

Biren Borkotoky's Poem

Issue: Vol. V, No. 2, August-October, 2026

How Far off is Borjoha Village?

How far off is Borjoha village?
Can't recall who was it that asked
The memories of Borjoha village draw away my mind
though the passage of time has disconcerted it,
As you take the turn on the road
there it is on the bank of the Dikhou river—
My beloved Borjoha village.
How many rows of palash and modar bloomed there
with fire-like red hue at the touch of Phagun.
To convey the message of Bihu to thousand villages
perhaps the common lora has perched on
the tall Kadam tree at the edge of the village
Flying over the som tree grove in that sky
how many times the brainfever bird may have cried.
Hearing her shrill cry since midnight
who knows how many times the village belle Sumola
became distracted while winding her handloom pirn.
How far off is Borjoha village?
The dry Chote month has arrived
In the front yards of many households,
pulling the veils on their heads – how many
daughters-in-law who got married only months back
in Aghon or Phagun, assisted by the unmarried
daughters of the households, have laid the warping“
with red border strips – the hue of Shimalu flowers
the elder brothers of their husbands pass by carrying bundles of firewoods—
Having to pull forth the veils on their heads repeatedly,
the daughters-in-law become confused
how many pairs of border strips have been set?
The skein-winder inside the mind of the
unmarried daughters of the household spins
as the familiar young man from Meteka
passes by the road in front
By no means spun the skein-winder in her hand.
Although she has been struggling to kindle
the fire so long in the hearth blowing the damp firewood repeatedly
scolding and cursing from her areca nut – stained
mouth, the mother-in-law has undone the tangle
in the yarn of the warp
From a distant village came here Keshoram
every now and then with a mind to set up
a family
Finding Umoli weaving at her loom, he
spoke out his heart :
On the first day of Bohag you'll give me
a gamosa embellished with tiny tendril—
like flower motifs
And I'll bring a screwpine flower

for your hair bun.
 How far off is Borjoha village?
 By now, the elderly people of the village —
 the mainstay of the community — perhaps have
 started twisting the fibres to make cattle ropes
 for the Bihu, sitting below the bokul tree of
 the village prayer hall.
 With every twist of the fibre how many times
 have they wound the memory of those
 their intoxicating younger days.
 There's not much distance left to reach
 Borjoha village
 You'll reach the ghat from where
 water is fetched
 From far you'll hear that too too tweet sound
 of hornpipe played on by some
 seemingly familiar young man who crosses
 the ghat riding a buffalo.
 How many times the village belles —Bimalas and
 Kamalas— slip on this road while
 carrying water-pitchers.
 The rhythmic pattern of the folk drum beats
 keeps ringing intermittently,
 The jaw harp responds
 someone somewhere sings rural idylls
 The sound of each and every wooden rice pounder
 of the village
 lets out the news of Bihu.
 Its not very far to Borjoha village
 That very Borjoha I come by.

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1. *Polash*: Flame of the forest, tree.
 2. *Modar*: Indian coral tree, Tiger's claw.
 3. *Shimalu*: Red silk cotton tree.
 4. *Kadam*: Burflower tree.
 5. *Som tree*: Eri silk worms are fed leaves of this tree.
 6. *Bokul tree*: Spanish cherry, Indian Medlar, Bullet wood tree.
 7. *Gamosa*: A type of Assamese ethnic towel woven in handloom normally embellished with flower mofis in red colour and at times with plain border strips in red colour. It is given as a token of affection, love and respect.
 8. In Assamese (Indian as well) culture, wives of younger brothers of a man are often considered as "daughters- in- law" and they cover their heads with veil in front of him as a mark of respect.
 9. *Bihu*: The traditional Assamese festival — often called the National Festival of Assam— celebrated at three different times each recognising a different agricultural cycle of paddy rice. Of these – Magh Bihu is vibrant post harvest festival celebrating plenitude with feasting in mid January. Bohag Bihu is the spring festival celebrated with song, dance and merriment. In the rural and agricultural societies, it is also time for young men and women to start conjugal life. From long before the Bihu, the womenfolk in villages start pounding rice etc as a preparation for the massive quantities of various types of rice cakes, patties and other snacks required for the festival.
 10. *Cattle ropes*: During Bihu festival the cattle are given new ropes.
 11. *Aghon, Phagun, Chote*: Names of months in Assamese corresponding roughly to – (i) mid November to Mid December; (ii) Mid January to Mid February, (iii) mid March to mid April.

Translated by **Uttam Duorah**

Biren Borkotoky (1924–2002) was an Assamese poet, writer, educationist, and freedom fighter. *Manvantar*, *Chirantan*, and *Chinaki Prithibi* are his poetry collections. He served as the President of the Kampur session of the Asam Sahitya Sabha held in 1986.

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