fair, focusing on its origin, the various activities taking place in it, the host of communities participating in it, and the ways it has responded to changes of time and situations. The descriptions of the fair is also supplemented by illustrative pictures.

### 1500AD: The Joonbeel Mela Begins

The beginnings of the JoonbeelMela dates back to several centuries. In those times, this fair was organized under the ruling patronage for reasons political and administrative. Here, the ruling king and his courtiers would come to the place called “Joonbeel” to discuss political matters. Here in this meeting the king would also listen to the problems and miseries of his people and would discuss other such relevant issues.

Later, by the 15<sup>th</sup> century AD, this centuries long practice took the form of this socio - economic fair where the tribes from the hills and the plains of Assam and Meghalaya<sup>7</sup> would assemble to exchange various items with each other in a barter system of exchange. Here too, the customary practice of the king listening to the complaints of his people and interacting with them continues.

The etymology of the word “Joonbeel” after which the *mela* (fair) and the place is known as is also interesting. In Assamese terminology, the word “Joon” denotes “moon” and “beel” refers to “wetland”. It therefore, refers to a lake formed in the shape of a crescent moon. It is by the side of this lake that the fair takes place. Hence, the name “JoonbeelMela”. This village is located in a historic place named DayangBelguri in the district of Morigaon in Assam.

### Royal Patronage to the Fair

The JoonbeelMela was originally organised under the patronage of the Ahom Kings to discuss the prevailing political situations.<sup>12</sup> Even today, the fair is organized under the leadership of the TiwaChief called “Gobha Raja”. The “Gobha Raja” invites the tribes from the hills and the plains to take part in this iconic festival. Here, the king symbolically maintains the customary practice of discussing the prevailing social, economic and political situation and the distresses of his people if any. Before the actual fair begins, the ruling king and his courtiers visit the place where the *mela* would take place and have feast with the people. On the final day of the fair, as per the practice, the king collects revenue from his subjects.

### Participants in the Mela

The “JoonbeelMela” is organized by the Tiwa community of Assam and Meghalaya. It is a time when the Tiwa community, which has split into Hills Tiwas and Plains Tiwas over the years,<sup>7</sup> participate together in this fair and engage in exchange of a varied array of commodities indigenous to both the groups respectively. Apart from the Tiwas, the other major communities who participate in this festival include - the Karbis, the Rabhas and the Jaintias. Mainly the tribes from the hills of Karbi Anglong in Assam and JaintiaHills in Meghalaya flock to Joonbeel and participate in the fair and its festivities. These people from a

number of tribal communities across the regions of Assam and the border regions of Meghalaya numbers to around 10,000.

### Items of Exchange in the Fair

The items of exchange in the “Joonbeel Mela” presents a wide variety, home to both hills and plains. Different items such as ginger, turmeric, herbs, taro, chillies, wild fruits, berries, *pitha*, items made from rice flour, roasted rice flour, different breeds of sticky rice, rye and a variety of dried fish find place for display and exchange in the fair. Tiwas and other tribespeople from the hills bring with them such items as wild berries, turmeric, ginger, and other things which are generally grown on higher altitudes whereas, the tribes from the plains put up for exchange commodities like items made from rice flour, roasted rice, dried fish and such other products which represent harvest in lower climes. Also, it is an interesting fact that vegetables which are put on display in the fair for these days are hardly spotted in the local markets.<sup>7</sup>

Besides articles of food, the fair also showcase various articles of indigenous craft (Picture 12). These include - baskets and other items made of bamboo, and traditional hand woven apparel.<sup>7</sup>

Another notable feature reflected in the items of exchange is that the all the commodities bartered in the fair are either raw products of nature or handmade articles. Machine made and technologically modified items of nature seldom finds place in this market.

### Detailed Activities of the Mela

The “Joonbeel Mela” happens to be a three day annual festival, held in the month of *Magh* which corresponds to the months of January/ February. The festival is organized by the Tiwa tribe of Assam (Picture 6), with the invitation of the Tiwa Chief, “Gobha Raja” to the tribes of the hills and the plains of Assam and Meghalaya to take part in the event. Large numbers of tribesmen from Assam and neighbouring regions begins their journey towards this historic fair with all their belongings and items for sale, on the invitation of the “GobhaRaja”. On reaching Joonbeel in DayangBelguri, these enthusiastic tribes people prepare their settlement in makeshift huts and tents for the following three days to participate in the practice of socio - economic exchanges with one another. There the King along with his courtiers visit the place and feasts with the people.

The actual fair begins the day following that of the tribes' gathering on the bank of the Joonbeel. The festivities begins with the performance of *Agni Puja* for the well being of the communities. This is followed by the practice of community fishing (Picture 7) in the lake, the Joonbeel. This fishing activity marks the beginning of the fair. Here, barring the children almost every family from the Tiwa community belonging to both the hills and the plains along with the participants of other communities plunge into the waters of the *beel* with fishing nets to catch fishes, together. The motive behind this fishing activity is to promote friendship and brotherhood among all the communities who assemble in the place to participate in the fair.

Thereafter begins the trading activities of the tribemen. An attractive array of exotic items (Picture 8 and 9) from the hills and the plains are placed on display. The various items of food from the hills like ginger, turmeric, wild berries, different kinds of vegetables grown in hilly areas are exchanged by the tribes from the hills for items grown in the plains like cakes (*pitha*), beaten rice, fishes and other such things. Poultry and traditionally prepared rice beer are also other items of trade.

Apart from trade in food items, the fair also showcases other ethnic elements of the different tribes gathered in the festivals. The traditional attires of the tribes folk (Picture 10), their traditional dances (Picture 11) and songs add greater vibrancy to the fair. Cockfights (Picture 13) are another highlight of the festival. This barter system of exchange is completed by noon<sup>5</sup> and then, the fair is open for the tourists to visit and buy the ethnic commodities from this people of the hills and the plains as well.

By nightfall every day, the festival change its character and transforms into what is more typically understood by the term *Mela*. Magic shows (Picture 15), cotton candy stores, mini carousels and a large Ferris wheel (Picture 14) replaces everything traditional that is seen in the mornings, and the transformation brings with it huge crowds from the nearby Assamese towns.

As mentioned before, during the culminating day of the fair, the Tiwa king "Gobha Raja" with his courtiers visit the tribes in the festival, interacts with them and collects taxes from his people as per tradition. This is the only occasion when the king wears the traditional dress which consists of a *jugla* (sleeveless vest), *nara* (loin cloth around the waist) and *phagu* (turban).<sup>5</sup>

### Significance of the fair

The "Joonbeel Mela" holds significance on various accounts.

- The fair is organized to promote harmony and brotherhood among the different tribes and other indigenous communities of Assam. For centuries, this historic fair has brought the different tribes people home to the various regions across the state of Assam closer to one another and has maintained cordial relations among them
- The Joonbeel Mela upholds the traditions of the tribal communities. The practice of the king holding a "darbar" to discuss the prevailing situations of his place and the problems of his people, the showcasing of different traditional dances and games like cockfight are some of the traditional tribal elements of the Tiwa and other communities which are kept alive in the festivities of this annual event.
- The fair also promotes sustainable development of culture and values. The articles brought by the people for exchange are either taken from nature or are handmade.
- The Barter system of exchange is another significant feature of this fair. In a demonetised age where cashless transactions are being projected as the country's stepping stones to a brighter future, the Joonbeel Mela – arguably India's only fair that works on the barter system – comes as a veritable blast from the past.<sup>6</sup>

### Royal Allowance

On 17 January 2009, the Government of Assam announced an "Annual Royal Allowance" for the 19 customary kings from communities under the Gobha Kingdom that includes parts of three districts of present Assam: Morigaon, Nagaon and Kamrup. The then Education Minister of Assam distributing the bank cheques among the kings, said that the monetary assistance will be something between Rs.3000 to Rs.10,000 depending on the population count under them.<sup>15</sup> The kings welcomed the move with great delight. Gobha Raja Deep Sing said, "It is a welcome move by the government of Assam. We have been demanding this for a long time as the economic condition of all these customary kings is going down. If we do not receive any assistance from the government, it would be difficult to maintain even the tradition of hosting the annual Joonbeel Mela, which has become an important tourist destination."<sup>13</sup>

### Trends of Change

The principal participants of the Joonbeel Mela happened to be the Tiwa tribes people living in the hills and plains of the Assam and the Meghalaya states of the country. The main tribes participating in this fair were the tribes inhabiting the hills of the Jaintia in Meghalaya and Karbi Anglong in Assam. These included the Karbis, the Khasis, the Garos, the Tiwas, the Rabhas and the Jaintias.

However, in the recent times, there has been a change in the initial composition of participants with new groups being a part of the festival.

Now, people from other regions or states do also take part in the century-old fair.<sup>16</sup> The Mela nowadays witness participation from outside the North East as well. Relevant sources mention the name of a trader from Siwan in Bihar who had participated in the Mela in the year 2019. Another article published in January 2021 mentions a lady from Guwahati who enjoyed a novel experience of trading in the Joonbeel Mela. For her, who was a corporate professional from Guwahati, it was not only a pre-dawn sixty-kilometre drive from the Assam capital but a rare opportunity to break through the shackles of the busy city life and acquaint herself with a traditional trade that exist only in this part of the country. She informs, "I brought my mother and elder sister along. This is the first time that I have come to the Joonbeel Mela. I brought a good amount of homemade 'teelpitha' (local sweet delicacy) which I exchanged with wild turmeric and ginger and a local folding knife with the indigenous people. It's crazy that in this age of crypto money I could literally buy things without any currency."<sup>16</sup>

In an interview with Firstpost in 2019, the Gobha King remarks on the changing trends in the fair by stating "The festival is now bigger than it ever was before, partly because of its growing popularity outside our region and partly owing to government help. The magnitude of the fest is only a reflection of multiple other customs that have evolved, including the graduation from an elephant to a car as the king's preferred mode of transport."<sup>6</sup> Hints of change are visible also in terms of the activities of entertainment featured in the fair. Besides the Ferris wheel, there happens to be a "well of death" for motorcycle stunts, some rides for



children, eateries selling roasted pork, fish, rice beer, and shops selling factory - made items. In fact, the latter now outnumber the traditional stall.<sup>6</sup> Bollywood songs can also be heard on loudspeakers of some shops, which is a new kind of feature.

#### Unity in diversity: the essence of the “joonbeel mela”

The “JoonbeelMela” projects an impressive sight of unity in diversity. The different tribes belonging to the hills and the plains gather in Joonbeel in DayangBelguri for a cordial stay of three days. These communities separated, by regions and culture, engage in harmonious relations with one another in trade, fishing, playing games, and performing traditional performances. Hailing from different regions across Assam, Meghalaya and now also from other states outside northeast India, these naïve people connected with nature, assemble together and stay peacefully with one another having fun and feasts together apart from exchanging commodities. They stay in makeshift huts in the beautiful valley for the three days as a greater family and every participant addresses the other as ‘mama’ or ‘mami’<sup>13</sup> (maternal uncle or aunt).

#### Respects For Tourism

The uniqueness of the “JoonbeelMela”, given the practice of barter system and the continuation of age old customs and traditions makes the fair an emerging tourist attraction. The specificities of this historic fair attracts people from different regions across the state as well as outside the state to witness traditional and modernity intermingle in the same place. In recent years, the fair has also witnessed tourists from outside the country as well, as revealed by one of the members of the organizing participants of the fair in an interview.

The fair's potential for evolving into a tourist destination was also recognized by former Chief Minister of Assam, Mr. Sarbananda Sonowal. In 2019, the Honourable Chief Minister, addressing the closing ceremony of the Mela, said, “Jonbeel Mela with its barter system has the potential of turning into a major tourist attraction. We will support and promote it as a global tourism event. The three - day mela turns into a confluence of humanity every year and gives us an opportunity to present the diversities to tourists and strengthen the harmonious co - existence of various communities in our state. ” He, further, announced an amount of Rs 1 crore for the promotion of the event.<sup>14</sup>



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Picture 6: The Tiwa Tribe



Picture 7: Community fishing in JoonbeelMela



Picture 8: Food items to barter



Picture 9: Bartering vegetable for fish



Picture 10: Traditional tribal apparel



Picture 13: Traditional cockfight game



Picture 11: Tiwa folk dance



Picture 14: Evening fair



Picture 12: Bamboo handicrafts for barter



Picture 15: Magic Shows in the fair

## 5. Conclusion

The JoonbeelMela is an interesting interface of tradition and modernity. This unique fair, held annually in one of the villages, known as DayangBelguri, in the district of Morigaon in Assam, is reflective of a truly functional traditionality in a modern context. From the very beginning,

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dating back to around 15<sup>th</sup> Century AD, this fair promotes the values of harmony, interdependence, and brotherhood among the different indigenous communities of the region. The spirit of brotherhood that the fair aims to foster among the various tribal and non-tribal communities of the regions of Assam as well as outside the state is a great contribution to the enrichment of the national ideals and her essence "unity in diversity". The harmonious participation of communities, otherwise separated by geography, religion, language, and other elements of culture, promotes a strong case of social solidarity. This iconic fair is an excellent illustration of cultural exchange. The fact that the participants address one another as "mama/mami" is reflective of the oneness which the fair signifies. Belonging to such diverse ethnicities, these participants stay for a period of three days in the said venue as a collectivity, interaction with one another, dining together, and trading together in their respective locally available articles. Barter system, perhaps the most significant aspect of this fair is another significance of the fair. Even though the world has moved across many stages of economic transactions, presently featuring a system of digital economy, the practice of this age-old system of economic transaction is indeed, a thing to witness. The fair also highlights, among other things, how tradition can be developed in a sustainable manner. In terms of the nature of articles bartered in the *mela*, it also refers to man's relation to nature and thereby, reminds the society about its responsibility towards its sustenance. The JoonbeelMela, further highlights the significance of tribal kings who are still revered by their community people as authority figures.

From the above study, the following conclusions might be drawn with reference to the aforementioned objectives:

- The historical context of the JoonbeelMela dates back to the period of Ahom Kingdom in the Barak and Brahmaputra Valley, wherein the fair was organised by the ruling Tiwa King as a means to interact with his people and discuss political matters and also to get informed about the trials and tribulations, if any, of his people.
- The significance of the fair, in the present context, lay in the advancement of the spirit of interdependence and harmony among the different tribal as well as non-tribal communities of the region. Moreover, the fair provides a beautiful sight of the lively cultures of the participant communities. Further, it signifies the maintenance of traditions in the modern world in a functional manner.
- With respect to tourism prospects, the unique features of the fair, ranging from the barter system of exchange to exclusively handmade articles of trade, and the mosaic of different cultures which it displays, are indeed, exciting tourist attractions. As such, government initiative in this direction is much likely to boost the tourism aspect of the event.

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