

## **Jonbeel Mela: Study on an Aged old Barter System from Historical Perspective**

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**ABSTRACT:** It is a three-day Tiwa community fair held (annually) the weekend of Maghbihu at a historic place known as Dayang Belguri at Joonbeel. It is 5 km from Jagiroad in Morigaon district of Assam. A few days before the mela starts tribes like Tiwa, Karbi, Khasi and Jayantia of the north east come down from the hills with products and interchange their merchandise with the local people in a barter system. It is said to be a hi-tech age barter system and perhaps the only in India where barter system is still alive. This is not an ordinary fair but it is an important fair, where one can see the reflection of social, political, economic and cultural life of Tiwas. Even the traditional Gobha king, along with his officials, visits and collects taxes and important decision are taken. The main aim of this paper is to study the origin and growth of the Jonbeel mela. Secondly, aim of this study is to see the barter system and what role it plays in bringing harmony and brotherhood among the tribes and communities scattered in Northeast India. Thirdly, it is also to be studied the role of traditional Gobha King as; he visits the mela and collects taxes from his subjects.

**Keywords:** Beel, Barter system, Gobha King, Joon, Tiwa,

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

This mela has a long history of its origin and growth. Started later than 15<sup>th</sup> Century AD this was first organized several centuries ago by the Ahom kings to discuss the prevailing political situations. Jonbeel Mela is one of the most attractive and unique festival of Assam where Barter system comes alive. Just 30 km from state capital Guwahati, Assam 03 day long community fair held the weekend of Maghbihu at a historic place known as Dayang Belguri at Joonbeel. It is 5 km from Jagiroad in Morigaon district of Assam. A few days before the mela starts tribes like Tiwa, Karbi, Khasi and Jayantia of the north east come down from the hills with products and interchange their merchandise with the local people in a barter system.

The three day long festival takes its name from the lake next to which it is celebrated, the 'Jonbeel'. The *Jonbeel* (*Jon* and *Beel* are Assamese terms for Moon and wetland respectively) is so called because a large natural water body is shaped like a crescent moon.

**1.1 Origin and History of the Jonbeel Mela:** *Jonbeel Mela* is believed to have originated in 15<sup>th</sup> century AD. The Ahom kings led to the commencements of this fair for discussing the political situations prevailing in their kingdom.

**1.2 Features of Jonbeel Mela:** Fire worship, also known as *agni puja*, is performed before the start of *jonbeel mela* to pray for the well being of the mankind. Community fishing in the *jonbeel* wetland marks the beginning of the fair. *Jonbeel mela* is characterized by a huge and vibrant bazaar. Exquisite traditional dance and music can also be witnessed there, performed by the various tribes. Cock fights, group *melas* and exhibitions of varied artifacts form prime attractions for the visitors from all around the community. It also visited by the Gobha king, the king of tiwa tribes, along with his courtiers for collecting taxes from his subjects. On the day before the fair, a community feast is arranged by the king with his officers on the bank of *jonbeel*. Promoting the harmony and brotherhood among the various communities and tribes dwelling in the Northeast India is the main focus of *jonbeel mela*. An ambience of fun and gaiety can be experienced in the fair.

Apart from these, as soon as the barter trade was over by noon, it was time for the visitors to flock to the makeshift markets of household goods and spend the currencies with them to choose and buy from arranged products including wooden rice pounder, wooden furniture, quilt, mattress, fishing implements, bamboo and cane products wooden and plastic toys, agricultural implements, utensils. Some visitors could not resist the temptation of taking a ride on giant wheel in the *mela* venue. Hundreds of people took part in community fishing at the *Jonbeel*, a large wetland from which the annual fair got its name.

**1.3 Barter System at Jonbeel Mela:** Prior to the starting of the *mela* the Gobha king offered prayer to their ancestral God Fa Mahadew in the Dewsal temple. a few days prior to the fair, tribal community such as Jayantia, Tiwa, Khasi and Karbi belonging to the northeast India descend down the hills with their indigenous products and exchange their artifacts and basic articles of necessity with the local folks of the plains in a barter system. Herbs spices, fruits, ginger, etc. are brought by the people of the hills to interchange them with rice, cakes and other food stuffs that cannot be grown on hills. Numerous tribal villagers from the different parts of Assam arrive in this beautiful place to meet the folks of the plains for exchanging goods. During the three days of the festival temporary bamboo huts are created by these people where they cherish the festivity with great enthusiasm. It is referred to a hi-tech age barter system is still active. In fact this is quite an uncommon practice in this civilized modern society.

## II. OBJECTIVE:

- The main aim of this paper is to study the history of origin and growth of the *Jonbeel mela*.
- Secondly, aim of this study is to see the barter system and what role it plays in bringing harmony and brotherhood among the tribes and communities scattered in Northeast India.
- Thirdly, it is also to be studied the role of traditional Gobha King as; he visits the *mela* and collects taxes from his subjects.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This work is an empirical study and based on Secondary sources and personal observation. Data are collected from various books, journals, magazines, souvenir published by the North East Folk Cultural Festival Celebration Committee and internet sources.

## IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION:

The study was carried out to understand the history of origin and growth of *Jonbeel mela* or trade fair where age old barter system is still practicing at a historic place known as Dayang Belguri at Joonbeel. Secondly it was carried out to understand how this trade fair or *mela* could bring harmony and brotherhood among the various tribes between the hill tribe and plain tribe of Northeast India. And thirdly, what is the exact role being played by the traditional Gobha King.

It has been observed that the *Jonbeel mela* is quite ancient as one cane traced its origin during the Ahom period. And it is observed that the *mela* plays a significant role in bringing communal harmony and brotherhood among the various tribes. Though the barter system, which we are mostly talking about, it seems that the *mela* is held every year just in order to keep its tradition and rich heritage. By the last day of the *mela* as soon as the barter trade was over by noon, it was time for the visitors to flock to the makeshift markets of household goods and spend the currencies with them to choose and buy from arrange products including wooden rice pounder, wooden furniture, quilt, mattress, fishing implements, bamboo and cane products wooden and plastic toys, agricultural implements, utensils.

Thirdly, the Gobha King is still deserves all the respect and honour from his subjects. The king is still the chief of his subjects. Even today ‘we still sit here and hold council when the need arises’ as says present king Sumngal. During festivals and other occasions the King is taken to place called as Silsaang in all his finery and offered respect by the villagers. 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).

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