



# পছোৱা

P O S O O W A

News & Events of the Assamese People Living Around the World  
**VOLUME 34, ISSUE NO. 5 :: FEBRUARY 2007**



*Pani Toola or Raising Water is an important part of the traditional Assamese Hindu wedding. Several times during the course of an usual two-day wedding, a small group of women trudge to a source of fresh water, collect or raise a pot of water which is later used in the abluion of the bride or the groom. Here, we see water being raised from the stream in Basistha in Guwahati during a recent wedding. Photo by Navanita Saikia of Guwahati.*



## Table of content:

- Page 2: Elly Bhuyan
- Page 3: Is Ethanol the Right Alternative to Fuel?
- Page 4: Pilgrimage
- Page 5: Florida Magh Bihu Celebration
- Page 7: Assam 2007: Laurel, MD

# Elly Bhuyan



Dr. Elly Barua-Bhuyan

This February 2007, Dr. Elly Barua-Bhuyan was awarded the honor of Distinguished Life Fellow by the American Psychiatric Association (APA). Distinguished Life Fellow marks the highest level of recognition given by the APA. This award signifies Dr. Barua-Bhuyan's many years of leadership, service, and high quality patient care.

When Dr. Barua-Bhuyan first started practice in 1977, it was a difficult time for immigrant Indian physicians to establish themselves and draw in patients. It was also a challenging time for female physicians. Dr. Barua-Bhuyan had to compete with many colleagues, all whom were white American males. The early years of her private practice were very slow (she recalls getting one or two new patients per week). To keep herself busy, Dr. Barua-Bhuyan served in two different mental health centers in the St. Louis area, often driving 100 miles each day between the different clinics and her own office. Thirty years later, Dr. Barua-Bhuyan has successfully built her private practice. She is currently one of the ten busiest psychiatric practitioners in the St. Louis metropolitan area.

Dr. Barua-Bhuyan continues her service to community mental health, as the Medical Director at Comtre and Provident Counseling, two clinics that serve indigent populations. She has also served as the board member of several nonprofit organizations in the medical and Assamese communities and has spearheaded a number of highly successful and significant community service projects in Assam; the most noteworthy of which is the Promode Lal Baruah and Swarnalata Baruah Memorial Trust at Lamb Road, Guwahati.

Dr. Barua-Bhuyan still manages to find time to enjoy playing badminton twice a week and travels to regional tournaments when possible and is an

insatiable sports-fan. She has two children and four grandchildren.

Though not a typical grandmother, the youngest granddaughter, Minali, is already learning to watch professional sports during her weekend visits to her Aita's house.



By Rupalim Bhuyan (Lawrence, Kansas) and Chandan Mahanta (St. Louis)

## American Psychiatric Association

1000 Wilson Boulevard  
Suite 1835  
Arlington, VA 22209  
Telephone 703.907.7300  
Fax 703.907.1085  
E-mail [apa@psych.org](mailto:apa@psych.org)  
Internet [www.psych.org](http://www.psych.org)

February 5, 2007

Elly Bhuyan, M.D.  
443 N New Ballas Rd  
St Louis, MO 63141-6800

Dear Dr. Bhuyan:

It is an honor and privilege for me to convey congratulations on attaining Distinguished Life Fellow status. As a Distinguished Life Fellow in the American Psychiatric Association, you have achieved the highest honor that your profession can bestow. You have my personal gratitude for your years of service to your patients and to your profession.

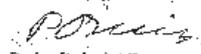
I also would like to extend a cordial invitation for you to attend the Convocation of Distinguished Fellows where your new status will be officially recognized. The ceremony will be held during the APA Annual Meeting in San Diego, California on Monday, May 21, 2007, at 5:30 p.m., in the San Diego Convention Center, Ballroom 20, Upper Level.

While the Convocation will begin at 5:30 p.m., we are requesting that you arrive promptly at 4:45 p.m., to assemble. There will be a seating area reserved for the Distinguished Life Fellows, as well as one reserved for your guests. Formal attire is optional for this occasion. If, regrettably, you are unable to be present, your medallion will be mailed to you.

A special dues rate was established for those reaching Life status. As a Distinguished Life Fellow, you are being billed  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the full rate for the first five years of Life status. You will then be billed  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the full rate for the following five years of Life status and after ten years of holding Life status will become dues-exempt. You are being afforded the rights and privileges associated with your former Distinguished Fellow status including receipt of *The American Journal of Psychiatry* and *Psychiatric News*. A Distinguished Life Fellow certificate will be mailed to you later this year.

I look forward to seeing you at the Convocation ceremony.

Sincerely,

  
Pedro Ruiz, M.D.  
President

cc: Eastern Missouri Psychiatric Society



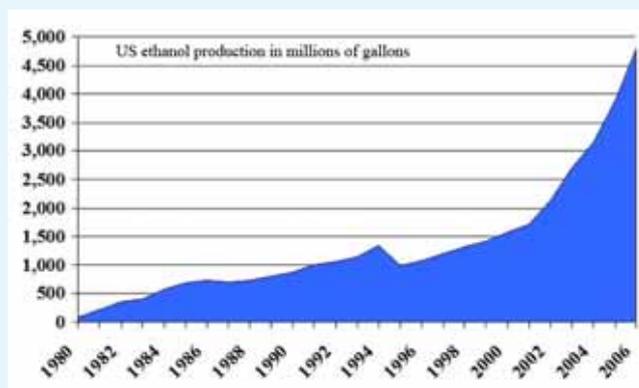
# Is Ethanol the Right Alternative to Fuel?

The traditional rural lifestyle of the American Midwest has been in a steady decline for decades as people have flocked to urban and suburban areas. But small-town living in states such as Iowa is getting a new boost from a controversial new fuel, ethanol.

Ethanol, a product of fermenting organic matter, is a gasoline substitute derived from plants such as sugarcane and grains. In the United States, ethanol mainly comes from feed corn. In the past, feed corn has often been produced in surplus - but those were the days before ethanol really got a foothold.

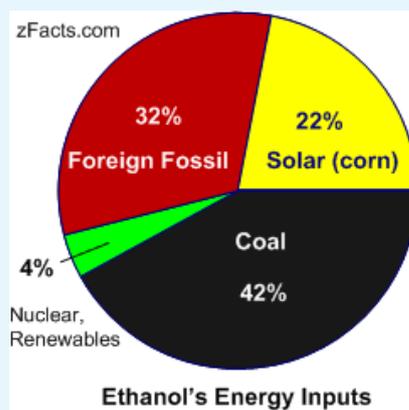
Now, the ethanol business is booming. Ethanol production plants are going up by the dozens, new distilling technologies are being developed and President Bush even mentioned a need for ethanol in his State of the Union address in January 2007. With millions of dollars of funding in place, signs are pointing to ethanol's status as the fuel of the future.

But ethanol has many critics who warn of the biofuel's shortcomings. Some believe that it can never compete with oil-derived gasoline for a variety of reasons, and that ethanol research and development should simply be abandoned. However, their claims are regularly contested as ethanol production technology is refined. Perhaps the most commonly cited claim against ethanol is that the energy required to produce it is more than the energy it yields when burned.



This claim is countered by a study by the U.S. Department of Energy, which found that “for every unit of energy that goes into growing corn and turning it into ethanol, we get back about one-third more energy as automotive fuel.” Though ethanol production was energy negative when first introduced, industry improvements have made this concern largely obsolete. The Department of Energy also states that the energy ratio of ethanol can only improve with continued development; in the future, the fuel may yield twice the amount of energy put into its production. Improved techniques also counter another anti-ethanol claim: the biofuel is not actually environmentally friendly, as its promoters often claim.

The energy that goes into ethanol's distillation process has to come from some source, and most often the energy is derived from the polluting fossil fuels ethanol claims to replace. Unfortunately, source energy will always be necessary in some form, but with alternative



energies like wind or nuclear power also on the rise, the proportion of source energy from burning petroleum products could decrease. Hope also lies in another of the president's State of the Union initiatives, which puts funding into research for clean coal. America's supply of coal is enormous, and technologies are available which would make coal-burning less polluting than in the past. The net result is it would make it possible to realize ethanol's most important advantage, thus eliminating the use of foreign oil.

Even today, the amount of foreign oil used to create ethanol is very small, with coal- and natural gas-produced electricity providing most of the energy input. And of course ethanol itself has the potential to replace petroleum-based gasoline, at least in part. This is the heart of an argument for ethanol - the vast sums of money Americans spend on fueling their cars could go to American companies and co-ops instead of large corporations tied to the Middle East.

Another concern is that large-scale ethanol production will be too demanding on our resources. With more corn going into fuel, there would theoretically be less available for food and other corn-based products; everything from corn-fed beef to corn syrup-infused soft drinks could see a rise in price as demand increases. These circumstances may not come to pass, however, for two reasons.

First, it follows the logic of markets that supply would increase to meet demand. As demand for and the price of ethanol increase, production would become profitable and more farmers would be willing to produce the corn required. And demand for corn to ferment into ethanol may not increase indefinitely, either; in the next few years the United States will get its first ethanol production facility capable of making the biofuel from plant “waste” products like prairie grass and cornstalks. Although the process of making ethanol from plant leftovers is more expensive, the material required is much cheaper than corn, lessening the strain on the corn market.

Overall, this fuel is not a solution that can instantly deprive America from its oil dependence, but its benefits prevail over its flaws. Ethanol remains a viable, crucial product that can take us in the right direction.

*Contributed by Satyam K Bhuyan, Ames, Iowa*

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# The Pilgrimage

*Jukti Kalita*



*Jukti Kalita, a marketing professional with a Ph.D. from Columbia University has written several short-stories and translated several Assamese stories to English.*

The *maulavi* asked Zeenat for the third time if the *mehr* - the money that she had ceremonially asked for and that her would-be husband was agreeing to pay in the event of a *taalaaq* was acceptable. Although, deep emotions ruled her mind on this evening of their wedding at the Hyatt in Princeton, New Jersey, she was outwardly calm. She whispered 'yes' once again to her brother who was sitting next to her on the plush carpet in the hotel's wedding hall. She was wearing a beautiful smile - it was visible through the fine silk see-through veil that covered her head and most of her face. Zeenat's brother, in turn, recited the affirmative back to the priest. Zeenat had asked for a mere \$10,000. Neither her parents nor her brother did prompt her for any particular amount as they would in a typical Islamic marriage. He was simply relaying her words to the priest.

Zeenat knew fully well that this meager one-time alimony would not help her beyond a few months in case of a *taalaaq*, especially if she did not have a good job then. But, she was not worried. This was a token gesture that she had agreed to abide by for the sake of her love for Imran. Imran and the *maulavi* had explained to her that Islam requires a binding separation agreement before a *nikaah* can be solemnized. Being an educated girl in the era of Madonnas and Sharon Stones, she did not expect a dole from her ex-husband in case their marriage failed. She fully expected to work, to be able support herself in the future and did not foresee a divorce spelling a shrunken standard of living. But, she and her husband were so fully devoted to each other that she expected their union to last forever - she could not imagine that her love for him to ever ebb from the height it had risen to. She may be a Muslim girl, but naïve she was not. And, she knew that America was her home and not Pakistan or India. Although, she was born to parents from India, she had spent nearly all her life in America. She was progressive and liberal in her outlook. She knew fully well that American divorce laws will supercede such '*mehr*' agreements and they would have to share their joints assets equally if their marriage failed.

There was going to be no looking back now. She had determinedly cast her future in the same net with Imran and expectantly waited to bathe in the unbounded love of an eastern marriage within the reasonable bounds that it imposes, the responsibilities that go with it and have a house full of jumping, romping and beautiful children. Her trust in Imran was complete. She knew in the heart of heart that her husband-to-be fully reciprocated her feeling towards him - she witnessed it in his every word and every action. There was no doubt in her mind about the rightness of the decision that she had taken and the success of the path they together were embarking upon. Their destinies would be intertwined

from then on and she was completely comfortable with that idea.

The *maulavi* then went to Imran who was sitting a few feet away with his father, also on the carpet, and asked him, also for the third time, if he was willing to pay \$10,000 in the unforeseen event of a *talaq*.

"Yes, I will. I love Zeenat dearly and I agree to pay this amount."

"I hereby pronounce that the *nikaah* of Imran and Zeenat Hussein is now complete" - said the *maulavi*. "Imran and Zeenat are now husband and wife in the eyes of *khudaa*. *Allah-O-Akbar*".

He continued with a chant of a few lines from Koran in Arabic - the language of the prophet.

*"Ai-ju-billah-hi mina-shai tuwanir raajim,  
Bismillah-hir rahima-nir rahim,  
Al-haamdo lilla hi rabbil al-laalim,  
Ar rahma-nir rahim."*

(English translation)

*Taalaaq* is Arabic word which means freedom from the bond of marriage or in simple words, a divorce. Koran allows a Muslim man to end a marital relationship by uttering that supremely powerful word three times in front of his wife and two witnesses. All he needs to do is to convince himself that the marriage was not working or it needed to be ended for any other reason and then say - '*taalaaq, taalaaq, taalaaq*' and with that the marriage, the years of shared relationship, years of love and affection, or of dislike and hatred that witness the joint life would come to an abrupt dissolution.

Under strict *Koranic* laws, the woman does not have any say in the matter of divorce. However, because they were in the US for the marriage to legally end, one of them would have to initiate it under the civil codes. Imran's parents and *maulavi* pointed out to Zeenat she need not worry for despite the apparent ease of divorce, it was a lot less common in Pakistan and other Muslim countries than in the west. That was the case, they had added, among the Muslims in the US also.

Koran - according to priests, respects women's rights and the wedding can not be solemnized until the bride and the groom agreed upon the *mehr*. To start with, the Islamic priest asked the bride to quote a specific amount, which he relayed to the groom. This initiated a process of negotiation that lasted three rounds, culminating in an agreement and the sealing of the marriage. This money, according to the priest, ensures that the woman is not left to the mercy of *khuda* if and when a divorce materializes, however unanticipated or unwanted it may be. However, in practice on such auspicious days, most brides who tend to be heavy on sentiments and full of romance ask for amounts that are not sufficient to live on for more than a few months.

*Nikaah* is the marriage contract blessed by the Koran and can only be completed between two willing parties under the supervision of a priest or a *maulavi*.

There was no ritual kissing of the bride and the groom as in a western wedding upon pronouncements by the *maulavi* that the *nikaah* had been solemnized. After all

this was an Islamic affair and there were many elderly invitees. Kissing and open display of affection would be a mark of disrespect to the older guests especially those who had come all the way from the tradition-soaked culture of Pakistan.

It was not that they did not show their love toward each other in private or in the presence of friends of their generation. They did so quite passionately – they held their hands together, felt each other’s bodies and kissed like any normal American couple. However, there was a limit to what they could do that night. There was going to be some social dancing that night to the tune of soft and melodious

*Bollywood* songs – that was as far as they could push the boundaries without touching any nervous chord among the guests. There would also be a session of *kawaali*. It is a traditional Pakistani or north-Indian music session where mostly men would be singing half-religious songs in Urdu. A professional group had been invited from Toronto to perform.

In any case, some of their friends planned a post-wedding party away from the curious eyes of the elderly for them to have more fun. In such parties among the second generation of the immigrants from the Indian subcontinent, the guests would dance to the pulsing energy of *Bhangra*

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## Florida Magh Bihu Celebration



Magh Bihu was celebrated by the Assamese residents of Florida during the evening 13th of January in the residence of Nabajyoti Barkakati in Tampa, Florida. Celebrations continued through the night. A symbolic meji was burned on the morning of the 14th.

*Photos by Ganesh Bora, Lake Alfred, Florida*

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beats as well to that of the American rock and roll. A well-known DJ from New York was going to entertain them at a hotel in Edison. The dress code would also be less traditional - girls could dress in western gowns or dresses to that party.

Since Imran and Zeenat had already registered their marriage in the Princeton municipal court, they were legally married as well.

The audience that was quiet while the ritual was going on broke out with congratulations. There was laughter and smile all around. Imran and his new wife were now allowed to sit next to each other in a specially decorated sofa in the center of the wedding hall. This was a concession that the *maulavi* had agreed to make given the demands and the sensitivities of the generation that grew up in America with its liberal mores. Zeenat was led to the sofa by Imran's sister - there the veil covering her face was removed.

For the first time that night everybody could see Zeenat's radiating face. She looked gorgeous in her beautiful wedding dress - a flowery *salwar kameej* with golden hand embroidery and a matching soft *dupatta* - the soft scarf that she rolled around her neck. An Indian hair stylist from Oak Tree in Edison did her long black hair - it was parted in the middle and combed backward. She also thinned Zeenat's eyebrows - a treatment that many a South Asian women enjoy. The stylist had carefully pinned a few violet flowers to the folds of her hair. Her palms had the *henna* decorations - intricate designs that the make-up artist had etched with herbal colors during a long session in the afternoon. Her hands were completely dry now - she liked the smell of the colors. The beautiful shapes will stay on her hands for a couple of weeks before fading away. Pinkish white powder that was applied on her face added a glow to her face.

A 24-karat gold necklace that must weigh at least three ounces and a set of diamond earrings added to her charm that night. The wedding ring was stunning - it was also made of gold and was studded with a large ruby. The bracelets were made of solid gold. Imran's parents were both doctors and had lavished her with ornaments. There was not a single piece of jewelry that was made of anything but pure gold, diamond or precious stones.

Two of them wore big smiles on their faces and were ready to receive their blessings and congratulations from everyone. The *maulavi* was the first one to walk over to the couple and bless them. "*Bete*, I wish both of you a happy and a prosperous life. Please stick to the path of *Allah* and He will fulfill all your dreams. *Allah-O-Akbar*." Next, it was Imran's father who walked over to Zeenat. "Dear Zeenat, we accept you as our *bahu* from this day on. From now on, you will be like our daughter." Then he looked at his son who had a big smile on his face and said - "*Badhaai ho!* Congratulations. You will surely go to heaven now that beautiful Zeenat is our proper *bahu*." *Bahu* is the pan-Indian word for daughter-in-law. He hugged Imran who had gotten up from the seated position to receive his father - joyful tears rolled momentarily down from both of their eyes. Imran's mother also went over first to Zeenat, touched her hair and forehead. "From today you are like my daughter," - she said. She warmly blessed her son too. Zeenat's parents congratulated them next - although their hearts were heavy that night with the burden of thoughts and emotions, they had put on a happy front. Then it was

Imran's sister and Zeenat's brother's turns to share the joy with their respective siblings.

Following this many of the invitees formed a line, walked over to the couple when their turn arrived and wished them good luck. They reserved their special commendation for Imran. "You will go to heaven" - was something that could be heard many times. Zeenat did not understand the meaning of this oft-repeated comment and planned to ask Imran about it later on.

The *maulavi* was exquisitely dressed in a dark silk *kurta* and *pajama* - he sported a thick black beard that was several inches long, had a white cap, and, indeed looked quite distinguished in his long black coat. He was tall and spoke in lyrical Urdu which the bride's family did not have any problems understanding.

Zeenat's mother was draped in a red *sari* - the long cloth that an India woman skillfully wraps around her body. This *sari* was special because it came from the expert weavers in the city of Benares in the heart of India. She had bought it during her last trip to Bombay expressly for such an occasion. But, gosh, did she know then that her daughter's wedding will turn out the way it did? Despite all the uncertainties in her mind, she wanted to look good on her only daughter's wedding night. Her father wore a white *kurta* and a *Nehru* jacket. He also had a lot of things playing in his mind, but outwardly he did not give any inkling to his problems. Later on that day, he went around and spoke to many of the guest in Urdu and Sindhi.

She was sitting on a chair several feet away from the bride. She and her husband had ultimately decided to be present in the wedding ceremony.

The wedding party went on for several hours. It was attended by a large number of members of Imran's family, some of whom had flown from Pakistan for this joyous occasion. His family's friends in the US were also there in full force. They were mostly Punjabis of Pakistani origin, the younger ones mostly grew up in the US while the older ones were first generation immigrants like Zeenat's and Imran's parents. The womenfolk were dressed in colorful *salwar, kameej* and *dupattas*. Their dresses were a pure riot of colors with as many shades of oranges, golds, greens, purples, yellows and pinks that one would get in a Pakistani clothes bazaar. They were gorgeously decorated with heavy ornaments bought during the trips that they made to Pakistan. The young girls were dressed generally in the long floor-length skirts and dresses. Only a few of the oldest women had put on *saris* like Indians and even fewer among them wore western style skirts or pantsuits. The very young were frolicking around.

Pakistani or Indian marriages in the US are incomplete without the sumptuous food - chicken *biriyani*, lamb *khost*, *puris*, *naan* were just a few of the delicious items that were served that night. A separate hall in the hotel served as the dining area. The bride and the groom made the customary walk from one dinner table to another and chatted with the invitees.

A lot of sweetmeats were offered to the guests at the end of the dinner - *rosogollas*, *jalebis*, *gulaab jamun* and many others. There was a *paan* stand where the guest could treat themselves to betel nuts wrapped with *zarda* and other spices in a green betel leaf.

There was an open bar, and even though Islam prohibits drinking, the men were drinking the best of Chivas Regals and Vodkas while a few of the women were sipping wines. The immigrant men from Pakistan as well as India liked the strong 'real' stuff and generally avoided the wine and beer.

It was as if this wedding were being held in Pakistan or India. Of over five hundred guests, there were only a handful of white faces – they were Imran's friends from work and college, and five American women married to successful Pakistani doctors. Five hundred invitees to a marriage is not an extravagant number in the immigrant South Asian communities' weddings. Back in the home countries wedding tend be huge affairs with the invitee list running into hundreds long, if not thousands among the moneyed classes and among the aristocrats. They also lasted longer -in fact the various rituals and ceremonies spanned at least three days among the Pakistani Punjabis. Another difference with the weddings in Pakistan was that there was no dowry involved. The bride's parents had to pay large sums of money to the groom's family before the auspicious beginnings of the wedding ceremonies - in fact it is a well known fact that in Pakistan and north-India many wedding ceremonies get cancelled at the eleventh hours because the two parties can not agree on the dowry.

From Zeenat's side, there was only a handful that attended the wedding - her parents, her only brother and three dear girl friends from college days. Unlike a typical wedding among immigrants from the Indian sub-continent, it was not bankrolled by the bride's family. Imran's parents were hosting it, and they made sure that everything went smoothly as planned.

Something was really amiss for her mother – Zeenat was having a wedding that was quite unlike her own nearly twenty-five years ago in Bombay. Radha Gokani was

married to Mohan Nachnani in front of a fire by a Hindu priest and she had a big dot of *sindur* on her forehead on that night. She vividly remembers that day when her father gave her away. She had a long *urni* or veil on her face the whole time she sat in front of the fire. The *Brahmin* recited hymns from Hindu scriptures - those were mostly in *Sanskrit* and neither she nor Mr. Gokani did fully understand them. During that long ceremony that must have lasted several hours, two of them had to repeat many of the lines after the priest. Small amounts of sacred water brought specially from the north Indian river Ganga was periodically poured on the fire with a special spoon. A special butter called the *ghee* kept the wood fire glowing. Finally, two of them together, she behind him with their ends of their clothes tied in a knot, had to circumambulate the fire seven times for the marriage to be solemnized.

Her mother had wept when the wedding ceremony ended; Radha went away with her husband and the wedding entourage. For in India, at least during that period of time, it was customary for the bride to leave her parent's home and live with her husband and his family after marriage for the rest of her life. His and their home became her home from that they on. Most married women were content with domestic ambitions of a successful husband and raising the children.

During their reception that was a held a couple of days after the wedding, the bride and the groom sat on high chair with gold and silver decorations and pink pillows to support their backs. The whole thing seemed like a dream now - but she saw flashes of it when she was sitting in that wedding hall.

*to be continued in the next issue*

## Assam 2007: Laurel, MD

Assam 2007 will be held in Laurel, Maryland, on June 29th, July 1 and 2, 2007. Memberships of several committees were recently announced. Fell free to contact anyone on any of the committees if you have any questions.

### Host Committee:

Niranjan Brahma, Chair Person  
Prabin Dutta, Co-Chair Person  
Sangeeta Dutta  
Rajib Barua  
Utpal Borah

### Cultural Committee:

Utpal Borah, Chair Person  
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Bonmoyuri Kalita  
Tripti Bora Das  
Ruprekha Bhuyan  
Moushumi Brahma  
Barnali Tahbaldar

### Reception Committee:

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Pronoti Dutta  
Suravi Kalita  
Malabika Brahma  
Geeta Chowdhary  
Lulu Baishya  
Runa Choudhury  
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Mukul Chowdhary  
Kedar Bhuyan  
Dhruba Das  
Jugal Kalita  
Utpal Brahma

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Probal Tahbaldar  
Prabin Dutta  
Jukti kalita  
Gonesh Bora  
Jukti kalita  
Prakash Deka  
Kabita Sharma

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The ASA Executive Committee is composed of Dhruba Das, President (Coatesville, Pennsylvania), Kabita Sharma (Hillsborough, New Jersey), Vice President, Mukul Chowdhary (Edison, New Jersey), Treasurer, and Ganesh Bora (Lake Alfred, Florida), General Secretary.

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