

# THIRD EYE EDITION

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## Cuckoo in cyberspace



Not being much of a singer or dancer, I suppose words are all I have to evoke the Bihu spirit. Soon after the nail-biting suspense of cobbling together our Rongali Bihu supplement, we have had a flurry of e-mails from abroad, flying in together like homing pigeons. My cousin Dr. Parineesha Nath wrote to say that she hosted the first ever Bihu celebration at Pittsburg, as there are very few Assamese families there. Another cousin, Priyendu Mohan Das in Guwahati and his brother-in-law Parikshit Roy (a software engineer) in Los Angeles have braved time zones and spanned continents to create [www.bihutoli.com](http://www.bihutoli.com). You may want to check it out.

Then again, Doctor Karuna Sagar Das has moved heaven and earth to bring out *Luitor Pora Thamesoloi* (Luit to Thames), a journal now in its thirteenth annual issue. It is a bridge of words and feelings that makes the world a huge *Bihutoli* where everybody knows everyone else and nobody is a stranger.

Going by all these novel and creative efforts being initiated by the Assamese abroad as well as at home, one pauses to wonder – what is at the root of this flowering of our native culture? Can we assume these creative intercontinental efforts are fuelled merely by nostalgia, and the loneliness of not truly belonging to the countries they live and work in? Is it actually an identity crisis, a sense of being adrift, and a driving need of the NRAs to feel at home by immersing themselves in all the elements of the culture they have left behind? It could even be interpreted that when one is overseas, his/her perception of Assam changes.

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If he/she were not to move away from the State, he/she would be just another cynic grumbling about government apathy, lack of health care, proliferation of garbage heaps. But far from home, Assam metamorphoses to a paradise from which one has been exiled, and in that faraway country he/she lives in, the home left behind takes on the shape of some golden myth.

This new phenomenon, a sort of *Asomiya* cultural imperialism – in a good sense, of course, makes us aware that there exists a split modernity in the psyche of the Assamese today, even more so among the Assamese abroad. It is a cycle that can be best understood by an example. Suppose Ankur is this brilliant geek who finds a great opportunity to work in an American firm, let's say in Houston. At first, he is homesick, terribly so, missing not only his mother, but also her fish *tenga* and *khori* pickle. But then, his ambition fuels him to put in his best. He works long hours, hangs out with colleagues, mostly white. None of them have heard of Assam. So it makes more sense to identify himself only as Indian, he decides. Then his folks back home zero in on a fair, convent educated girl who is brave enough to take on an unknown geek and an equally unknown country. He zips into home base alone with only a week's leave for the marriage and a couple of months later (the bride's visa headache over), she is off to join her geek. As a couple, suddenly they want to get in touch with other Assamese families. And they do. Then *voila*, nearly every weekend, each family is inviting the others for a barbecue or cocktails and they have a whale of a time singing Bhupen Hazarika songs, retelling tea garden bungalow ghost stories, and wondering what was the word for *thekera* in English, in case they had to ask for it at a supermarket. So, here they are – caught in the cusp of the old and the new, the familiar and the unknown, creating little Assams wherever they can get together.

Creator of the *Bihutoli* website, Parikshit Roy, based in Los Angeles, had this to say.

"In April 2011, I was taking videos of the cultural shows during the Rongali Bihu celebration – like many of us always do. The Bihu celebrations are a tradition in the southern California area (SoCAL). There are approximately 100 families with roots in Assam – who live in and around Los Angeles and San Diego. We all want to keep our Assamese roots alive and so preparations start about two months before Rongali and Bhogali Bihus for cultural programmes and other logistics (venue, Bihu *jalpans*, dinner, stage arrangements, etc.). The cultural programme is a big part of the celebrations. Chorus, dances, songs, skits, stand-up comedies are performed by everyone who wants to showcase their talents.

"Last year, the day after the Rongali Bihu function, I thought Hmm.., why not open a website for the Assamese diaspora living in different corners of the globe? We can organise the photos and videos by location, time, media type, or any other criteria as necessary. I was working with some offshore teams to build some web-based products at the time. But, I needed someone who understood the Assamese language, culture and Bihu in particular. I had noticed a talent in Priyendu Mohan Das, whom I call Bhaity. Despite being physically challenged from birth, he has completed his Bachelor's degree and picked up computer programming on his own. I assigned the [bihutoli.com](http://bihutoli.com) project to Bhaity in the middle of last

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year, with a deadline to launch the site during this year's Rongali Bihu. Bhaity did a great job, completing the project on time, despite some technical challenges which usually come with streaming of larger media files.

"By celebrating Bihu in foreign lands, we – as parents – also want to transmit our cultural traditions to the next generation, who in turn could keep these traditions alive in their times. During this process, we could not only capture their childhood, but it also became a means of discovering new talents/surprises. We, as a small Assamese community, come together with a sense of camaraderie and fellow-feeling and nothing can beat that. I will be very happy and will consider the effort successful if it can provide a platform for the Assamese communities living in Assam and abroad to share their Bihu experiences and memories through this website called [bihutoli.com](http://bihutoli.com)."

Says Priyendu Das, "When we first envisaged the *Bihutoli* website, we had decided to keep it simple, put up a simple, but elegant site that would keep the focus on only the content, and of course be user-friendly as well. Therefore, the first challenge was to find a good design. It may sound easy, but I had to sift through lots before selecting a suitable one. Initially, we were only thinking of putting videos on the site, but later decided to include images too. Since the content was to be generated by members of the website, we had to handle the videos and images for them. Managing the images was easy enough, but it was the videos which posed as the biggest challenge. Videos are big, resource hungry and come in various formats that cannot be played directly on a web browser. So what to do? Surprisingly, there weren't many solutions for this seemingly big problem. The site was more than half-complete and I was still looking, worried! One day, a bulb switched on somewhere and we finally decided to manage our videos through YouTube, the biggest and most well known video sharing site on the planet. Now the challenge was to use their tools to manage our videos."

Going by the ingenuity and commitment of all the people featured here, our culture is certainly in safe hands.