Chapter VIII

KATI BIHU AND MAGH BIHU: THE CHANGING TRADITIONS

1. Preliminary Observations:

The three bihus observed at three different times during the annual life cycle of the peasantry of Assam are the three parts of the Bihu festival complex. It has already been observed that the observance of the Bohag bihu marks the time of tender paddy plants of ahu variety waving in the wind and this is followed by transplantation of seedlings of sali variety of paddy after the monsoon rain. The Kati bihu marks the time when the seedlings of sali variety attain the stage for fructification; the fruits that paddy plants bear are the fruits of hard labour rendered by the toiling peasants. So, after the harvest of sali paddy is gathered, the peasants observe the Magh bihu to give outlet to the tiredness of hard labour. Thus the three bihus of the year are significantly sequential and are inter-linked with one another. Although Kati bihu and Magh bihu have also shed much of their earlier ritualistic character, yet unlike the Bohag bihu, these two bihus are still adapted to the agricultural setting of rural Assam. The traditional rites and rituals connected with Kati and Magh bihus are found to be observed by the peasants with relevance to rustic simplicity but to a limited scale. This chapter deals with the significance of the Kati and the Magh bihus and their changing traditions.
2. Origin, background and significance of Kati Bihu:

The Kati bihu is the second phase of the Bihu festival complex observed by the peasantry of Assam during an agricultural year. The time of observance of the Kati bihu suggests that it is a destitute bihu as the food grains of the peasants are almost exhausted leaving little scope for enjoyment. This bihu is observed on the day of Asvin Sankranti, the last day of the sixth Assamese month, when the green shoots of Sali variety of paddy put forth the initial blossoms in the fields. At this time, the cultivators of prehistoric Assam could learn by experience that Mother Earth had conceived consequent upon transplanting of seedlings into her womb after enactment of the springtime magico-rituals and that she was likely to deliver the fruits. So, they naturally thought of doing something to keep Mother Earth in the best of her health and vigour and to avert any calamity to the foetus. It is logical to hold that in the context of primitive life, the cultivators were left with no alternative but to take recourse to some timely magico-rituals for wellbeing of the matured paddy plants. The particular time of their observance indicates that the origin and antiquity of the Kati bihu go back to the introduction of cultivation of Sali paddy in prehistoric Assam.

We have reasons to believe that the particular designs of magic and rituals projected by the cultivators of early Assam and cast for protecting the maturing Sali paddy plants constituted the substratum of Kati bihu. Relics of these are still found to be observed as collateral rituals of Tulasi puja. Tulasi puja may be a form of ancient tree worship. The Alpine

1. R.M. Nath, Background of Assamese Culture, p 6
cultivators added a ceremonial character to Kati Bihu while the Vedic Aryans thrust the idea of Tulasi puja upon Kati bihu. Tulasi is regarded as a sacred plant and is believed by the Hindus to be the image of Laksmi, the corn mother. The Atharva Veda incorporates prescription of worship of the Asvin brothers for protecting crops from birds, insects and animals. The present form of the Kati bihu current among the Assamese Hindus had definitely evolved on propitiation of corn mother and other connected rituals mentioned in the Vedas. The identical practices of the pre-Vedic time might have merged with the Vedic prescription of the Kati bihu. Evidently, the plains tribal people of Assam also believe in a kind of rice spirit similar to the Hindu goddess Laksmi. Their magico-ritual activities intended for paddy welfare clustered round this belief.

The Kati bihu has a distinct significance in the mental and social life of the peasantry of Assam as this bihu underlies the seeds of likelihood. The time of its observance coincides with the Autumnal Equinox which occurs in the Sarata rtu, the third season of the year. According to tranik view, the growth of fruits is connected with the two Equinoxes of the year which indicate two particular positions of the Sun in relation to earth. We have already referred to the Vernal Equinox of Vasanta rtu as a booster to the procreative urges of trees, plants, birds and animals. Contrary to this, in Autumnal Equinox of Sarata rtu all animate objects of the earth become fruitful and so become weak like the pregnant women. The creative effect of the Sun on the Earth becomes low at the time of Autumnal Equinox.

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3. P.C. Bhattacharya, Asamar Loka Utsav, p.58, Also see L. Gogoi, Bihu Eit Samiksha, p.9
4. P. Goswami, B.B A.B.S, p.8
5. S. Biswas, H.F.B S A, p.54
8. P. Bandyopadhyaya, 'Matri Puja' quoted by S. Biswas, ibid, p.52
which retards the growth of plants and trees having embryos in their wombs. The peasants of Assam in the distant past could definitely gather such experiences from nature and so attached utmost importance to this period of the year for enacting magico-rituals in order to see the paddy plants bouncing with vitality.

From the above discussion, we may infer that like the other two bihus, the Kati bihu has also a probable relationship with fire cult or solar cult. Lighting of earthen lamps in front of granary and paddy fields underlies the belief that fire will preserve the paddy from the depredations of the locusts and other evil spirits. Here, fire is employed as the creative agent. Chandogya Upanisada incorporates fire as a positive force and points to its close relationship with all objects on the earth; fire is a source for development of embryo and growth of food. This philosophy of the fire cult postulated in Chandogya Upanisada further leads us to hold that lighting of earthen lamps in the context of the Kati bihu may have some connection with fertility cult. However, traces of fire cult and cult of fertility are also found in the agricultural rites of some tribes of Assam. These might have been subsequently associated with the propitiation of personified deities by the Vedic Aryans.

We may now come into a definite conclusion that the inner meaning and significance of the Kati bihu may have rested on propitiation of corn mother alias Laksmi Devi alias rice spirit for possession of high yield from the maturing paddy plants. This propitiation in any form in the past was

logically done by the cultivators at the point of time when the Sun crossed the equator in Autumn, preferably on the day of Autumnal Equinox. Some scholars place the antiquity of the tradition of the Kati bihu observed on the day of Autumnal Equinox to about 2200 B.C. when the first wave of Aryan culture spread into Assam. It deserves mention that Pan-Indian Laksmi is also separately worshipped by the Assamese Hindus as the goddess of wealth on the night of Laksmi Purnima. There is, therefore, no doubt that the Tulasi puja of the Kati bihu was a degenerated form of Laksmi-puja developed in Assam in the context of her prehistoric culture.

3. Pattern of Magico-Rituals associated with the Propitiation of Corn mother:

Owing to dearth of materials it is not possible to ascertain the archaic forms of Autumnal harvesting rites that were current among the non-Aryan cultivators of ancient Assam. Yet, prevalence of crude magics associated with trees in ancient Assam, convinces that more or less identical practices were also followed in Autumn for wellbeing of grown up paddy plants. Some magical practices now followed by the cultivators of Assam on the occasion of the Kati bihu have, therefore, a hoary ancestry. It is an established fact that the worship of trees is older than worship of corn in the history of religion. Evidently, both tree spirit and corn mother are worshipped worldwide by the agricultural races.

13. R.M. Nath, Op-cit., p.8
15. P. Goswami, Bohag Bihu of Assam And Bihu Songs, p.14
16. J. Frazer, Golden Bough, pp.380,412-419
We have therefore every reason to believe that before Tulasi-puja was incorporated as a ritual in the context of the Kati bihu, certain patterns of tree worship meant for welfare of paddy plants were in vogue among the cultivators of this region. Rightly does observe R.M. Nath:

*A small plaintain tree was dressed in the simple cloth veiled like a bashful woman and in the middle part representing her belly were tied paddy plants, black arum, giant arum, turmeric plants, the chief products of cultivation which were growing in the womb of Mother Earth. As medicinal doses were tied Bael fruits as an antidote to constipation, leaves of Asoka as an antidote to uterine troubles, Aparajita creeper as an antidote to phlegm, Barela and Jayanti plants as antidotes to troubles in the pelvis. Then festivities with songs, dances and eating and drinking continued for four to seven days. On the last day of the ceremony filthy and obscene language was freely used amongst the partakers in the ceremony with a view to frightening away the calamity that might harm the foetus* 17.

The mode of these magico-rituals suggests that the ceremony was nothing but a form of tree-worship observed before the time of harvest. Such pre-harvesting magical practices were current among the hill tribes also as evident from the relics still noticed among the Nagas, a hill tribe of the N.E. part of India. In present day Assam, these magico-rituals are found to be incorporated in the Durga-puja observed by the Hindus; The Mother Goddess Durga is also worshipped as crop deity and projected as a destroyer of the calamitous demons which may harm the crops. Even though Durga is a Pan-Indian goddess, she is worshipped in Assam in localized form with the rites and rituals being abstracted mostly from

17. R.M. Nath, *Op-cit.*, pp.6-7
ancient tree worship relating to cult of fertility. We can, therefore, come to a definite conclusion that the magical practices associated with tree worship mentioned above were possibly observed by the ancient cultivators of Assam for averting calamities to the grown up paddy plants\textsuperscript{18}. With the unveiling of the Aryan culture in prehistoric Assam, the existing rice-spirit and tree worship were converted into worship of corn mother Laksmi and Tulasi-plant\textsuperscript{19}. As the Aryans were pioneers of Astrology, we have reasons to believe that thenceforth observance of the \textit{Kati bihu} coincided with the Autumnal Equinox and \textit{Tulasi puja} and lighting of lamps in the paddy fields emerged as the main features.

Evidently, beliefs and practices relating to rice-spirit or corn mother are also in vogue among the peasants of some other countries. The magico-rituals observed by the Malays and Dyaks of the East Indies in connection with rice is founded on the conception that rice is animated by a soul like human beings. The Indonesian peasants behave towards the rice in bloom as they behave towards a pregnant woman. When a rice field does not flourish, the Karens of Myanmar believe that the soul of the rice is detained from the rice; so they call back the soul by chanting \textit{mantras}\textsuperscript{20}.

The magico-ritual practices observed by the peasants of Assam in the \textit{Kati bihu} have their variations from place to place. Besides, this \textit{Bihu} has been attached with different names in different regions. In undivided Kamrup district, \textit{Kati bihu} is known as \textit{Domahi of Kati}; in some places of Darrang, it is \textit{Ada bihu} as there is nothing to offer except ginger\textsuperscript{21}, in

\begin{itemize}
\item[18.] L. Gogoi, \textit{Bihu Eti Samikshya}, p.16
\item[19.] R.M. Nath, \textit{op.cit} p.8
\item[20.] Frazer, \textit{Op-cit}, pp.413-415. We have already referred to the rice spirit conceived by the plains tribes of Assam.
\item[21.] N.C.Sarma, \textit{Essays on the Folklore of N.E.India}, p.65
\end{itemize}
undivided Goalpara district, this bihu is known as Lokhi bati or Kati dol dol or Buri puja\textsuperscript{22}. In some places of upper Assam, the term Samkranti is also used to denote the Kati bihu day\textsuperscript{23}. The term Kangali bihu is used by some people to signify the poor state of the peasants at this time when feasting and merriments are rather irrelevant\textsuperscript{24}. Upto a few decades ago, this Bihu was also known as thagi chor kara domahi in places of north Kamrup. Stealing of naibeda was enjoined on the cowherd boys as a ritual and hence, was not considered a crime; this ritual was the symbolic expression of the poor state of the peasants at the time of the Kati bihu\textsuperscript{25}. Despite these variations, the Kati bihu is the generalized term used to denote agricultural rites and rituals observed on the day of Asvin Samkranti.

In the afternoon of the day of Asvin Samkranti, the head of the peasant family visits the paddy field and naturally gets delighted when he looks at the grown up paddy plants opening their spadix. At home, seedling of Tulasi is newly planted in the east of the family yard and a mound of earth is raised close to it. A small plantain tree is planted beside the sacred Tulasi and at its foot an earthen lamp fuelled by mustard oil is placed. Earthen lamps are also lit on the shelves made by thrusting bamboo sticks into the trunk of the plantain tree. In some places, instead of small plantain tree, its trunk is placed vertically beside the Tulasi plant. A naibeda is then reverentially laid near the sacred Tulasi plant. Earthen lamps are also lit on the entrance of granary, at the foot of an areca nut tree and in the cowshed. Each earthen lamp is accompanied by a naibeda.

\textsuperscript{22} B. Datta, \textit{A study of the folk culture of the Goalpara Region}, p.108
\textsuperscript{23} L. Gogoi, \textit{Op-cit.}, p.39
\textsuperscript{24} T. Sarma, \textit{op-cit.}, p.71
\textsuperscript{25} This ritual might be peculiar only to a few places of Rangia Sub-division of Kamrup district. We have not been informed by anybody regarding its existence in other places even in the past.
Lighting of ten or one hundred or one hundred and eight pieces of wick is a prevailing custom; these numbers are believed to be magic numbers\(^\text{26}\).

To light earthen lamps offering *naibedya* in the paddy fields is an indispensable feature associated with the *Kati bihu*. Significantly, this earthen lamp is put on the top of a stand made with pieces of split bamboo. This earthen lamp is the relic of ancient fire kindled by the cultivators to destroy pests and insects of the paddy fields; we have every reason to believe that this ancient fire was reduced to earthen lamp in subsequent ages and got linked up with propitiation of corn-mother. These folk customs and practices are mostly noticed among the non-tribal Hindus. These are found among the Hinduised Tribes of Mongoloid origin with certain variations. The variations have occurred for adherence to their respective traditional customs. Evidently, the use of *Siju* tree instead of *Tulasi* plant for lighting earthen lamp thereunder by the Boros\(^\text{27}\) bears testimony to their adherence to age-long tradition.

Certain magical designs are found to be current among the Assamese cultivators with variations in the method of enactment. At some places, the cultivators whirl a piece of bamboo and light earthen lamp in the paddy field reciting *rowa-khowa mantras* to protect the maturing paddy\(^\text{28}\). As has been mentioned in the treatment of magic and religion, a string is put round the neck of a mouse and the mouse is then kept tied in the paddy field. This is intended to frighten the harvesting mice. Another magical practice observed in the context of this *bihu* day in some places is

\(^\text{26}\) P.C. Bhattacharya, *Asamar Loka Utsav*, p.58
\(^\text{27}\) Among the tribes of Mongoloid origin, the Kacharis put earthen lamps at the foot of *siju* tree, in the garden, at the entrance of granary and in the paddy field. But these differ in certain details. Also see P. Goswami, *Bohag Bihu of Assam and Bihu Songs*, p.8
\(^\text{28}\) *Ibid*, p.8
the casting of *kshetra-bandhan* spell; this is done by employing a *bej* who recites certain spells over white mustard seeds and sprinkles them on the paddy field. The spells are meant for binding the mouths of injurious animals, birds, rats etc.

Some kind of traditional performing arts like *namaprasanga* are also associated with the *Kati bihu*. The *namaprasanga* includes singing of *tulasi vandana*, prayer in praise of mother *tulasi* personified as Laksmi. The following are the English versions of two prayers sung by both the menfolk and the women folk on the occasion; e.g.;

i) 
*Tulasi, O' Mother Tulasi,*
*You are Govindas favourite,*

*Which way has Krishna gone do tell us,*
*Mother, tell us quickly.*

ii) 
*O' deer! graze under tulasi,*
*To kill it,*
*Rama casts arrow from his bow.*

These *tulasi* prayers incorporating Krishna and Rama are found to be favourite songs among the Assamese people in general and women and children in particular. They take active part in the *namaprasangas* held in

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the evening of the *Kati bihu* day. The enthusiastic children sometimes dance by leaping with the rhythms of drum, cymbal and hand-claps.

Planting of *Tulasi* on the occasion of this *bihu* is also prevalent in the various *Satras* of Assam. *Tulasi* is believed by the Vaishnavite devotees to be very dear to Visnu. However, other household rituals are not observed in the *Satras*. Instead, the old cloth of the *Guru Asana* is replaced with a new one; hymns are sung in the morning and evening of the *Kati bihu* day. All these are confined to the *Satra* complex\(^{32}\).

Lighting of *akash banti*, a ritual of the *Kati bihu*, is seen in the yards of a few household throughout the month. The ritual is performed by putting an earthen lamp in a basket of bamboo; with the help of a rope, the basket is kept hanging from the yoked tips of a pair of long bamboos placed vertically from the ground. The sky, believed to be the abode of *Visnu* or the way to heaven, is thus illuminated with the earthen lamp\(^{33}\). The following is the English version of a song on *akash banti* found at rural folk level.

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\text{In the month of } Kati \\
\text{Earthen lamps shine} \\
\text{At the foot of tulasi;} \\
\text{And lord Visnu} \\
\text{Puts lamps} \\
\text{Up in the sky}^{34}. \\
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32. N.C. Goswami, *Satra Sanskritir Swamarekha*, p.154
33. This underlying belief of *Akash Banti* has already been referred to in magic and religion.
34. P. Bhattacharya, *Op-cit.*, p. 60
Apparently, this is an Aryan conception of akash banti. However, non-Aryan traits and belief observed in the ritual tradition of akash banti cannot be overridden. Evidently, bamboo puja and use of bamboos in domestic and social life are contributions of the Tibeto-Burmans. Lighting earthen lamp in the sky and connecting it with the earth through bamboo, a unification of sky father and earth mother is enacted. Akashbanti of the Kati bihu is thus attributable to both Aryan and non-Aryan beliefs35.

It is clear from the foregoing treatment that the rites and rituals associated with the Kati bihu of Asvin Samkranti are exclusively confined to peasant class. The tradition is therefore subjected to changes as and when attitude and belief of the peasants as also the time and mode of agricultural operation undergo changes. It has already been noted that the tradition of the Kati bihu observed on the day of Autumnal Equinox i.e., Asvin Samkranti was established by the Aryans. But the most startling change now perceived is that the day of the Kati bihu no longer synchronizes with the Autumnal Equinox. Evidently, the Asvin Samkranti i.e. the day of Kati bihu now falls on 18th October36; but the Autumnal Equinox occurs on 22nd or 23rd September37. The advance occurrence of the traditional equinoxes has resulted in corresponding changes in nature, time of sowing and reaping. Cultivation of sali paddy which the Kati bihu is associated with, is hardly seen now-a-days. This variety has been replaced with advanced and high yielding varities of paddy usually reaped before commencement of the Kati bihu. The Kati bihu has therefore lost much of its earlier relevance and significance among the peasants.

35 ibid, pp. 58-59
It is further observed that the offsprings of the elderly peasants are not orientated towards the traditional rites and rituals and the meaning underlying therein. The fact therefore remains that only the relic of the Kati bihu tradition is now seen among the elderly peasants where earlier enthusiasm is absent. The influence of Vaisnavite style can be detected in the devotional ritualism associated with tulasi puja and namaprasanga held in the evening of Kati bihu day.

Admittedly, the Kati bihu as observed today has lesser public significance unlike the other two bihus. The rites and rituals observed in this bihu are rather household affairs. It may therefore be inferred that Kati bihu is not a festival proper, but a sort of ritual meant for paddy welfare and observed domestically on the day.

4. Origin and Background of Magh Bihu:

While the observance of the Kati bihu marks the maturing time of Sali paddy in Sarata rtu, the Magh bihu is sequentially observed in Winter after the harvest of Sali paddy is gathered. The Magh bihu can therefore be rightly called the post-harvesting festival of Assam. As in today, the post harvesting festivities in the past were not observed on the day of Winter solstice; rather the primitive festivities of Winter naturally synchronized with the days of shivering in severe cold and the observances marked the abundance of food grains at the disposal of the cultivators. It is therefore logical to hold that the primitive cultivators kindled bonfire to warm up themselves during the days of severe cold and plenty of food grains at this time inspired them to indulge in feasting and merriments by the fireside. In the utilitarian context of primitive life, the community
bonfire and feasting had definitely a distinct place. Ancient art, song, dance and music all grew out of these social gatherings by the fireside. It was but natural that the heathen utility of primitive fire and joys of feasting lingered on to the subsequent ages. We have therefore, reasons to believe that burning of meji and feasting, the conspicuous features of the Magh bihu of later time, are indebted to these primitive aspects of life. But the bonfire and feasting of the Magh bihu lost their primitive utilities with the unfolding of Aryan culture in prehistoric Assam. The Aryans added devotional ritualism with new significance to the pagan utility of primitive fire and feasting. Accordingly, the primitive bonfire underwent transformation into meji and got incorporated in the Vedic cult of Agni puja. Henceforth, Agni puja of meji emerged as the core function of Magh bihu and came to be observed on the day of Makara Samkranti which marks the beginning of prolonged day time of the year. The present day fire of meji is therefore a sanskritized form of the primitive fire. We shall find later on to what extent the institution of meji is a synthesis of Aryan and non-Aryan characteristics.

5. Significance of Magh Bihu:

The foregoing treatment gives us strong evidence to hold the view that the Magh bihu was originally a fire festival associated with the primitive fire cult where fire was employed as a creative agent. The primitive farmers' belief after collecting the harvest was that the conceived mother was delivered of the child and she had to be kept warm. Their

38. H. Barua, *The Red River and the Blue Hill*, p.91
39. Elaborate treatment of meji and other allied terms follows.
41. B.K.Barua, *Op-cit.*, pp.73-78
bonfire, feasting and merriments of the days of severe cold clustered round this belief. This archaic meaning of the primitive fire cult assumed a new meaning as soon as the Aryan cult of Agni puja was thrust into the primitive mind. This change occurred naturally as fire was already conceived to be a power and deity by all primitive tribes. Evidently, Agni is an Indo-European term; but the worship of fire under this name is purely Indian. As in Assam, the fire cult in some form or other was prevalent among the pre-Aryans of India in the past. The Aryans developed the new cult of Agni puja in association with the natives of prehistoric India. This is proved from the non-Aryan elements noticed in the varied forms of Agni puja current among the Indian Hindus. We have therefore reasons to believe that although the form of Agni puja associated with the Magh bihu of Assam was fundamentally allied to that of India, it further absorbed some existing non-Aryan traits in prehistoric Assam and took on a degenerated form. Consequently, the Agni puja now current in Assam has a separate entity. Evidently, certain features of the Magh bihu of Assam are not found in Makara Samkramanti and allied rites observed elsewhere in India as parallel to the Magh bihu. The traces of the Agni puja developed in Indian context and so also the traces of the Agni puja associated with the Magh bihu of Assam are found in Vedic tradition of Mahavrata ritual. The Mahavrata festival was observed in Makara Samkramanti where Surya was adored calling upon the spring season to drive away severe cold. As described by J.R. Bose, in the Mahavrata festival “maidens carrying

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43. L. (iogoi, φρ-ελ, p.2.
44. Macdonell, Vedic Mythology, p.99
45. S. Biwas, H.F.B.S.A, p.64
46. P.C. Choudhury, H.C.P.A, p.310
47. N.C.Sarma, ‘Utsav Anusthan : Bihu Utsav Aru Magh Bihu’ in Asamar Magh Bihu, ed. N.C.Sarma, p.4
pitchers full of water dance around the fire. As part of the ceremony, a conversation take place in abuse language bespeaking fertilization. The abusive dialogue is followed by actual performance of sexual intercourse at the Mahavrata offering. These magical designs involving sex and enacted in the Mahavrata festival were intended for bringing about rainfall to increase the fertility of mother earth. Briffault observes that the divine generative power which brings about fertility of nature, animal and human being is believed to be stipulated not only by sexual intercourse, but also by any act or speech of lascivious and sexual character. All such features are believed to have been prevailed at the initial stage of Vedic tradition in the Magh bihu of the past. Also certain magico-rituals still current as connected acts of Magh bihu convince that Magh bihu is a fertility festival. The uruka of Magh bihu has a special significance for the people of Assam. Bhelaghar bears certain affinities with the male dormitory of the Tibeto-Burmans; spending of a wakeful Uruka night in Bhelaghar by the youths indulging in merriments of feasting, singing and dancing is traceable to Tibeto-Burman tradition. The dal bhat or log bhat held in Uruka night is the symbol of abundance, merriment and social solidarity. These meanings underlying the post harvesting community feasting had definitely bred in primitive mind.

Burning of Meji or Bhelaghar is still holding some ancient traditions. The term Meji is supposed to have been derived from Vedic

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48. J.R. Bose, India in the age of Brahmans, p.208
51. K.R. Medhi, Introduction to Assamiya Vyakaran Aru Bhasa Tatva, p.31
52. P. Bhattacharya, Op-cit., p.78
53. L. Gogoi, Op-cit., p.50
medh or medhya which signifies yagna. But this may not be true. Because, the Alpine Aiyans also had a Mejai festival in the past and the Tai-Buddhists who came to Assam in thirteenth century A.D. also have their Bapu meji. Evidently, the term Mejai is also allied to Meji and Bapu meji. Hence these two terms cannot be disregarded and ignored while dealing with derivation of the term Meji of Magh bihu. Although we cannot come to a definite conclusion on this subject, it must however be admitted that medhya of the Aryans, Mejai of the Alpines and Bapu meji of the Tai-Buddhists have been absorbed in the ideal of Magh bihu. On the otherhand, the term Bhelaghar is a corrupt form of the Boro term Bilagur which had existed prior to Meji. Both Meji and Bhelaghar are effigies of winter and are burnt to drive away severity of cold calling at the same time the pleasantness of spring. The heat produced by the fire of Meji is believed to take away illness, sorrows and sufferings from body and mind and brings about purity and virtuousness to the mind.

The day of the Magh bihu synchronizes with the last day of the month of Pous (approx. 15th December to 15th January). The day is believed to be significant in the context of Agni puja of Magh bihu. We have already referred to the Mahavrata Offerings of the Vedic Aryans performed on this day. The Sun comes to the farthest north and enters the Tropic of Capricorn and the day time becomes longer than the night from this day. Astronomically, this day is known as winter solstice which the Aryan school of thought denotes as Makara Samkranti, the auspicious day for Agni puja. The heating power of the Sun and fire is believed to be

55. N.C. Sarma, Op-cit., p.4
56. L. Gogoi, Bihu : Eti Samanwayar Utsat in Asom Bani, ed. II. Borgohain, April, 1994 issue, p.6
57. P. Bhattacharya, Op-cit., p.77
getting a boost from this day onwards\textsuperscript{59}. The whole month of \textit{Magh} that follows the day of \textit{Makara Samkranti} is considered sacred month by the Assamese people\textsuperscript{60}. Evidently, most of the religious rites of the Hindus of Assam are performed in this month. Some devout Assamese Hindus continue the \textit{Maghi Snan} until the month of Magh ends.

6. \textbf{Magh Bihu and Post-Harvesting Rites}:

There is no doubt that post-harvesting festivities in the past were associated with the excessive joy of reaping abundant harvest. There is also every reason to believe that the primitive agricultural people used to determine time looking up at the size of the moon in the night sky and used to celebrate the festive occasions in or around full moon night. But subsequently the lunar calculation of the primitive people was replaced with Aryan solar calculation and festivals connected with agricultural operations came to be observed from the day of \textit{Samkranti}\textsuperscript{61}. Despite the fact that fire ceremony of \textit{Magh bihu} and certain allied rituals are observed on the day of \textit{Pous Samkranti}, this \textit{bihu} is called the \textit{Magh bihu} since some customs and practices continue for the whole month of Magh. This \textit{Bihu} is also known as \textit{Bhogali bihu} since the time of its observance abounds in pleasant relish of eatable items made out of agricultural produce. Thus the \textit{Magh bihu} and the \textit{Bhogali bihu} are two generalized terms of the post-harvesting winter festival of Assam. The term \textit{Bhogali} is

\textsuperscript{59} B.M.Goswami, "Pub-Kamarup Anchalat Magh Bihu" in \textit{Asamar Magh Bihu}, ed. N.C.Sarma, p.95
\textsuperscript{60} P.C.Sarma, "Maghar Meji Aru Agni Sewa" in \textit{Purbachal}, ed. H. Borgohain, 12\textsuperscript{th} January,2003 issue.p.5
\textsuperscript{61} L. Gogoi, \textit{Bihu Eti Samikha}, p. 49
also found to be associated with a Hindu myth. According to this myth, Boli the king of demons agreed to give three foot steps of ground as gift to Bamana on the day of *Pous Samkranti*. In the first and second steps, Bamana covered the heaven and the earth; as no place was left for the third step, Boli laid his head before Bamana to keep on the third foot step. The pressure of the third foot step of Bamana sent down Boli to *Sutal puri*. Consequent upon Boli's act of going to *Sutal puri* on the day of *Pous Samkranti*, the food items to be relished by him in this earth on that day had been left uneaten. So people pleasantly relished the food items and the *Bihu* observed on that became *Bhogali*. This myth found at folk level of some places has little truth in it as regards the origin of the term *Bhogali bihu*. However, the term *Bhogali* is related to *Bhog* of food items abundantly available after harvest.

It is observed that enthusiasm of the people of lower Assam is more for the *Magh bihu* as compared to that of the *Bohag bihu*. The *Magh bihu* is variously known in lower Assam region, e.g., *Domahi* or *Domehi* or *Domhi* or *Maghar Domehi* in Darrang and undivided Kamrup district; in undivided Goalpara district, the festival is known as *Maghar Domahi* or *Domasi* or *Pushnā*. The prefix *Do* and suffix *Mahi* or *Masi* have constituted the term *Domahi*. The terms *Domasi* and *Domsi* found respectively among the Boros and Rabhas of lower Assam, are probably the corrupt forms of *Domahi*. However, in upper Assam, both the terms *Magh* and *Bhogali bihu* are widely used. The prevailing regional and racial differences found in respect of the name of the post-harvesting winter

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63. B. Datta, *A study of the Folk culture of the Goalpara Region of Assam*, p. 104
festival, definitely hint at variation in the method of observance from place to place and race to race.

The tradition of Meji, goes back to the fire worship found in the culture of pre-vedic societies. The burning of Meji is an important feature of the Magh bihu. As such, all preparations for construction of Meji are completed well in advance with top priority. Meji is usually a temple like structure made with green bamboo, dried banana leaves or stubbles of paddy. In some places of north Kamrup, this structure is also called Mofk or Bhela-puji. In upper Assam, Meji is raised by placing stacks of wood vertically one on the other. On the other hand, Bhelaghar is a hut like structure made of green bamboo, dried banana leaves and stubbles of paddy. Bhelaghrs are convenient for night stay and merriments for the cowherds. Whether it is Meji or Bhelaghah, the materials required for its construction are gathered by the cowherds either from free sources or from every household. Usually two Mejis or Bhelaghrs are made.

The importance of Uruka of Magh bihu for the agricultural people is found to be above everything. The enthusiasm of these people for Magh bihu reaches its climax on the day of uruka which is not noticed in the other two bihus. On this day the womenfolk, both tribal and non-tribal, clean the household clothes and keep themselves busy in baking various types of pitha, pounding cira, making laru, preparing doi, gur and etc. These sweet dishes are kept ready to be partaken of by the members of the family and guests from the next day. Predominance of pitha is noticed all

64. A synthesis of Aryan and non-Aryan traits is noticed in the institution of Meji; while the design and Agni puj of Meji are purely Aryan, the materials of the structure are exclusively used by the Tibeto-Bumans in day to day life.

65. The custom of plentiful preparation of cake in Magh bihu is believed to have come from the Aryans. Also see L. Gogoi, ‘Bihur Bani’ in Bihu Sanskritir Ruprekha, ed.J.Gandhia,p.3
over Assam in the *Magh bihu*; some people are therefore accustomed to calling this *bihu* a *pitha parvan*66. Coconut, sesame, curd, molasses unboiled rice and betel-nut have particular place in this *bihu* since these items are also required in the *Agni-puja* of the *Samkranti* day. Of the cakes, *sunga pitha* or *sunga caul* is especially prepared in *Magh Bihu*67. Another special preparation of *Magh bihu* is *mah-karai*, a combination of blackgram, unboiled rice, sesame and pieces of ginger roasted in fire. Rice beer is a special drink of *Magh bihu* in tribal settings. A breakfast known as *hurum* is found among the Ahoms68. All these eatables are domestically prepared in *Magh bihu* out of the fruits of cultivation and they constitute a part of *Bihu* festivity.

Community feast of *Magh bihu* usually held in the night of *uruka* is a conspicuous feature of rural landscape. In a few places, this feast is also held on the *bihu* day. The necessary arrangement for the community feast of the *uruka* night is completed during the day time. It is customary to eat fish and meat in the meal of *uruka* night69. In the past, menfolk went for hunting wild animal on this day; the relic of this custom is still noticed among a few tribes. However in most cases, the requirement of meat for community feast is now fulfilled with the flesh of domestically reared animal. The community fishing on the day of *uruka* is still in vogue.

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67. *Sunga pitha* or *caul* is made of moist rice powder or sticky *bara* rice steamed in tender bamboo tube. The custom of boiling rice in bamboo tube prevalent among the Tibeto-Burmans convince that *sunga pitha* or *caul* is a contribution of these people to *Magh bihu*. Also see P. Bhattacharya, *Assamar Loka Utsav*, p. 78
68. L. Gogoi, *Op cit.* p. 3
69. Fish and pork roasted in fire are favourite non-vegetarian food items of the Mongoloid people. These people make various implements from bamboo for catching fish and killing domestically rear pig. The Vedic Aryans who had come to Assam in prehistoric time, became accustomed to eating fish and meat though methods of preparation were different. The custom of eating fish and meat with the meal of *uruka* night is believed to have been spread all over Assam from the Mongoloids. See L. Gogoi, *Op-cit.*, pp. 2-3
Mankind go for fishing to nearby lake, river or community pond\textsuperscript{70}. Vegetables, pulses and other items required for the community feast of uruka night are gathered from within the community. The curry of matikalai is one of the essential items in the menu of the feast; this curry becomes appetizing when cooked with the fat of castrated goat.

The community feast of the uruka night is held by the villagers in the yard of the community namghar or in some open ground. But the cowherds hold this feast separately inside the Bhelaghar or makeshift cottage constructed nearby for the purpose. The cowherds spend the night there where singing and dancing add to the gaiety of the occasion. Some people offer meat, fish, vegetables etc. as donation to the cowherds on this day. The pious belief associated with this donation is that childless couples are blessed with child and child with imperfect limb is blessed with perfect formation. In some places of lower Assam, hymn singing to the accompaniment of nagara, and khanjari is held on the night of uruka. Young men kindle bonfire either in open space or in roadside. This is found to be a common scene of rural landscape in the night of uruka. Donation of green bamboos, logs of wood etc. to this bonfire is enjoined upon the villagers to be a pious act\textsuperscript{71}. The villagers warm up themselves in this fire and they cheer with every bursting of bamboo cracker. Pani hilois are also caused to explode in the bonfire\textsuperscript{72}. The furious sound of pani hilo is believed to drive away the evil spirits and increase in number of other

\textsuperscript{70} The community fishing held on the day of uruka in a lake near Dimaria of Kamrup district is significant for taking part in it by people of varied caste and race. Fishing starts with singing and dancing after offering worship to mermaid. The social solidarity observed in this fishing is definitely a relic of the past. Also see A. Bharali, "Lokaviswasat Maghi Uruka" in Purhachal, ed. H. Borgohain, Jan'2003 issued, p.4

\textsuperscript{71} P. Bhattacharya, Op-cit., p. 77

\textsuperscript{72} Pani hilo is made by boring one end of a closed bamboo tube and filling half of the tube with water. The bore of the tube is then closed tightly by hammering a nail of bamboo lath. When this pani hilo is put into blazing fire, the steam produced inside burst the tube causing loud sound.
bamboo crackers is believed to increase the fruit bearing capacity of trees\(^\text{73}\). This bonfire is definitely the relic of the primitive bonfire already referred to here.

Next day is the *Magh bihun* day, the last day of the month of *Pous*. This day is traditionally observed by the Hindus as *Makara Samkranti* or *Pous Samkranti* in other parts of India. In the context of *Magh bihu* in Assam, the members of the agricultural household wake up at dawn on this day. Someone of the male members ties strips of bamboo, stubble or hay of paddy around trees so that the trees give fruits abundantly; someone calls out dogs and offer eatables. Someone pretends to cut a coconut tree not capable of bearing fruits while some other standing nearby forbids him saying the tree will bear fruits; this dramatic design is enacted to infuse fertility into a barren coconut tree\(^\text{74}\). Simultaneously, the female members of the family clean and plaster the floors of dwelling houses, family yard and rub the cooking pans and other utensils kept uncleaned overnight. The folk and children have a purifying bath and proceed to the community *Meji* or *Bhelaghar* remaining on fast\(^\text{75}\). In a forepart of plantain leaf, they offer flower, basil leaf, coins, couch grass, betel-vine and nut, cakes, earthen lamp fuelled with *ghee* etc. to *Agni devata*. The attenders then set fire to *Meji* or *Bhelaghar* before sunrise just\(^\text{pronouncing}\) the name of Hari or Krishna. In some places of lower Assam, fire is set to the structures after *Agni puja* is performed by a

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\(^\text{73}\) B. M. Goswami, "Pub-Kamrup Anchalat Magh Bihu" in *Asamar Magh Bihu*, ed. N. C., Sarma, p.91


\(^\text{75}\) *The Maghi snan* (holy bath of Magh) held in Parasuram Kunda near Sadiya of upper Assam has a hoary ancestry. Besides, some people continue this holy morning bath at home till end of the month of Magh.
Brahmin purohit employed for the purpose. The Purohit recites the following Sanskrit mantra:

अग्नि प्रज्वलितां वोऽन्दे, गुरुवेदम् हुतासनाम्,
सुवर्ण वर्णमामालम् ज्वोती रुपयायते नामह.

(I salute the blazing golden flame the form of Agni in all the four Vedas)\(^{76}\). In places of upper Assam, the cowherds stay in the Bhelaghar overnight, have a purifying bath at crack of dawn and before sunrise take four turns around the Meji and set fire to Bor meji placing offerings to god of fire\(^{77}\). Besides, many other variations are noticed in the fire ceremonies observed from place to place. The Vaishnavite devotees keep themselves away from the Agni puja part of the fire ceremony; immediately after setting fire to Meji they proceed to the Namghar and hold namprasangas there.

After the Mejis and the Bhelaghars are burnt, the participants hold a session of namprasanga to the accompaniment of kettle-drum and cymbal. This is a notable feature of fire ceremony observed particularly in lower Assam region. The influence of neo-Vaishnavism is apparent in this feature of Magh bihu. But noticeably all Hindus, irrespective of their sect, take part in this session of namprasanga\(^{78}\). The namprasanga is put away with distribution of naibedya and the formal part of the fire ceremony is concluded. Important decisions on matters of communal interest are taken before the social gathering is dispersed. The half burnt sticks of Meji and ashes are scattered in the agricultural field and some pieces are also

\(^{76}\) This mantra is meant for Agni puja of Magh bihu; the meaning has been received from B.N.Sarma, Sanskrit Teacher, Jawahar Jyoti I.S. School, Puthimari.

\(^{77}\) A. C. Bharali, “Lokavisvasat Maghi Uruka” in Purbachal, ed. H.Borgohain, 12th Jan'2003 issue, p.4-5

\(^{78}\) The fact that Hinduism in Assam is manifolded with different sects, has already been shown.
brought home to keep near fruit bearing trees. In lower Assam, *koni yuj* reaches its climax on the fire ceremony ground. All these rituals are associated with fertility cult of distant past.  

At home, the members of the family have a breakfast of the cakes baked on the previous day. No lunch is cooked on the *bihu* day as a custom. Instead, the members of the family partake of a repast made up of *chira, etha doi* and *khamucia gur*. The evening meal consists of rice, curry etc excluding the non-vegetarian items. The left over rice is kept soaked in water (*Painta bhat*) and it is customary to take it next day, the first day of Magh as *Maghi pointa*. The following belief in the form of a saying is found in Assamese society:

*If cooked in *Pu hi* and eaten in Magh,  
One becomes as strong as a bagh (tiger).*  

The custom of eating the *Maghi painta* prevalent among the Assamese Hindus, has an Adivasi ancestry. Eating of yam, either fried or roasted, is a prevailing custom among tribal and non-tribal Assamese. It is believed that one becomes a pig in the next birth if one does not comply with this custom on the *Magh bihu* day. The custom of paying tributes to elders by youngers for invoking blessings also prevails in *Magh bihu*.

The cattle are let loose from the *Magh bihu* day after rubbing mustard oil in horns and putting mark on the foreheads with the ashes of burnt *Meji*. Unlike other regions of Assam, cattle rites are found to be incorporated in the tradition of *Magh bihu* in most parts of the undivided

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79. P. Goswami, *Festivals of Assam*, p. 19  
80. B.M. Goswami, *Op-cit.*, p.94  
82. L. Gogoi, *Bihu Eti Samikshya*, p 52
Goalpara district\textsuperscript{83}. After rubbing herbal paste, cows are bathed in river or lake. The most ill-natured cow is given a mark on buttock with heated iron stick\textsuperscript{84}.

Holding of sports and pastimes is an important feature in the tradition of Magh bihu. Egg breaking contest, peculiar to Magh bihu of lower Assam, has a hoary ancestry. From medieval age down to the early decades of twentieth century A.D., various indigenous sports were organized by the village youths all over Assam in the context of Magh bihu\textsuperscript{85}. As in the past, buffalo fights give thrilling enjoyment to the onlookers in the present day Magh bihu. The fight of bulbuli is also found to be an amusing event of the Magh bihu day being held in the premises of the Hayagriva Madhav temple of Hajo. A few other traditional minor events are also found to be held among the children in Magh bihu. The tradition of rewarding the winners in all these events owe to the Ahom patronage of sports and pastime in medieval age.

Another aspect of the Magh bihu day mostly noticed in the rural areas of lower Assam is ojapali performance, hymn singing by womenfolk and hymn singing to the accompaniment of kettle drum by menfolk held in the evening in the namghar premises\textsuperscript{86}. In the Vaishnavite Satras of Assam, the tradition of Magh bihu is observed with variations in certain details. The vedic pattern of Agni puja is not in vogue in the Satras. A bahi meji and a dhuti meji are constructed with stacks of wood. Uttering the name of Hari or Krishna, fire is set to the bahi meji at mid night and the

\textsuperscript{83} B. Datta, A study of Folk culture of the Goalpara Region, p. 105
\textsuperscript{84} N. Sarma, “Dhuburi Zilar Magh Bihu : Pusna” in Asamar Magh Bihu, ed. N.C. Sarma, p.67
\textsuperscript{85} Kaliram Medhir Racanavali, p.261
\textsuperscript{86} N.C. Sarma, “Utsav Anusthan : Bihu Utsav Aru Magh Bihu” in Asamar Magh Bihu, ed. N.C.Sarma, p.8
dhuti meji is set to fire at crack of dawn. The sari prasanga is held from the morning of Magh bihu day. The light repast of the Magh bihu day consisting of chira, doi, pitha etc. is taken only after paying humble salutation to Hari or Krishna at the end of morning prasanga in namghar.

The entire month of Magh is a period of leisure for the agricultural people since the following agricultural operation is yet to commence. It is observed that the Assamese people consider the month of Magh auspicious for holding social and religious ceremonies. Like the Bohag bihu, no tradition of giving ceremonial parting to Magh bihu is noticed. In Assam, the new agricultural cycle of the peasantry virtually begins at the end of the month of Magh with the tearing of cultivable land by ploughshare. The ploughmen consult an almanac and fix an auspicious day to begin with cultivation.

We have grounds to believe that the tradition of Magh bihu discussed above is in vogue with variations among the non-tribal Hindus since medieval age. The variations are mostly found in respect of method of observance. Nevertheless, we have taken up the traditions of the major features common to almost all places just to show their changes. Although the tradition of post-harvesting Magh bihu is also current among the tribal communities of Assam, it differs in certain features. Besides, some customs are found to be peculiar to a particular tribe. These are based on the respective tribal beliefs. In Boro society, construction of Bilagur and setting of fire to it is assigned to the cowherds. They offer rice to birds,

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87. N.C.Goswami, Satriya Samakritir Swarna Rekha, p.151
88. J. Goswami, “Jorhat Anchalat Magh Bihu” in Asamar Magh Bihu, ed. N.C.Sarma, p.20
89. Certain minor aspects, not common to all places, have not been included in this study. The existence of varied forms of a particular feature in different places may be due to regional influences which provides scope for a separate study.
fishes and animals. They put a mark of cowdung around their granary on the Samkranti day. The most notable feature of Magou domasi of the Boros is the custom of Magan. This custom is associated with carol singing in every household to collect eatables. The post-harvesting rites observed by the Rabhas in their Dumsi resemble the patterns followed by the non-tribals in lower Assam region. In addition, the Rabhas encircle their houses with unboiled cotton thread in the evening of uruka. Their fire ceremony incorporates pouring in of rice beer in Bhelanok. The Tiwas of plains observe Magh bihu on the Wednesday which immediately follows the Pous Samkranti. Singing and dancing to the accompaniment of dhol, pepa and tal and under the influence of rice beer is a striking feature of their Magh bihu. The influence of Vaishnavism is seen in their fire ceremony. Porag is the post-harvesting festival of the Misings. The Morung is renovated and large quantities of foods and drinks are arranged. Villagers of the neighbouring villages are also invited by the host village and all share singing, dancing and feasting where Apong and pork feature as essential items. Prayer is offered to Donyi Polo and Chedi Melo. The Dimasa Kacharis observe Magh Sainjara after the harvest of jhum cultivation is gathered. On the occasion, they offer prayers to Brai Sibrai. Feasting and dancing also feature in their post-harvesting rites. But the Demera sect of the Dimasa Kacharis observe Magh bihu like other non-Dimasas of the plains. The Deoris observe their Magiyo bisu on the first Wednesday of the month of Magh. They believe the fire of Meji to be the

90. P. Goswami, Op-cit., p.20
92. B. Senapati, "Tiwa Sakalar Majat Magh Bihu", Ibid., p.118
93. B.N. Bordoloi, Tribes of Assam, Part-I, pp.116-117
94. Informant, N.Hazzer, Haflong, N.C.Hills, Assam.
95. Chao L. Gogoi, "Dimasa Sakalar Majat Magh Bihu", Op-cit., p.140
fire of funeral pile of their founder father. On this day, they offer puja in deosal for wellbeing and prosperity of the villagers. The Karbis celebrate their Hacha festival after harvest where community feasting, singing and dancing are the striking features. Likewise, Wangala the harvest festival of the Garos of Assam and Meghalaya is also associated with eating, drinking, singing and dancing.

The Tai-Buddhists of Assam construct Bapu Meji on the following purnima of Pous Samkranti and they observe the day with feasting and merriments. The tea garden labourers, who constitute an important part of Assam’s population, celebrate their Tusu puja festival with eating and merriments on the day of Pous Samkranti. Although the tradition of burning Meji is contrary to Islamism, the Muslims of Assam kindle fire with paddy stubbles, firewoods, bamboos etc. at the time of Magh bihu. We have every reason to believe that the custom of baking cakes in Magh bihu followed by the Assamese Muslims owes largely to the influence of the Hindu culture. The immigrant Muslims, particularly the young lads, visit house to house, sing magan git and collect alms for holding feast at the time of Magh bihu.

Post-harvesting rites identical to those associated with the Magh bihu of Assam are also current among different tribes of neighbouring Arunachal Pradesh. The Chachaban and Laudongle of the Wancho, Loku of the Nocte, Lamra or Perong of the Tangsas are post-harvesting

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97. B.N. Bordoloi, Op-cit., p.67
98. M.A. Playfair, The Garos, p.95
99. L. Gogoi, Bihu Eti Samiksha, p. 51
100. I. Hussain, “Abhibhasi Asamiya Musulman Samajat Magh Bihu”, Op-cit., p. 83
festivals\textsuperscript{101}. But the \textit{Magh bihu} has close affinity with the \textit{Buribut} festival of the Hill Miris, \textit{Nyokum} of the Nishis, \textit{Torjiya} of the Monpas and \textit{Ampidorung} festival of the Adis\textsuperscript{102}. These tribes ethnically belong to the Tibeto-Burman group of the Mongoloid stock of people. Significantly, their harvest festivals are also associated with feastings, merriments and other ethnic rites which may have some bearings on the identical rites observed by the Mongoloid tribes of Assam in their respective \textit{Magh bihu}.

We may now come to a definite conclusion that feastings and merriments are the common features of post-harvesting rites current among tribal and non-tribal people of Assam. But although some tribes observe the fire ceremony on the \textit{Magh bihu} day, the rites and rituals are traceable to their respective primitive belief and not to the Vedic prescription as usually seen among the non-tribals. However, the tradition of observing post-harvesting rites is not only resting in this north-eastern part of India, but is also found in other parts of India and abroad. The holy bath of \textit{Makara Samkranti} is observed by the Hindus all over India. The \textit{Lohri} festival of the Punjab is a post-harvesting festival associated with fire ceremony, relish and mirth\textsuperscript{103}. The Tamil cultivators celebrate the \textit{Poungal} festival to mark the conclusion of reaping harvest; on the occasion, the Sun god is worshipped by offering \textit{Sarkkarai poungal}. Like the term \textit{Bhogali} associated with \textit{Magh bihu} of Assam, the term \textit{Poungal} also signifies abundance of food grains\textsuperscript{104}. The \textit{Magh Porai}, a post-harvesting festival of the Bhuyans of Orissa, is identical to \textit{Magh bihu} of Assam\textsuperscript{105}. In abroad, the \textit{Harvest Home} is a post-harvesting festival observed by the peasants of

\textsuperscript{101} B. Datta et al., \textit{A Handbook of Folklore Material of N.E. India}, pp.184-186
\textsuperscript{102} N.C.Sarma, "Utsav Anusthan : Bihu : Magh Bihu" in \textit{Asamar Magh Bihu}, ed. N.C.Sarma, p.6
\textsuperscript{103} G. Singh, 'Lohri' in \textit{Bharatar Bibhinna Utsav}, pbd. National Book Trust of India, pp.90-96
\textsuperscript{104} A. Sundaram, 'Poungal', \textit{ibid}, pp.98-106
\textsuperscript{105} N.C.Sarma, op. cit, p.6
England with great enthusiasm. Besides, there are so many mid-winter fire festivals current among the peasants in other parts of Europe. Like the Mejis of Magh bihu, the magical enactment of burning effigies in fire to secure heat and light of the Sun for growth of vegetation is also in vogue among the peasants of Europe.

7. The Changing Tradition of Magh Bihu:

We have already shown reasons for transformation of the heathen utility of the primitive bonfire into Agni puja. Undoubtedly this development was the earliest change in the tradition of post-harvesting rites. We have also grounds to believe that the post-harvesting rites of the early inhabitants achieved streamlined forms soon after these were affiliated to Hinduism. Under Hinduism, the Magh bihu had become a paradigm for indigenous people where Agni puja emerged as the centre piece. In late medieval Assam under the influence of neo-Vaishnavism, Magh bihu was given a more national character than it had been before. All these changes pertain to the early times.

But in the present day context of changing attitude of the people, the tradition of Magh bihu has undergone unprecedented changes. According to modern Astronomy the winter solstice, which had been identified as the day of Makara Samkranti by the Astrological school some two thousand years ago, now occurs on 21st December. This phenomenon in the Sky renders the traditional observance of Magh bihu as winter festival in mid-
January virtually meaningless; because, the days of severe cold already disappear by this time. Further, a big intervening gap is observed between the conclusion of harvest and observance of Magh bihu since the time of transplanting seedlings also occurs in advance. The fact therefore remains that the present day Magh bihu has shed its earlier relevance to the significance of Makara Samkranti and post-harvesting rites. It is observed that Magh bihu has now been reduced to merely a festival of relish.

The symbolic significance of earlier Agni-puja, community feast and other connected rituals are no longer found. These features have since assumed new meanings in the changing socio-economic scenario. Formal Agni-puja is hardly seen now a days; instead, Vaishnavite influence is obvious in the fire ceremony. A festival of relish and merriment has virtually no meaning amidst scarcity and poverty. The earlier abundance of food items is no longer available in the rural areas. The intensity of bhog in the present day Bhogali bihu has concomitantly come down. The custom of baking delicious cakes is now only a symbol of bhog. The fact that the taste of the people has shifted from Assamese to foreign dishes can also be noticed in rural areas.

The community feast of uruka night is no longer a symbol of social solidarity since it is not held among the village community in general. Evidently, the pleasure of community festing may come only in a peaceful society free from any sort of violence and terrorism.\textsuperscript{110} The present day situation in Assam, where participants of community feast of the uruka

\textsuperscript{110} N.C.Sarma, Op-cit., p.9
night have to face terrorists' bullets, is not only not conducive to holding community feast but also inimical to the ideal of *Magh bihu*¹¹¹.

Still, the tradition of *Magh bihu* is found to survive the changing trends accommodating the new meanings. We have reasons to hold the belief that the agricultural people now observe the *Magh bihu* because of habit and not because of belief probably to give outlet to their repressed feelings. Although the rites and rituals are exclusively suited to rural landscape, the urban people are also seen to have shared the merriments of this *bihu*. However, these people seem to conceive the *Magh bihu* to be a great occasion for holding grand feast only. It is pertinent to note that the merriment of *Magh bihu* is also shared by the Assamese Hindus staying abroad. This recent development has definitely propagated *Magh bihu* in foreign soil.

¹¹¹ The incidence of *uruka* night occurred a few years ago in village Kekerikuchi near Rangia of north Kamrup giving evidence to the present day adverse situation in rural Assam. Both males and females of the village had to face terrorists' bullets and some of them succumbed to bullet injuries when they were busy in baking cakes, cooking meals of the *uruka* night and enjoying the merriments around bonfire.