

Putla Biya: A Vanishing Folk Tradition of Bajali, Assam

I. Historical and Geographical Context

- Location: Tangarkur village, Barbata Bari, Sarih Mouza, Bajali district, Assam.
- Historical Roots: Possibly linked to Brahmins brought from Kanyakubja during the reign of Swargadeo Shiva Singha for worship at the Ashwaklanta Temple in Guwahati.
- Etymology: “Tangarkur” derives from tanga (forest) + kur (river pits), describing the village’s natural geography on the banks of the Kaldiya River.

II. Core Features of the Ritual

Element	Description
Timing	Celebrated on the 7th day of Rongali Bihu (Saat Bihu).
Participants	Exclusively women, especially gajmuri (elderly or childless women).
Materials	Puppets made from ulukher (grass/straw) and colourful threads.
Gender Symbolism	Only mothers represented; no fathers — symbolizing women’s agency.

Main Rituals	Puppet crafting, public viewing, symbolic wedding, immersion or hut-dwelling for nuptial simulation.
Emotional Core	Offers catharsis and fulfillment to childless women, simulating the joy of parenthood.

III. Socio-Cultural Significance

1. Ritual Empowerment of Women:
- A rare instance of female-only ceremonial authority.

○ Emphasizes maternal lineage and emotional bonding.
2. Community Healing:
- Acts as emotional therapy for women facing social stigma due to childlessness.

○ Transforms mourning into meaningful celebration via symbolic creation.
3. Feminist Ethnography:
- Challenges patriarchal notions of ritual authority.

○ Reframes motherhood beyond biological determinism — through creativity and symbolic agency.
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IV. Threats to Survival

Threat	Cause
Loss of Ulukher Grass	Tin roofing has replaced thatch, ending cultivation.

Decline of Thread Craft	Globalisation has replaced handwoven traditions.
Generational Disinterest	Youth disconnection from intangible heritage.
Lack of Publicity	Neglect by media and policy institutions.

V. Policy and Preservation Dimensions

Recommendations

1. Documentation and Archiving:
 - Include Putla Biya in Assam's Intangible Cultural Heritage list.
 - Collaborate with institutions like the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) and Sangeet Natak Akademi.
2. Cultural Tourism & Livelihood Linkages:
 - Promote as part of Bihu Tourism Circuit.
 - Provide grants for local artisans and gajmuri women to teach puppet-making in workshops.
3. Grassland Conservation:
 - Identify ulukher as a "heritage biodiversity resource" and support its eco-restoration under rural schemes like MGNREGA.
4. Educational Integration:
 - Introduce Putla Biya in local curriculum as an example of empathy-based folk pedagogy.

VI. GS Paper Linkages for UPSC/APSC

GS Paper	Relevance
GS I (Indian Heritage & Culture)	Folk traditions, intangible heritage, rituals in Assam.
GS II (Governance & Social Justice)	Role of women in cultural leadership; policies for tribal and folk culture.
GS III (Environment & Biodiversity)	Disappearing grass species (ulukher); community biodiversity traditions.
GS IV (Ethics & Essay)	Empathy, dignity of the childless, emotional justice through symbolic rituals.

VII. Model Mains Question (GS I)

Q. "Folk traditions are not just remnants of the past but living expressions of emotional, social, and cultural identities." Discuss with reference to the Putla Biya tradition of Assam.

Model Answer Key Points:

- Definition and brief background.
- Emotional resonance for childless women.
- Role in preserving gender-inclusive community rituals.
- Challenges from modernisation and environmental change.
- Suggest sustainable strategies for preservation.
- Link to constitutional values of dignity, culture (Article 29).

VIII. Broader Reflections

- Putla Biya is not merely a folk tradition—it is a gentle protest against erasure, a feminist imagination of family, and a ritual of care and catharsis. It reaffirms that every culture has its own poetry of pain, and that even grief can be woven into hope using colourful threads and straw.