Jun Beel Mela- a heritage fair and
Traditional Kingship Institution of the Tiwa Tribes of Assam

Introduction:

The Jun Beel Mela is a centuries-old traditional fair which seems to be a virtual wonder in its own right. The most striking feature of this historic fair is that it has been keeping alive the age-old barter system as a means procuring goods. This Jun Beel Mela is organised every year in the month of Magh of Assamese calendar, that falls in the mid January, near the highway town Jagiroad in the Marigaon District of Assam. The three day annual event is being organized under the traditional king of the Tiwa tribes called ‘Gobha Deoraja’ that once ruled the area. The fair has been organized on the occasion of Magh Bihu, a traditional festival, of the King and a wide range of pristine customs and practices are associated with the fair.

In this fair, the different hill tribes like Tiwa, Karbi, khasi, Garo and others from the neighbouring West Karbianglong and Meghalaya and their counterparts from the plains exchange products directly without the involvement of money. Barter turns out in this unique fair in such a natural and spontaneous way, as if the ancient practice has been fossilised here in a living state. The fair is also considered very important instance of maintaining cordial relations between the hills and the plains as well as among the tribes and non-tribes.

The Tiwas, also known as Lalungs, are one of the oldest but underdeveloped tribal communities of Assam that are mostly found in the plains and hills of the central part of Assam. Apart from the village and clan level socio-political organizations, existence of some self-governing social institutions headed by a chief called ‘Raja’, means king, are found among these Indo-Mongoloid people. Besides being a traditional judiciary head of the areas and the community, with a council of Ministers (Darbar) and office-bearers, these chieftains are often regarded as Deoraja means- a religious king or a religious head. Apart from the Jun Beel Mela, a wide range of intangible cultural elements are found associated with these kingship institutions that includes social folk customs, believes, oral history, legends, folk practices, artifacts, historical objects, festivals and
ceremonies, judiciary procedures, management systems, inheritance regulations etc.

There are more than a dozen of such traditional Tiwa kings with their organized kingship institutions that are maintaining their existence till date. The kingship institution of Gobha is considered most significant and important as it was the paramount province among all. The Jun Beel Mela was organized under this Gobha king or Gobha Deoraja to felicitate trade among the hills and the plains as well as among the tribal and non-tribal.

Documentation and research work are the need of the hour for the preservation, promotion and exposure of this interesting and unique fair as well as the tribal kingship institution of the Tiwa community which has not yet done comprehensively in any form. Moreover it is also considered very important to include Jun Beel Mela in the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage as it is the one of the rarest instances of practicing the most pristine mode of trade in the history of human civilization in a living state.

**Objectives the Project:**

The proposed project would be a comprehensive research and documentation work on the heritage fair ‘June Beel Mela’ as well as on the tradition of the Kingship Institutions of the Tiwas of Assam for its preservation, promotion, protection and exposure. With this study and documentation, research-based data would be created to establish the historic fair as a Heritage Faire. For this, different significant aspects of the fair would be studied, analyzed and documented through audio-visual means.

**Implementation of the project:**

The research and documentation project would be carried out with the following tools and means –

a) Textual Documentation
b) Audio Recording System
c) Still Photography
d) Video Photography
The study would mainly cover the following aspects of the fair and the kingship institutions of the Tiwas -

- Origin and historic courses, present status, changing trends, traditional management system, customs, practices and beliefs, oral history, people’s participation in general,
- Social Folk Customs and Folk Practices, Worships, Festivals & Ceremonies, Traditional Judiciary, responsibilities and functions of the kingship institutions.
- Impact and role of the fair in the present day context, Jun beel Mela as a site of communal harmony and integration among different communities. Its role in maintaining congenial relation between hill dwellers and plain-dwellers.
- Significance of Barter System of the fair, Products exchanged in the fair, The reasons behind the existence of age-old Barter System in this day of modern way of life and convenient means of economy.
- Impact of modernity and other new developments, Threats to this fair and needs and means of preservation

**Time frame of the project:**

Commencement of the project : April 2014  
Duration of the Project : one and half year (18 Months)  
Completion of the Project : September 2015

**Geographical Area:**

The Tiwa chiefdoms are found in the Morigaon, Nagaon and Kamrup districts of Assam that are the geographical area where the highest concentration of the Tiwas are found. The Jun Beel Mela is held near the highway town Jagiroad in the Marigaon District. Thus the study has to be carried out mainly in these areas.
Conclusion

A final report will be prepared on the findings of the entire research and documentation work that will contain the textual part of the documentation as well as the records on audio visual format.

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