

Traditional Games of *Char-Chapari* in Assam

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Abstract:

Health is the most precious wealth of human being. Sports is most important to be healthy and active. Playing keeps the mind fresh and alleviates distress. Therefore, the men have been enjoying different kinds of games for entertainment since ancient time. The Assamese *Miya* Society is not an exception in this case. *Miya* Also enjoy a lot number of traditional games. These games are integral parts of *Miya* society and culture. Even though these games are still enjoyed in the Assamese *Miya* society, many of these games are about to vanish due to technological advancement and effects of globalization. Smartphone, television, internet, cartoons, video games etc. have diverted the young minds from these traditional games. Gradually, the games are becoming more vulnerable. In this paper, endeavors have been made to shed an insightful light on games enjoyed by the Assamese *Miya* society.

Keywords: Assamese, *Miya* Society, traditional games, *Char-Chapari*, Assam, Sand-bank.

Research Methodology: As far as research methodology is concerned, field study, survey, census is consulted to prepare this paper.

Introduction:

Assam and the North-East are the culturally diverse. In fact, this region is a cultural hotspot. The Assamese Culture is the combination of various tribes, ethnicity, culture, language, religion and so on. The *Miyas* who came to Assam, due to economic and political reasons, at the end of nineteenth and in the beginning of twentieth century are one of the influential parts of Assamese society. The *Miya* identify themselves as Assamese but their distinct ethnic identity is clearly visible. According to an assessment of Assam Char Development Council of 1993-94, there are 2079 villages in fourteen of 23 districts in Assam, 121 in Darrang, 361 in Barpeta, 150 in Bongaigaon, 313 in Dhubri, 148 in Kamrup, 58 in Nalbari, 210 in Jorhat, 95 in Morigaon, 29 in Nagaon, 187 in Goalpara, 95 in Dhemaji, 118 in Sonitpur, 182 in Lakhimpur and 86 in Dibrugarh. According to census 2001, there are 2251 villages spreading in fourteen districts whose population amounts to twenty-five lakhs (Hossain²⁸). There have been a lot of number of ethnic games in these *Miya* inhabited sand-banks of Assam. Due to various reasons these games are vanishing gradually. The modern games like Hockey, cricket, valley ball, badminton is replacing this game due to their global values. Various games prevalent in the *Char-Chapari* are discussed below.

Traditional Games of “*Char-Chapari*”: Different types of games are traditionally practiced in the “*Char-Chapari*” region. The following is a list of some of the most popular games in the *Miya* community commonly living in “*Char-Chapari*” areas:

Nao Khela (Boat racing): While talking about “*Char-Chapari*”, a beautiful river scene unfolds in our mind. From Majuli in upper Assam to Dhubri in lower Assam, many new *Chars* forms and some have flowed into the mighty river Brahmaputra every year. *Nao Khela* is one of the most popular traditional games among the people of *Char* in Assam. During the rainy season, in *Char* areas boat becomes the only means of transportation for the *Miya* community in the region. Boats are used for every aspect of daily works like cutting grass, catching fish, going to the market, crossing human and animals and so on. Road transportation has improved and gradually connecting the last-mile, for which boats have become obsolete in many places. Of course, there is a difference between a ‘Transport-boat’ (used for commutation) and a ‘Sports-boat’. These sports-boats are specially designed for swift ply, with almost 30/40/50 arm’s length and very thin hull, which are called *Baishal*. The *Baishal* boats are usually decorated with *Hengul-Haital* (natural pigments), which depicts various trees, shrubs, birds, tigers, deer, etc., and portrays them in different colours and decorate them pleasantly. This game is held competitively to coincide with various festivals like Independence Day, Birth and death anniversaries of Vaishnava Gurus, Eids, Durga Puja, Kali Puja, etc. The organizing committee invites the owners of the boats from different parts of Assam by letter. Prizes, gifts, remunerations, etc. are all mentioned in the letter. In this way, as soon as the game is invited, the owner of the boat takes the *Baisas* (rowers) to the nearby river from about a month or a week before the game. The crew with specific divisions of rowers like *Baisa*, *Majhi*, *Charandar*, *Bayati* reaches the venue a day before the game marching cheerfully with all their supporters.

In this competitive game, both sides of the boat need equal number of *Baisas*. In places, they are seen to row the boat either sitting or standing. A distance of about three/four/five km is taken from the upper reaches of the river towards the lower as course of the race. In the game, two boats compete at once (which is called *Jora Khela*), whichever boat wins, qualifies for the next round. The final match will be played between the last two or three boats, of which one becomes the winner and remaining two become runner-ups. This game can be played for three/four/five days at a time. In this game, to entertain the audience, who are sitting on the other side of the river or to ease the labour of the *Baisas*, the *Bayatis* sing and dance various songs together. For example, below is a part of a song –

“*Baitha Marae Baitha Marae*

O’ Baishal Bhaiyare

Chhadiya Bhaitha Mariya Jao Re.”

This game has been played competitively in different rivers of Assam since the post-independence period. This game is still held every year in Assam, where many people participate regardless of race, caste, creed or ethnicity. This sport has been declared as “Indigenous Sports” by the Sports Authority of India and listed among the popular and enjoyable sports in Assam. But due to lack of financial support and several other natural and developmental obstacles this game is gradually losing its fame (Hossain 59).

Ladibari/Lathibari/Sardarbari/Latribari Khela: Like *Naokhela*, *Lathibari* is also a very popular sport in the *Miya* community. This game is also known as *Sardarbari* and *Latribari* games depending on the region. In the *Miya* community of Assam, this game is celebrated on the occasion of Eid-mehfil and various other festivals. This game is usually played between two teams or *faidas* with bamboo sticks, shield-sword, etc. There will be a leader in this game, who is called *Sardar* or *Zamindar* (Hossain 72). Players can be seen dancing to the beat of musical instruments like *Dhol-Taal* etc. wearing anklets, headscarves, *Gamucha*, *Dhoti* etc. If any of the players on either side gets distracted during the game or do not know how to play, then he might get injured or beaten up. Serious casualties or getting killed are also undeniable. Of course, according to the rules of the game, one can be hit between hip and ankle only. This game is popular in Muslim society though, at the beginning of the game prayers associated with gods and goddesses like *Kali*, *Shiva* and other deities along with *Khoda* (God), *Nabi* (Prophet) etc. For example,

“*O’ re Allah Allah kowre momin*

Nabi kara saar

Nabir naam dhariya ei bhava nadi

Hoiya jabo paar...

Hoo... re.”

Also, -

“*Ore asilam baalu chare*

Uthilam nay,

Bajailam khat-khati

Jaa kare shaym ray re

Hoo... re.” (Hossain 6).

Besides, through various rhythmic verses, satires, and proverbs of *Daak*, they are seen teasing the opponent players.

Hadu-Gudu/Gudu-Gudu Khela (Kabaddi): *Hadu-Gudu* is another popular traditional sport in the *Miya* community. This game is played by both elders and children. It is played between two teams of seven players. There will be two referees to run the game. To play this game, a two room’s court is drawn with seven arms’ wide and fourteen arm’s length. This is called ‘*Dashi*’. The floor made smooth so that players do not get injured. The game starts with atoss. One player (raider) runs into opponent’s court and tries to tag out as many of their defenders as possible and without being tackled, in a single breath. They usually make sounds like “*Kabaddi-Kabaddi/Dig-Dig/Tok-Tok*” while raiding into opponent’s court. A raider can stay in the opponent’s court for a period ranging from a minute up to the capacity of the raider. Tagged out or tackled players can only come back after tagging or tackling the opponent’s player by their team. A team wins after tagging and tackling all the players of the opponent team.

Panja Khela (Arm-wrestling): *Panja* is known as fistfight Assamese. This game is played between two players. In this game, both the players hold each other’s fist tightly and keep their elbows in marked places. The left hand should be placed on the back when playing with the right hand and vice versa. To win, one needs to pin opponents arm onto the surface. This can be called a game of strength.

Gadam/Lavandari Khela: This type of game prevalent in the *Miya* community is called 'Gadam' and in some other areas it is called 'Lavandari' game. There are at least five players in this game. However, if there are more courts, more than five players can play. The court is made of 10 arms wide and 25 arms long (for five rooms). There are lines marked at each 5 arms distance and a straight line in the middle, parallel to the length (25 arms). This middle line divides the main room into two parts, i.e., some horizontal lines are drawn at the interval of five arms inside the court. Another vertical line is drawn amidst the rooms, which divides them into equal halves. This is called 'ShikDair'. There are two main rooms in this 10-roomed court. There is a *Gadam* (main room) and another one is *Noon/Lavan* room. The players on the first team enter the main room and the players on the second side stand surrounding the *Gadam* (main) room; so that the players of the first team cannot move from the main room to the *Lavan* room. If a player from the first side comes out of the main room and enters the *Lavan* room, and return to the main room; he will win the game. However, if a person from the second team touches a person from the first team, it is considered dead/defeat. The second party then enters the *Gadam* (main) room and starts the game as before.

Golla Khela: The game of *Golla* is very popular among the children of the region. There are two teams in this game. Each team has five/seven/ten players. A speedy, smart and efficient player is chosen as *Budhi* (Old woman) or *Mul* (root). This game can be played beside a tree or open field, where they make a circle called "Thaila" (Sarma 133). *Budhi* stays inside that circle. All the players of that team circle *Budhi* holding hands. The opponent team stays alert at a distance to touch and restrain them from reaching the target. When the players of the first team find a scope, they run to the target. A player considered to be dead (tackled) if the other party can tag as soon as s/he leaves the *Budhi* or on the way to the destination. But from the middle of it, those who run and find the target, will return to the *Thaila* and jump from the *Thaila* to the target and make a new *Thaila* as far as he can go and then he will return to the destination. However, players once tackled would not be able to participate in the game again. In this way, everyone except the *Budhi* runs around the *Budhi*, who also try to sneak into the destination. If the *Budhi* can get to the destination, then the other party loses 'ekhan gare' (one game). If anyone from the second team can touch the *Budhi*, then all the players of the first team will die (defeated). Then the teams will change their roles.

Lading Khela: Lading (*Latum*) is a favourite game of children and young cowherds. *Latum* is commonly crafted from a thick baton of the 'Gugra tree' in an oval shape, a small nail pinned in sharper pole of the *Latum*. From the shaft of the nail a fine jute string 'Lasti', tightly looped around the *Latum*. On freeing the string, the *Latum* rotates on its axis. Several people can play *Latum* together. In this game, firstly a six arm's diameter circle is drawn and another small circle is drawn inside that, which is called 'Pangkhi'. Initially, all the players should release their *Latums* together and try to spin inside it. One who cannot spin the *Latum* inside the 'Pangkhi' lags behind, should place their *Latum* in the middle of that large circle. The rest of the players will scratch and crash that *Latum* by their spinning *Latums*. Sometimes, the *Latum* kept inside the circle, is seen to be split into two by the hit of other spinning *Latums*' nails. But if the *Latum* inside the circle is sliding out of the circle by such attacks, then everyone has to loop their *latum* and spin it on the ground as soon as possible. And in this way, the game continues for a long time.

Matbal Khela: The game of *Matbal* (marble) is very popular among the young boys; although, cowherds and elders are also seen playing and batting in this game. The colourful marbles cost only around Re. 1 for 8/10 balls. Nowadays, prices have risen but these balls are still cheap in many places. There are several types of marble games. These include *Pil*, *Bach*, *GatalDain*, *Nori Motar* etc.

In the *Pil* game, a small hole is dug which can fit one marble. It is called 'Dip'. Players roll their marbles pointing towards the 'Dip' from a throwing line drawn at a certain distance. The one closest to the hole will play first. He will put his thumb in the hole and target to shoot other players' marbles by using an index or middle finger of the same hand with the support of another hand. The player gets all the marbles he hits; if missed, the next player will continue the same process.

The *Bach* game is different from *Pil*, in which, a small square-shaped court is drawn on the ground. There will be a line in the middle of the square dividing it into two halves. The players roll their marbles targeting the middle line to determine the first, second, third, etc. position to play. Their positions are set based on the distance of marbles closest to far from the middle line. After that, except for the first, the rest of the players roll their marbles at some distance from the court. The first player tries to hit the marbles by a *Digel* (striker) marble. After the hit, he has to throw his marble back into the square, keeping few marbles as a bet, which he loses if unable to enter his marble inside the square. In this way, the *Bach* game continues with an object to gain profit.

In the game of *Nori-Motar*, three parallel lines of about one-two feet are drawn. Everybody contributes 2-3 marbles as decided, to place evenly being half an inch apart from each other. After this, each player throws another marble (striker) towards the line, perpendicularly. The object is to gain most of the marbles. Each player tries to bring out as many marbles as possible from the lines, but if his striking marble hits a marble and it does not come out or his striker marble stays inside the lines, that hit will be considered as foul and he has to put one marble on the middle line as a penalty.

Kachugudi/Kachuguti Khela: This game is played between two players. To play on the ground/wooden bench, one has to draw a rectangular court with straight and diagonal lines making triangular shapes inside the court; 2-6 *pachoons* (a small triangular-shaped design with six connecting points where six pieces can fit), are drawn outside the main court. To play this game, black and white *Kochuthaari* (leaves stems of Taro) cut into small pieces or small two-coloured stones are used as dices. These pieces are to be placed in the junction points of the lines. In this game, there will be 16-34 junction points, of which only 5 points are left, where the players can move a dice. Both the players move their pieces to an unoccupied place or crossing over the opponent's piece, which removes that particular opponent piece. Then the second player moves his piece forward in the same way. In this way, the two of them plays until one's all pieces are completely removed from the court. This is a game of intelligence and strategy.

Bagh-Chagi Khela: *Bagh-Chagi* game is similar to *Kachuguti*. Between the two players, the one who plays the role of the *Bagh* (tiger) will play with only one piece. And who plays the role of a *Chagi* (goat) will play with 16 pieces. If the *Bagh* can finish eating (eliminating) all the *Chagi*, then the *Bagh* will win. And if the *Chagi* can block the way of the *Bagh*, then the *Chagi* will win the game.

The Pachgata/Dashgata Khela: The *Pach-Gata* or *Dash-Gata* game is played by young boys sitting under the trees during the rainy season. In this game, there are a total of ten small holes in five lines. Five beads (small betel-nut beads or small stones) are kept in each hole. There will be five holes for a player. Initially, a player picks up all beads from one of his holes and distributes one in each hole. And he repeats the process with all five holes till a hole completely gets empty. The player can pose all the beads of the hole next to the empty one. The second player does the same. After the end of one round both the player gets beads. In the second round, the player, who has more beads, can buy one hole from the opponent's side. The object is to own all the 10 holes.

Koot-Koot Khela: *Koot-Koot* is generally played by young girls in the Char region, although young boys are also seen participating. This game can be played by 4/5 children at a time. To play *Koot-Koot*, a rectangular court is drawn on the ground in the yard or on the road with eight equal squares inside it. Children then play one by one and their playing positions are determined by lottery. In the beginning, a player takes a broken piece of clay pitcher and puts it in the first room by hand. Then push that piece of clay jumping with one foot, keeping the other foot above the ground. If the player's foot or the clay touches the lines, s/he is considered out and the second person starts the game. In this way, eight rooms have to be passed first. After that, the player stands outside the court looking toward the opposite side and throw the clay over his/her head and call, '*half na full*'. If the clay falls in any of the rooms, s/he owns the room. The owner of highest rooms wins the game.

Panit-Parat Khela: In the Char region, this game is seen to be organized competitively in festivals. All children can participate in such games. This game has a referee. He arranges the players in one or two rows and starts calling *Panit* (in water) *Parat* (onshore). The referee will first tell the players, where they are standing/sitting symbolically: *Panit* or *Parat*. After that, the game will start. Soon the players will jump to the front and back according to the call. The referee first calls at a slow pace and rapidly increases his pace and mismatch calls to confuse the players. Attentiveness is the main obligation of the game. Inattentive players get out of the game and who remains till the last is declared as the winner and his/her previous two players who got out are selected as runner-ups.

Ghura /Ghora Khela (Horse racing): *Ghura Khela* competition is one of the most interesting sports in the region. In this game, different types of attractive prizes, gifts and remunerations are given. *Ghura Khela* is usually held in large fields. Horse owners are invited through letters and public announcements to participate in the game. In the first round, two horses compete at once in race-course, for a predefined distance. This is called a '*Jora Khela*' (pair game). Winners of first-round play in the second round. The final round is played among three (sometimes two) horses from which the winner and runner-ups are determined.

Hari/Aaribhanga Khela (Pot breaker): Aari or HariBhangagame is generally played by children; although, it is also organized as competitive sport in primary, secondary and higher secondary schools in the Char region like the *Huisuta* (needle and thread) game. In *HariBhangagame*, a clay pot or a symbolic object is placed at a certain distance from the player. Then a referee blindfolds the player and rotates him/her to 2-3 times. S/he is given a baton to hit the pot. Anyone who can break or hit the pot with that baton will be declared the winner. More than one player can win this game.

Tang-Guti/Dangudi/Tankibari Khela: *Tang-Guti* is also known as *Dang-Gudi* or *Tankibari* in the region. This game is played by two players. At the beginning of the game, a small hole is dug and one small bamboo stick is placed on the hole in a way that half of that stick can rest on the ground. After that, one player gently strikes the side of the stick with *anachari* (baton). The stick jumps up above and the player has to hit that stick second time with force. The opponent player will defend the stick from falling and hits back. If the first player can manage to cross the opponent, he will measure the distance with his *achari*, which is his point. The calculation method of this game varies from region to region. One of the methods is mentioned below:

“*Gadam-Dali-Chakkar-Chhaira-Dima-School*

Eri, Duri, Tindari, Tarabari, Champa Dhek Suta.” (Hossain 74).

In this game, 20 *achari* means one ‘full’. A full can buy a new player.

Jair Hoil /Nal-Nal/Bolai/Moil Khela: *Char-Chaparis* are in riverside, therefore, most of the area covered by rivers, *beels* and ponds. So, the children become expert swimmers from a very tender age. Children play this game while bathing in the river or *Beel*. This game is known by different names in different places. There are no set rules for the number of players in this game. Many people can participate together. At the beginning of the game, someone first stays 15/20 arms away and addresses the rest of the players -

“*Eita ki?* (Pointing a finger)

The rest answers- *Nol* (stick)

Eita ki? (Showing two fingers)

The rest responds as - *Kenchi* (scissors).

Eita ki? (Showing water)

The rest responds as -*Paani* (water).

Tor Dada/Nanar Naam ki?

The rest responds as - *Malai*.

Then he says - *TaileIttu talai* and dives underwater.

As soon as s/he says this, the rest of the players swim around to touch him/her. S/he, who can touch, will find a *Nal* (a chance to start the game). Then the game starts again with the new player and rest chase to touch him/her and the game progresses like this.

In addition to these, some other important traditional games in the ‘Char’ region are - *Azar/Fos/Khapra Khela, Jalai/Julangi Khela, Ghas Khela, Dom/Kaiya Khela, Pachra Gutu Khela, Chagaldari Khela, Atal Patal/Chok-bandha Khela, Bandar-bandar Khela, Dhou Khela, Mon Para-pari Khela, Chango/Chago Khela, Pichala Khela, Rashi Tana Khela (tug of war), Kukura Juj (Cockfight), Biscuit Khela, Gaara-gaari/ Chan-Nori Khela, Chhi Bou Chhi/ Chhausi Khela, Gaas-Paathar- Chail Khela, Thappi, Chiyaar Khela etc.*

Conclusion:

From the discussions such as above, we can observe that there are more than 50 traditional games are prevalent in *Miya* society. But most of the games are now on the verge of extinction. The ignorance of government, educated youth, intellectuals, journalists and the conscious group of people are mainly responsible for the vulnerability of these sports and games. Though, modern games like virtual games on mobiles, laptops, TVs, etc. which are also equally responsible for people to lose interest in traditional games. On the other hand, the easy accessibility of internet services, social networks such as Facebook, Twitter etc. are also rapidly indulging into the *Miya* community. It has become addictive and eventually, these people are losing interest in the traditional games. The government can do a lot to revive and popularize these traditional games in the region. The government and other Cultural organizations can take steps like organizing various cultural programs, archiving visual and documented records of the traditional games under various schemes or through various media. This will enrich the cultural environment of “*Char-Chaparis*” and save their unique cultural identity from the verge of extinction.

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