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# THE IMPACT OF MODERNIZATION ON JUNBEEL MELA: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

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## ABSTRACT

*Junbeel Mela is a traditional fair of the Tiwa tribe of Assam, India which has been a cultural event for centuries and is known for its barter system and cultural activities. However, the process of modernization has brought some changes in the economic, social, cultural and environmental aspects of the Mela. This paper aims to analyze the effects of modernization on Junbeel Mela with special reference to the aspects of continuity and change. Based on ethnographic observations, interviews with the members of the Mela community, and historical records, this paper examines how modernization has impacted Mela's practices and how some aspects of the culture have remained intact. The study indicates that although the process of modernization has affected the barter system in terms of commercialization and its partial disappearance, the main cultural practices and the values of totemism remain stable. The paper concludes with a discussion on the future of Junbeel Mela based on these changes and recommendations on how to strike a balance between tradition and modernity to ensure that Mela remains culturally relevant.*

## INTRODUCTION

Joonbeel Mela, which is celebrated near the Joonbeel, a crescent shaped water body, is a festival that unites people of different ethnic groups especially the Tiwa (Lalung) community from the hills and the plains. The fair is not only a place where people can trade goods without the use of money but also a place where people can come together and celebrate their togetherness, cultural practices, and beliefs. It depicts the culture of integration and coexistence of the various communities in Assam that have been imbibed into the society (Adhyapak, 2023). Junbeel Mela is an annual festival celebrated in the Morigaon district of Assam, India where thousands of people from the Tiwa tribe and other tribes participate. The Mela is especially famous for the barter system where people from different areas come to exchange goods without the use of money ( Doloi et al.,2024). This practice has been in existence for several centuries and is one of the few trade practices that existed before the use of currency. Besides the economic role, Junbeel Mela is a cultural and religious event, where people perform different rituals, sing and dance, and engage in other activities that strengthen the social ties between them. The place where the mela is held is named after a large, crescent moon shaped natural water body. The event has a historical background associated with the folklore of the Tiwa tribes of Morigaon and Kamrup( Mech, 2019). However, the rituals that are followed during Junbeel Mela are gradually being threatened by the forces of modernity. The use of money and other modern business practices have slowly reduced the use of barter trade as a means of exchange. In the same way, changes in culture brought about by tourism, media, and technology have affected the way the Mela is celebrated and this has raised questions about the loss of cultural values. Other factors such as social and environmental issues like the influx of outsiders and the effects of large crowds on the environment add another dimension to the issue. In the case of Junbeel Mela, modernization has brought changes in the economic aspect of the society such as the use of money and commercialization of the event which has replaced the barter system. The theoretical perspectives from cultural anthropology indicate that although modernization is a process that undermines traditional practices, it can also be a process of reinvention of these practices.

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## OBJECTIVE OF THIS STUDY

This paper aims to analyze the effects of modernization on Junbeel Mela with special reference to the features of change and continuity. The central research question is: In what ways has the process of modernization impacted the traditional practices of Junbeel Mela and to what extent has the festival been able to sustain the changes? Therefore, this study seeks to add to the existing literature on how indigenous cultural practices transform in the face of modernity by analyzing the economic, cultural, social, and environmental aspects of Junbeel Mela.

## METHODOLOGY

The research method used in this study is qualitative research since it effectively captures the multifaceted effects of modernization on Junbeel Mela. The study is qualitative in the sense that it explores the experiences of the Tiwa community and other people in the Mela. This approach enables one to understand the cultural significance of the Mela and how the significance is being transformed by modernity.

The data collection for this study was done through various approaches to capture all the aspects of the effects of modernization on Junbeel Mela. The data gathered from participant observation, interviews, archival research, and surveys were analyzed through the process of thematic coding. This method entailed searching for patterns and trends in the data concerning the effects of modernization on Junbeel Mela. The themes were then grouped into economic, cultural, social, and environmental contexts to systematically examine how modernization has impacted each of the aspects of the Mela.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS STUDY

Although there are many articles and books written about the historical and cultural importance of Junbeel Mela, very little research has been done on the effects of modernization on the Mela. This paper seeks to address these gaps by offering a detailed analysis of how modernization has impacted Junbeel Mela and which aspects of the Mela have been most resistant to these changes.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The origins of Junbeel Mela can be traced back to ancient times, with historical records indicating that it has been a central event for the Tiwa tribe and neighboring communities for centuries (Medak & Hazarika, 2017). The Mela is not only an economic event but also a cultural and religious one, featuring rituals that are deeply embedded in the Tiwa way of life ( Zaman & Medhi , 2023). Scholars have noted that the barter system at Junbeel Mela is one of the last surviving examples of pre-currency trade practices in India, making it a unique subject of study in the fields of anthropology and economics ( Roy, 2017).

Modernization, characterized by economic development, technological advancement, and social change, has had profound effects on traditional cultural practices worldwide (Andreeva et al., 2017). This study draws on theories of cultural change and continuity, particularly those proposed by Clifford Geertz (1973) and Arjun Appadurai (1996). Geertz's concept of "thick description" provides a method for understanding how cultural practices, such as those at Junbeel Mela, are imbued with meaning and how these meanings change over time. Appadurai's notion of "global cultural flows" offers insights into how modernization influences cultural practices through the spread of ideas, technologies, and people.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Junbeel Mela in Assam illustrates the complex interplay between modernization and tradition. Economic, cultural, and environmental shifts have transformed the Mela, reflecting broader changes in society. This analysis explores the impacts of modernization on trade practices, cultural authenticity, and environmental sustainability at this historic event.

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1. Economic Impact of Modernization

The shift from barter to currency is also linked to the broader economic changes occurring in Assam and the rest of India. The proliferation of modern markets and the growing penetration of currency into rural economies have led to a decline in traditional trade practices, such as those observed at Junbeel Mela. This transition has had mixed effects: while some community members appreciate the convenience and broader range of goods available through monetary transactions, others lament the loss of the traditional barter system, which they see as a key element of their cultural identity.

**Table 1: Changes in Trade Practices at Junbeel Mela**

| Period | Barter System | Currency Use | Commercialization |
|---|---|---|---|
| Pre-1990 | High | Low | Low |
| 1990-2000 | Moderate | Moderate | Moderate |
| 2000- Present | Low | High | High |

The results of the study indicate a clear shift from the traditional barter system to the use of currency at Junbeel Mela. As shown in Table 1, the reliance on barter has decreased significantly since the 1990s, with modern economic practices taking their place.

2. Cultural Impact of Modernization

Modernization has also affected the cultural aspects of Junbeel Mela in a very significant manner. The modernity of technology, tourism, and media has changed the way the Mela is viewed and celebrated. For example, the dances and songs that were originally religious are now performed for the sake of entertaining the foreigners, which some of the inhabitants of the country think is wrong. Interviews and questionnaires revealed that the younger generations are more receptive to these changes as they view them as the evolution of the Mela. Nonetheless, the participants of the older generation are concerned about the fact that the commercialization of the Mela through the tourism and media industry has taken away the originality of the event. According to Appadurai (1996), the process of globalization and modernization results in the commercialization of culture, which may create conflicts in the groups that aim at maintaining their cultural heritage.

3. Social and Environmental Impact of Modernization

Modernization has also brought about significant social and environmental changes at Junbeel Mela. The influx of tourists and the increasing scale of the event have led to issues such as overcrowding, waste management challenges, and strain on local resources. Moreover, the social dynamics within the community are changing as modern values and lifestyles intersect with traditional ones.

**Table 2: Environmental Challenges at Junbeel Mela**

| Environmental Issue | Impact Level | Main Causes |
|---|---|---|
| Waste Management | High | Increased tourism, Lack of facilities |
| Deforestation | Moderate | Expansion of the Mela grounds |
| Water Pollution | High | Increased waste and sanitation issues |

As highlighted in Table 2, environmental concerns are increasingly prominent at Junbeel Mela. The expansion of the Mela grounds to accommodate more participants and tourists has led to deforestation and other ecological impacts. Additionally, water pollution has become a significant issue due to inadequate waste disposal systems and the large number of visitors. These environmental challenges are exacerbated by the lack of infrastructure to manage the increased scale of the event.

Despite these challenges, the social fabric of the Tiwa community remains strong, with many traditional practices and communal values still intact. Community leaders and elders play a crucial role in maintaining these traditions, even

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as they adapt to modern influences. The importance of these cultural custodians in ensuring that the core values and practices of Junbeel Mela are preserved for future generations.

4. Continuity Amidst Change

It is evident that modernization has affected Junbeel Mela in a way but some aspects of the Mela have remained quite resistant. The basic rituals like the ceremonial lighting of the Junbeel, a large fire symbolizing the sun, are still carried out with a lot of respect. These rituals which are part of Tiwa cosmology have remained relevant despite the influence of modernity. This continuity is a clear indication that the Tiwa community has a strong cultural base, and they have not wavered in their efforts to uphold their culture. Geertz (1973) opines that culture is a part of society and therefore, it is very hard to change even when there is pressure from other societies.

**Recommendations**

To overcome the challenges and to make the best use of the opportunities that are offered by the process of modernization at Junbeel Mela, several measures are required. The following strategies can be adopted to ensure that the positive impacts of modernization are achieved while at the same time maintaining the cultural and environmental aspects of the Mela. Below are several key recommendations to ensure the continued vitality and sustainability of Junbeel Mela:

1. Preserve Core Traditions

*Barter System:* Despite the pressures of modernization, efforts should be made to preserve the traditional barter system, even if it's symbolic. This could involve specific times or designated areas where bartering is encouraged, preserving the essence of the Mela.

*Cultural Practices:* Core cultural activities, such as rituals, music, dance, and traditional attire, should be prioritized and preserved. Involving the elders of the community to guide and participate in these activities ensures the continuity of these practices.

2. Promote Cultural Education:

*Workshops and Educational Programs:* Organize workshops during the Mela to educate visitors about the historical significance and cultural practices of the Tiwa tribe. This will help raise awareness and appreciation among younger generations and outsiders.

*Documentation and Archiving:* Creating digital archives of Mela's traditions, including stories, rituals, and practices, can help in preserving them for future generations and make them accessible to a broader audience.

3. Adaptation to Modernity:

*Integrating Modern Elements:* While respecting traditions, provide an opportunity to introduce elements that are relevant to Mela's values. For instance, the use of environmentally friendly technologies can be adopted to make the event an environmentally sustainable one.

*Commercial Aspects:* Modernization often brings commercialization. But it is important to achieve a balance. For example, the local art and cuisine can be marketed together with contemporary products with an emphasis on local artists.

4. Community Involvement and Ownership:

*Inclusive Decision-Making*: Engage the local community, especially the Tiwa tribe, in decision-making processes related to the Mela. This ensures that any modernization aligns with their values and preserves the cultural essence.

*Youth Engagement:* Encourage the younger generation to take an active role in organizing and participating in the Mela. Their involvement ensures that the traditions continue while also allowing for innovative ideas.

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5. Promote Sustainable Tourism:
*Cultural Tourism*: Promote the Mela as a cultural tourism destination, but with guidelines that ensure tourists respect the traditions and environment. This could be in the form of educational tourism or cultural interchangeability programs.

*Environmental Considerations*: Discuss the environmental effects of the Mela and incorporate measures such as waste disposal, the use of environmentally friendly products, and raising awareness of the effects of the Mela on the environment.

6. Media and Technology Use:
*Digital Platforms*: Utilize digital platforms to promote the Mela globally but ensure that the portrayal remains authentic. Live streaming cultural events or creating virtual tours can attract a wider audience without compromising tradition.

*Social media*: Leverage social media to create awareness and attract younger audiences, using it as a tool to showcase traditional practices and educate people on their significance.

7. Research and Continuous Monitoring:
*Continuous Ethnographic Studies*: Carry out surveys from time to time to assess the impact of modernization on the Mela and make changes accordingly. This assists in the identification of areas that are threatened by traditions and where modernity can be advanced without negative consequences.

*Feedback Mechanism*: Create a feedback system through which the members of the community and visitors can give their opinions on how to strike a balance between the two.

By implementing these strategies, Junbeel Mela can continue to evolve while maintaining its cultural integrity, ensuring its relevance for future generations.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the effects of modernization on Junbeel Mela with emphasis on the aspects of continuity and change. The study shows that modernization has brought about a change in the economic, cultural, social and environmental aspects of the Mela but there are some aspects which have not changed. The gradual disappearance of the barter system and the growing commercialization of the Mela are indicative of the general trends in the region's economy and culture. However, the continuity of the key rituals and the unity of the Tiwa people prove that the indigenous culture remains rather stable. The study also shows the interaction between tradition and modernity, and how culture can be fluid and still retain its significance in the context of change. The results also underscore the reasonable modernization that would consider the cultural values of Indigenous people like the Tiwa. More studies could be conducted to explore the effects of modernization on Junbeel Mela and other such cultural fairs in the long run. Cross-cultural comparisons with other indigenous festivals in India and other parts of the world could also be useful in understanding how different societies deal with the process of modernization.

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