CHAPTER – IX

CHANGES IN THE TRADITION OF BIHU FESTIVAL: FORCES AND MECHANISM

1. Preliminary Observations:

In the preceding chapters, we have so far focussed light on the tradition of the Bihu festival and its transition through different times in Assam's dynamic history and prehistory. It is observed that this transition signifies the changes from one condition to another, of the belief, content, texture and method of observance associated with the tradition of Bihu.

Society and culture are inter-woven. Change is the unchangeable law of nature; as part of the vast nature, society is inevitably subjected to changes. On the other hand, culture is the breath of social system; it is adopted in social environment. So, as and when social mores, values and attitudes are changed, the cultural traditions cherished by the concerned people also undergo change. Conversely, any variation in culture inevitably leads to social change. But it is observable that the field of social change is limited as compared to the field of cultural change.

'Culture Change' is a worldwide phenomenon. The culture christened as 'Bihu' and protected by the people of Assam since time immemorial was also no exception as is evident from our preceding

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2. P. Goswami, Bohag Bihu of Assam and Bihu songs, p.3
3. Vatsyayan, Social Control and Social Change, p. 144
treatment of the subject. It has been observed how the ritualistic *Bihu* songs and dances underwent transformations from ritual to romance and from romance to performing art; this indicates changing attitudes of the people towards fertility conception at different times. In this chapter, our endeavour will be to identify the forces which generated the changing attitudes of the people at different stages and levels of Assam's heterogeneous society and concomitantly brought about changes to the tradition of *Bihu*. Focus on this aspect of our study will be in the light of social changes for which we shall be leaning on the historical and prehistorical sources. The opinions of the exponents of the tradition of *Bihu* collected from all over Assam are also expected to be of great help in dealing particularly with the startling and unprecedented changes observable in the tradition of the *Bihu* festival of the recent decades.

2. **Cor-relation between Cultural Tradition and Change: Its bearing on the Tradition of Bihu:**

E.B. Tylor defines culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society"\(^4\). The background of human culture provides evidence to show that culture is not biologically transmitted. In fact, it is adopted in or made by man as part of the social environment\(^5\). Even without rejecting these statements, it would perhaps be logical to hold further that culture extends to the expressive side of the

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entire way of life of a people. By nature, culture is shared, transmissive, continuous, cumulative and adaptive. These inherent characteristics of culture have added dynamism to it. Since culture is a collective product of society, the social reality is naturally reflected in culture. Culture embodies the historically created designs for living which people inculcate and learn in society. Evidently, these designs are established as cultural heritage and transmitted orally from generation to generation under constant modifications made possible by pressures from within and outside the culture. In the process of transmission, tradition works as a vehicle carrying the cultural designs from the time of its inception down to the existing generation. In fact, tradition is an oral transmission of practice or way of doing which involves habitual actions, habits and customs established by historic sense in the past and handed down to the present for protecting a cultural heritage. We may now comfortably hold the view that cultural tradition refers to the practice or way of doing associated with a particular cultural object. Culture and tradition therefore go hand in hand and appear to be identical.

That cultural traditions cannot remain static is no longer worth arguing about; they are subjected to changes in the perspective of time and circumstances. Any change in culture is simultaneously reflected in its tradition. The statements made by T.S. Eliot on the relation between tradition and change are found to be significant and relevant to the.
tradition of the *Bihu* festival of Assam\textsuperscript{10}. These historic statements show the natural process how a tradition established in the past befits the present. Tradition cannot be a blind adherence to the ways of the previous generations. Although it is a part of the living culture of the past, it works in the order of the present. As observed by Eliot, "tradition is not solely or even primarily, the maintenance of a set of dogmatic beliefs ......., tradition involves a perception not only of the pastness of the past but of its presence ..... the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past"\textsuperscript{11}. Since tradition represents the accumulated wisdom and experience of ages, its knowledge is essential for enriching the life of the present by the vitality of the past. The knowledge possessed by the present generation modifies the past to suit the present. A readjustment of values resulting in conformity with the old and the new is thus achieved. Obviously, such a change is not an improvement but a development, a continuity; because tradition is a dynamic force in social system having a dynamic culture. \cite{11}

The above strategy of change is found to be applicable to the tradition of all art forms which constitute the non-material aspect of culture. But the strategy does not suitably apply to the tradition of material culture\textsuperscript{12}. Obviously the tradition of the *Bihu* festival of Assam is associated with art forms. The socio-cultural history of Assam pertaining

\textsuperscript{10} Although Eliot's statements in his critical essays e.g., *the Sacred Wood* and *Tradition and Individual Talent*, were made by him in connection with literary tradition, these are too meritorious to receive universal acceptance for applying to other mediums of art. See R.I. Varshney, T.S. Eliot: *Selected Critical Essays*, pp. 37-48.
\textsuperscript{11} T.S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, pp. 20-24
\textsuperscript{12} Material culture includes concrete things like houses, household items, instruments etc. and non-material culture includes abstract things like customs, conventions, methods, arts, knowledge, religion etc. See R.N. Sharma, *Social and Cultural Anthropology*, p. 108
to the period from the early decades of the 19th century down to the present day convinces that the changes in the tradition of the Bihu festival have been more or less influenced by the strategy of change discussed above.

Modernization of Assamese society had virtually begun in this period with the emergence of the elite class in the midst of an existing traditional society. The desire to change in this period naturally took different turns, e.g., a return to tradition, towards modernization and towards a synthesis of the elements of tradition and modernity. This social phenomenon might have resulted in induction, direction and manipulation of changes to a certain extent.

The development of culture is a continuous process; but it was definitely slow in the case of non-material culture in a tradition-bound society\(^\text{13}\). The evolution of Bihu proves that there have been changes in the tradition of Bihu since its inception in the past. Evidently, the process of change at any stage of society is likely to be considerably influenced by the concerned society’s cultural view of change\(^\text{14}\). It can be assumed that the people in ancient and medieval Assam were guided by the prevailing popular beliefs and practices and the social mind was pervaded by the presence of supernatural power. People adhering to the traditional beliefs found it very hard to shift to a new belief and pattern. So, conservatism prevailed at that stage of the Assamese society. It was therefore natural that these societies were less prone to any change. The

\(^\text{13}\) R.N. Sharma, \textit{Op.cit.}, p.119
socio-cultural milieu in this part of India was, therefore, peculiar where many factors arising out of the distinctive cultural mosaic contributed to the structural changes in the tradition of the *Bihu* festival.

3. Identification of the Forces influencing Changes in the Tradition of *Bihu* Festival:

All culture change over a period of time in response to environmental crises, intrusion of outsiders and modification of behaviour and values within culture\(^{15}\). The *Bihu* festival of Assam has also been experiencing phenomenal changes over the ages. As an agricultural festival, the tradition of *Bihu* has been directed by changes in the means and relations of production and mode of consumption of the agricultural produce. With newer modes, there have been newer beliefs and ways of life\(^{16}\). Obviously, the evolution of *Bihu* as harvesting rite had virtually begun in the society of ancient Assam. The unique ethnic composition and geographical location of this region indicates a cultural link of the land with South-east Asia in the past. However, for most part of medieval period, Assam practically remained isolated from the rest of India; free intercourse between Assam and the rest of India was workable only after the treaty of Yandabo in 1826 A.D. and soon Assam witnessed the new wave of changes in socio-cultural field\(^{17}\). This was followed by revivalistic and nativistic movements after India's Independence. The contemporary changes in the tradition of the *Bihu* festival were therefore attributable to the changing attitudes of the people of Assam. But the

\(^{15}\) W.A. Haviland, *Cultural Anthropology*, p. 47


\(^{17}\) S.N. Sarma, *A Few Aspects of Assamese Literature and Culture*, p. 223
factors influencing changes in the tradition of Bihu, mostly in ancient and medieval Assam, have been identified to be peculiar in respect of their nature and effectiveness.

The advantage of one condition of life over another is sufficient reason to account for change. Admittedly, each stage of society carries the seeds of invention for the next stage\(^\text{18}\). As in the other societies, innovation has therefore been identified as the ultimate source of all changes at all stages and levels of Assamese society. Innovation may relate to any thought, behaviour or thing that is new because of its qualitative difference from existing forms. The cultural background of society creates conditions favourable for innovative possibilities. Wants provide the basis both for innovations and disseminations\(^\text{19}\). It is a process of substitution, which leads to change in cultural tradition when accepted by the members of society. Innovation involves cultural loss because the acceptance of a new innovation leads to the loss of an older one\(^\text{20}\). It is proved by some events of the past and present socio-cultural history of Assam that cultural innovations have been made not only in the economic system but also in the field of art, literature and religion of the Assamese society.

Evidently, the major portion of the content of any culture is borrowed or absorbed from other culture. The process by which the achieved cultural elements are transmitted from one culture to another is

\(^{18}\) N.O. Lurie, 'Culture Change' in *Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*, ed. J. Clifton, p. 274

\(^{19}\) S.C. Dube, *Op cit*, pp.40-41

\(^{20}\) W.A. Haviland *Op cit*, p.417
known as cultural diffusion\textsuperscript{21}. Cultural diffusion mainly occurs for influx of population which was phenomenal in the entire history and prehistory of Assam. It may also take place between two neighbouring communities having two different culture. However, a non-material aspect of culture is found to be impaired in the course of diffusion\textsuperscript{22}. Like diffusion, acculturation has also been found to be an important force influencing change in the tradition of Bihu festival. Acculturation is cultural transmission in progress; it occurs when groups of individuals having different culture come into intensive firsthand contact; this contact results in massive changes in the original pattern of cultural tradition of one or the other groups\textsuperscript{23}. Through acculturation, fusion of different culture is occurred when the concerned groups lose their separate cultural identities and form a common culture to be shared by all groups. But involvement of an element of force in the process of acculturation is also possible; a dominant culture is likely to impose acculturation upon a feeble culture\textsuperscript{24}. So many instances of acculturation can be drawn from the heterogeneous socio-cultural history of Assam. It was the process of acculturation which created a situation in ancient and medieval Assam conducive to syncretisation and assimilation of varied cultural traits in the tradition of harvesting rites. While syncretisation refers to harmonious blend of the various cultural elements into a new system, assimilation implies the essentially unilateral absorption of one culture by another\textsuperscript{25}. In the social mosaic of ancient and medieval Assam, acculturation definitely played a

\textsuperscript{21} S. Channa, \textit{Understanding Society, Culture and Change}, pp. 35,41
\textsuperscript{22} N.C. Sarma, \textit{Asamiya Loka Samskritir Abhas}, pp. 23-24
\textsuperscript{23} Haviland, \textit{Op.cit}, p.418
\textsuperscript{24} P. Goswami, "Introduction" to \textit{Bohog Bihun Barochanita Cahit}, p.2
pivotal role in changing the age-old tradition of the *Bihu* festival protected by the peasantry. This is obvious in various aspects of the present day *Bihu* festival.

*Sanskritization* has been identified to be the leading factor which exerted a lot of influence on the tradition of the *Bihu* festival in ancient and medieval Assam. Although *Sanskritization* covers a wider meaning\(^2^6\), in medieval Assam the process was intended to modify or improve the traditional customs, practices, beliefs and way of life through reinterpretation of the existing meanings; through *Sanskritization*, Hinduism played a significant role in affecting caste mobility among the tribes. Such instances are observable throughout the socio-religious history of ancient and medieval Assam. Evidently, *Sanskritization* in Assam is traceable to *Aryan* culture which flourished in ancient Assam\(^2^7\). That the tradition of the *Bihu* festival had come under the pale of *Sanskritization* is proved from the various aspects of the festival flavoured with *Aryan* culture.

The Ahom rule of Medieval Assam introduced feudalistic structure of society at rural agrarian level. Evidently the tradition of the *Bihu* festival nurtured by the peasant class was directed to some extent by the will of the dominant feudal lords.

The above factors contributed to the changing tradition of the *Bihu* festival and were active at the folk and tribal levels of Assamese society mostly in ancient and medieval Assam. But in modern times, Assamese

\(^{26}\) M.N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, pp.6-7
\(^{27}\) P.C. Choudhury, *The History of Civilization of the people of Assam to the 12th Century A D.*, p. 394
society has been passing through a complex process of transition from the traditional ways. Modernization which had virtually begun in Assam with the advent of British colonial regime, marked a definite break with the past traditions and a fresh recording of socio-political structure\textsuperscript{28}. But as in other parts of India, the British liberal philosophy and outlook had its impact on the intellectual few and not on the mass people at folk level\textsuperscript{29}. It was after India’s attainment of Independence that people at all levels of Assamese society learned towards the new wave of modernization which was characterized by forces like economic reorganization, new education policy, improvement in communication, industrialization, science and technology and commercialization etc. Evidently the impact of modernization had changed the attitude of the people towards traditional culture. Further, the withdrawal of British imperialism had given rise to a revivalistic attitude in the Post-British Assamese society. At the same time, a conflict between the old values and new values could also be noticed. Towards the end of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the impact of cultural globalization could also be felt in the Assamese society. Social mobility from rural to urban areas in search of employment and emergence of the middle class are other important factors contributing to the changes in the tradition of Bihu. Thus, so many factors can be identified which have influenced the tradition of the Bihu festival since the British annexation of Assam.

\textsuperscript{28} A. Jha, "Modernization of Hindu Socio-Culture" in J A R S, Vol.XXXIII, No.2, 1994, p.68
\textsuperscript{29} B. Kuppuswamy, Social Change in India, p.69
4. Tradition of Bihu Festival: Nature and Dimension of Changes in Ancient and Medieval Assam:

The forces of change identified above have been found to be effective in the process of evolution of Bihu from its earliest form to the present. Since Bihu was initially an agro-based festival, such forces definitely influenced the means and relations of production in ancient times; the socio-cultural developments in medieval Assam indicate that these forces had also an impact on the older fertility conception of the people towards the various aspects of the Bihu festival.

Admittedly, the prehistoric developments had left some scope for the tradition of Bihu festival to change in the required directions in ancient and medieval Assam. The prehistoric society of Assam shifted from food gathering stage to food producing stage.\(^{30}\) It has already been mentioned that the earliest form of Bihu is construed to be a harvesting rite. We have every reason to believe that the primitive harvesting rite was a new innovation evolved on the religious beliefs and connected rituals of the Austric cultivators. The Austric beliefs associated with the cult of fertility, relation between woman and the earth, power of egg, betel-nut, weaving of clothes etc. were symbolically reflected in their harvesting rites.\(^{31}\) Evidently the dhol which was a musical instrument of the Austric people, occupied a prominent place in their aesthetic needs.\(^{32}\) The Tibeto-Burman speaking Mongoloid people, who came after the

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31. R.M. Nath, Background of Assamese Cultue, p.3. Also see I. Gogoi, Bihur Eti Sanuksha, pp.29,32
32. Dhol is still noticeable among the Austric people of Pacific region. Also see I. Gogoi, "Bihur Banl" in Bihu Sanskriti Ruprekha, ed. J. Gandsia, p. 4
Austic people, had a racial admixture with the Austric people. This provides grounds for believing that the Tibeto-Burmans adopted the advanced Neolithic culture; they practised the tradition of harvesting rites innovated by the Austric cultivators and that was definitely a cultural diffusion in prehistoric Assam. There is every reason to believe that the Tibeto-Burmans also added their own identical rites and rituals to the existing harvesting rites borrowed from the Austric people. Evidently, the Mongoloid culture had the influence of the Chinese culture in the east and the Egyptian and Babylonian culture in the west which naturally found reflection in song, dance and other rituals. However, we cannot believe that the Neolithic culture adopted by the prehistoric Tibeto-Burmans could raise the agricultural production above the subsistence level. We also cannot ascertain if there was any change in the fertility conception since social system was operational only at tribal level. For lack of sufficient evidence we cannot go beyond what has been inferred above in connection with the tradition of prehistoric harvesting rites. In order to precisely deal with the early changes in the tradition of the Bihu festival or harvesting rites, we are therefore constrained to come down to the socio-cultural developments in ancient and medieval Assam.

The tradition of harvesting rites cherished by the Austric and Tibeto-Burman speaking Mongoloid people in prehistoric Assam had undergone remarkable changes in historic times of ancient Assam. We

33, Tibeto-Burman elements still noticed in the tradition of the Bihu festival have been discussed in a preceding chapter. For influence of Chinese, Egyptian and Babylonian culture, see R.M. Nath, Op.cit., p.16

34, K.I. Barua, “Asamar Pragoiilhac Samskriti” in Asamya Samskriti, ed. H.P. Neog and L. Gogoi, p.31
have already shown the Alpines as pre-Aryans who came to this land in prehistoric time before the Vedic Aryans. The Alpine-Aryans played a conspicuous part not only in the evolution of Bihu but also in the development of the cultural complex of this region. The Alpines had both advanced religious ideas and crude magic; they had advanced technique of cultivation and also possessed fine aesthetic culture associated with music and dancing. With these cultural traits, the Alpines had prolonged socio-cultural contact with the Tibeto-Burmans in the plains of Assam. We are therefore on firmer grounds that there had been cultural diffusion, acculturation and cultural assimilation and syncretisation among the Tibeto-Burmans and Alpine people. The reasons for a synthesis of Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman elements in the harvesting rites of the latter, have already been shown. Further changes in the means of production caused by Alpine influence increased the agricultural yield. It is reasonable to hold that production above the subsistence level brought about structural changes in the existing tradition of the harvesting rites. There had definitely been a harmonious blending of Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burman and Alpine elements in the tradition of the harvesting rites at folk and tribal level. At this stage of society, the attitude of the people towards fertility and their aesthetic aspects of life might have been affected by the advanced religious ideas of the Alpine people. Consequently, the primitive tradition of harvesting rites adapted to an advanced condition. Survivals of syncretic forms in various aspects of the harvesting rites may still be noticed in the traditions of the Bihu festivals observed by the tribals and non-tribals of Assam.

Obviously, the history of ancient Assam unfolded itself with the coming of the Vedic Aryans\textsuperscript{36}. But it is perceived from various sources that the Aryan culture gained some ground from 5\textsuperscript{th} to 6\textsuperscript{th} century A.D with extension of royal patronage\textsuperscript{37}. Admittedly, the most significant socio-religious development of ancient and medieval Assam was conversion of the non-Aryan ruling families and tribes, particularly of the plains, to Hinduism. Most of them were given a divine ancestry drawing linkage with the principal characters of the Epic\textsuperscript{38}. In the new social environment put forth by the Aryan culture, the status of a tribal king was dependent on how much he patronized Aryan culture and Hinduism. Since the indigenous people naturally followed the ruling families, the conversions effected caste mobility not only at the level of ruling aristocracy but also at folk and tribal levels. The process of Hinduization continued till the end of the Medieval period\textsuperscript{39}. Such conversions inevitably created situation for cultural syncretization and assimilation among numerous non-Aryans and pre-Aryans of the plains. The philosophy of the Vedas influenced certain aspects of the existing tradition of the harvesting rites which was hitherto a fusion of Austric, Alpine and Tibeto-Burman elements. Having been allured by the Vedic philosophy, the people at folk and tribal level of society had changed their earlier religious beliefs and life style. This changing attitude of the concerned people was naturally reflected in and had changed their tradition of harvesting rites in content, texture and method of observance.

\textsuperscript{36} P.C. Choudhury, \textit{Op-cit}, p.2  
\textsuperscript{37} B.K. Barua, \textit{The Cultural History of Assam}, p.117  
\textsuperscript{38} P.C. Choudhury, \textit{Op-cit}, p.429  
\textsuperscript{39} S.N. Sarma, \textit{A Few Aspects of Assamese Literature and Culture}, p.227
There is no least doubt that the Aryans took up the conversion of the non-Aryans simultaneously with the process of Sanskritization. Through the process of Sanskritization, the Aryans reinterpreted the primitive beliefs of the non-Aryans in terms of the philosophy of the Vedas and postulated these giving new meanings thereto. The various features of the prehistoric harvesting rites also could not remain outside the Aryan pale of Sanskritization. The Aryans brought the primitive fertility cult and fire cult under the philosophical guidance of the Vedas and accorded Hindu affinity. But it may be safely assumed from the present forms of the various features of the Bihu festival that the Aryan influence had its limitation probably for strong non-Aryan pull. The Aryan endeavour succeeded in effecting changes only in those aspects of the tradition of harvesting rites where their reinterpretations could persuade the non-Aryans; in some areas, the Aryan influence succeeded in bringing in a synthesis and conversely in other areas, the Aryan culture had to succumb to the dominant non-Aryan influence. Rightly does observe P. Goswami, "Assam's Hinduism, in fact, is a compromise between pure Aaryan customs and rites and local Mongoloid practices."

It is further proved by the fact that although the present day tradition of the Bihu festival has an Aryan-Hindu affinity and is allied to that of India, it has retained separate entity with local variations definitely for strong non-Aryan influence. Obviously, in bringing in a synthesis, the Aryans had to shed much purity of their Nordic blood.

40. S.K. Chetterji, Kirata Jana Kriti, p.5
41. P. Goswami, Essays on the Folklore and Culture of N E. India, p.174
42. P.C. Choudhury, Op-cit, p. 310
In medieval Assam the *Ahoms*, an offshoot of the Tai-Shan stock of South-East Asia, emerged as the superior power politically and culturally over the other non-Aryans and pre-Aryans. Although the Tai-Shans were minority, the other tribes naturally submitted to the political and cultural dominance of the Tai-Shans. So, cultural diffusion and acculturation between the Tai-Shans and other people had become easier. With their achieved traits of aesthetic culture, the Tai-Shans influenced the existing tradition of primitive song, dance and music associated with the springtime harvesting rites of the earlier inhabitants. Thus the content and texture of these features of springtime *Bihu* embodied South-East Asian traits through the Tai-Shans. The existing tradition of carol singing was also influenced by the Tai-Shan pattern and subsequently the *Huchari* institution was utilized to satisfy the ruling aristocrats and to meet the political ends of the Ahom monarchy\(^{43}\).

Under the *paik* system of the Ahom rule, the *paiks* had to work for the state besides the work of cultivation. The *paik* system was the greatest deterrent to the privatization of land. In the true sense, there was no economic feudalism. Such a situation was hostile to production relations and development of agro-based culture\(^{44}\). But the characteristics of political feudalism were visible in the style of living and spending of the royal officers who exercised considerable amount of influence and

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\(^{43}\) We have already gone through the Ahom contributions to the tradition of the *Bihu* festival in a preceding chapter. That *Huchari* institution was utilized for political gain is evident from killing of Ragha Moran by Kuranganayani while Ragha had bowed down to a *Huchari* band on the *garu bihu* day in 1769. See S.K. Bhuyan (ed), *Tungkhungia Buranjii*, p. 73

control over the paiks. The free peasantry available under the paik system was subjected to ruthless exploitation of these officers\textsuperscript{45}. The common people were put under restrictions in using certain costumes and ornaments\textsuperscript{46}. It may therefore be safely assumed that the tradition of the Bihu festival was also directed to some extent to the satisfaction of the feudal lords. This indicates the presence of certain amount of forceful acculturation also during the days of the Ahom rule.

But admittedly, it was the aesthetic sense of the Tai-Shans for which the tradition of romantic Bihu song and dance abandoned its ritual character and unveiled its art form. Although the Tai-Shans had a rich cultural heritage, it is observable throughout their six hundred years ruling history that these people gave up their cherished culture and adopted the local cultural traditions which they only developed through transmission of their identical cultural elements\textsuperscript{47}.

The devotional Vaisnavism which flourished as neo-Vaisnavism of Assam inherited the ethical, moral and social ideas of the larger Indian thoughts\textsuperscript{48}. Its liberal caste attitude integrated the villages and easy access attracted the indigenous people towards neo-Vaisnavism. This made acculturation and assimilation possible at folk and tribal levels. The Sanskritization process under neo-Vaisnavism had changed the existing cultural attitudes of the non-Aryans and pre-Aryans and brought them

\textsuperscript{45} M. Sharma, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 32
\textsuperscript{46} S.N. Sarma, \textit{A Socio-Cultural and Economic History of Medieval Assam}, p. 255
\textsuperscript{47} I., Gogoi, "Ahom Sakalar Sanskritik Abadan" in \textit{Asomar Sanskriti Samiksha}, ed. N.C. Sarma, p.190
\textsuperscript{48} S.N. Sarma, \textit{Op-cit}, p.105
into the fold of Aryanism of Indian mainstream. Evidently, both tribals and non-tribals incorporated the devotional traits of the neo-Vaisnavism in the traditions of their respective Bihu festivals. Hymns of Kirtana and Nama-Ghosas used to be sung as Huchari-nams added spiritual flavour to the tradition of Huchari institution. It is indeed significant that under devotional neo-Vaisnavism, the tradition of the Bihu festival was given a more national character than it had been before. The neo-Vaisnavite movement rescued the rural folk from the clutches of deep-rooted popular beliefs and practices. This definitely changed the attitudes of the ignorant and illiterate people towards their old conception of agricultural fertility which was subsequently reflected in the tradition of the Bihu festival.

The Burmese invasions and the consequent non-availability of royal patronage in late medieval Assam had paralysed the tradition of the Bihu festival which subsequently revived in British Assam. The British occupation of Assam marked the end of medieval feudalistic structure of society and advent of modernism in Assam. From the time of the British rule down to the present day Assam there have been so many strains of transition in Assamese society creating new forces of change in the tradition of the Bihu festival.

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49. N.C. Sarma, Asamiyā Loka Sanskriti Abhā, p.29
50. P.C. Choudhury, Op-cit, p. 408
5. Impact of the British Rule on the Tradition of Bihu Festival:

The tradition of the Bihu festival was dying down during the days of the British in Assam and displayed a gloomy picture. Evidently, Assam came under the dominion of the British soon after the Anglo-Burmese treaty of 1826 A.D. The British colonial influence made inroads slowly into the life and society of the people of Assam. The introduction of the British administrative and economic policies of world capitalist order in the semi-tribal, semi feudal and predominantly rural and agricultural economy of Assam was not only not suitable to Assam but was also totally foreign to its native people. This resulted in unhealthy consequences. Demolition of the traditional feudalistic structure of the pre-colonial Assamese society gave birth to new forces which disintegrated the old social order of the people51.

The British intention of land settlement was to impose and collect heavy amount of land revenue from the ryots. But the loss on the part of the peasants was not made good by development of the old techniques of production and traditional cottage industries52. The consequent deteriorating production relations and declining rate of net agricultural production had left little surplus with the peasants to pay out the increased land revenue. This is evident from the agrarian riots during the

51. M. Sharma, Op-cit, p. 24
52. G.R. Barua, Assam Buranji, pp. 187-192
days of the British\textsuperscript{53}. The situation had definitely an adverse effect on the traditions of agro-based culture in rural Assam.

Although the tradition of \textit{bihu} showed a reviving tendency from the first half of the nineteenth century\textsuperscript{54}, the obligation to pay heavy land revenue out of the meager agricultural return demoralized the promoters and protectors of \textit{bihu} to carry on with their age-long tradition as had been done earlier. In addition, the British divide and rule policy discouraged social cohesion and nationalism in the Assamese society composed of diverse socio-cultural elements\textsuperscript{55}. All these forces interrupted the inherent dynamism in the tradition of the \textit{Bihu} festival associated with indigenous agricultural folk.

The British introduced modernization in Assam by setting up industries, developing roads and communication system and introducing western education. With this, Assam received exposure to the rest of India. But at the same time, for smooth functioning of bureaucratic administration and tea, petroleum and coal industries, the British encouraged population immigration from rest of India\textsuperscript{56}. Although new ideas and habits penetrated into urban societies, some migrant communities were not interested in assimilation with the natives and maintained a colonial attitude to this region\textsuperscript{57}. But for lack of cultural

\begin{footnotes}
\item[54] The revival and existence of the tradition of \textit{Bihu} is evident from the description of \textit{Bihu} made by W. Robinson in 1841. See W. Robinson, \textit{A Descriptive Account of Assam}, pp. 268-269.
\item[56] II.K. Borpujari, \textit{op.cit.}, p.47.
\item[57] N.C. Das, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 171.
\end{footnotes}
diffusion and acculturation, the immigrants had little impact on the traditional agro-based culture of the rural folk. This is evident from the continuity of the late medieval form in the tradition of the *Bihu* festival up to the first half of the 20th century A.D.

Admittedly, the western education introduced by the British had changed the attitudes of the few neo-educated Assamese in urban areas. With this, modern ideas based on rationalism slowly crept into the educated Assamese mind. But the glimpses of rationalism were not the outcome of the British education only. It is evident from the history of the British colonial rule in Assam that besides the British education, the propaganda and activities of the missionaries and the inspiration of the Bengal Renaissance also contributed towards spread of rationalism. But the light of rationalism which worked as a crusade against superstitious beliefs and practices had enlightened only a small section of the urban society. It did not have substantial impact on the vast majority of rural people; so the dynamic of change in rural areas was tardy. This disparity inevitably created a *cultural lag* between the educated few and the indigenous illiterate people. The enlightened section criticized the superstitious beliefs and practices of the rural folk. A conflict between old values and modern values thus originated which generated some socio-cultural changes. Since the song and dance institution of the springtime *Bihu* was associated with ancient cult of agricultural fertility,

58. P. Choudhury, *Socio-Cultural Aspects of Assam in the 19th Century*, p. 15
60. S.N. Sarma, *A Few Aspect of Assamese Literature and Culture*, p. 230
it naturally became an object for criticism of the neo-middle class circle. Evidently, this circle tried to outcast the springtime Bihu songs and dances branding them as vulgar, erotic and uncivilized\(^{62}\). The few people belonging to this circle emerged as the first middle class in the 19\(^{th}\) Century Assamese society and they naturally exercised their dominance in every aspect of social life of the time. Consequent upon their dislike for Bihu, the tradition of the Bihu festival which once received royal patronage of the Ahom regime, had to remain alienated and stagnant. For their philistine attitude towards traditional culture, the neo-educated middle class of the nineteenth century failed to evaluate Bihu scientifically in its historical perspective. There is therefore every reason to believe that this class might have judged the springtime Bihu songs and dances, associated with non-Aryan fertility cult, from the standpoint of the morality of a civilized society. They failed to realise the inner spirit of the songs and dances associated with an agricultural fertility festival like

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62. i) H.R. Dhekiyal Phukan gave a comment in his *Asam Buranji* that at the time of Bohag bihu, the women and lustful men of common people get together and indulge in hateful singing and dancing. See J.M. Bhattacharya(ed), *Asam Buranji of Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan*, pp. 100-104

ii) Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan termed the songs and dances of Bohag bihu instituted in some places of Nagaon to be erotic. He let the people know the harmfulness of such activities. See G.R., Barua, *Dhekiyal Phukanar Jiban Carit*, p. 168

iii) *Orunodoi*, the organ of the Christian Missionaries of 19\(^{th}\) Century, also made unpleasant comment on Bihu. The Missionaries viewed that “the amorous activities performed in various places of Assam during the days of Bihu are known to all. This custom is not in vogue in other countries and it is a great stain for Assam”. *Orunodoi*, April, 1848, Vol. III, No.4, p.32

iv) “For seven days from the day of Choti Samkranti, some men and women belonging to low caste go to isolated places and sing indecent, erotic songs and exhibit impudent gestures”. ---G.R. Barua, *Asam Buranji*, pp. 202-203

v) K.K. Bhattacharya observed that “Bihu is a prejudice for Assam. ---- The foreigners revile us after having seen bihu; they express doubt on the chastity of the women of Assam”. ---G.R. Barua, *ibid*, p. 325

vi) In 1898, B.N. Dilihiya Bhattacharya advised the Government to pass necessary laws and regulations in order to impose a ban on bihu. See P. Choudhury, *Unavngsa Satikar Asamat Ebhunukti*, p.4

the bihu. The strong dislike of the middle class towards the springtime songs and dances of the rural unlettered people was obviously a class hostility which resulted from modern education and Aryan-Hindu Culture hatched by this class. It appears from the nature of their condemnation of bihu that this neo-educated class was unaware of the natural law of change and was blind to the original roots and foundation of a modern civilized society. The gross injustice done by this class to the aesthetic aspect of bihu was perhaps that this class did not initiate any progressive thinking towards modification of the Bihu songs and dances to suit a modern society. However, subsequently a few renowned personalities of the Assamese middle class had changed their attitudes towards the tradition of the Bihu festival. Their changing attitudes evinced some progressive thinking like modification of the springtime Bihu songs and dances\textsuperscript{63}. Obviously such new thinking began to bear fruits from the 3\textsuperscript{rd} decade of 20\textsuperscript{th} century and onwards\textsuperscript{64}.

Another important factor which degenerated the process of change inherent in the tradition of bihu was the terror of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} World War. The fear-some sight of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} World War which had cast its shadow of death and wanton destruction on the N.E. region demoralized to a great extent.

\textsuperscript{63} i) R.K. Bordoloi, Introduction to ‘Miri Jiyari’, p. 1
   ii) In his article Bihu appeared in Asam Bandhu of May, 1885 issue, Dolinarayan Bora suggested for retaining the essential parts of bihu discarding the non-essential ones.
   See N. Salkia (ed), Asam Bandhu, p. 167
   iii) Lakshminath Bezbaruah argued in favour of springtime Bihu songs and dances of unlettered rural people in his story Bihu. See A.C. Hazarika (ed), Bezbaruah Rachanavali, Part-II, p. 1568

\textsuperscript{64} An outcome of such progressive thinking was the publicly organized Bihu festival in the 3\textsuperscript{rd} decade of 20\textsuperscript{th} century which we have already referred to.
the protectors and promoters of *bihu* who found it difficult to keep the tradition alive\(^65\).

Thus it may be concluded that although the advent of British rule in Assam heralded the growth of new forces, the unmatching economic policy followed by the British in rural Assam arrested the normal process of change in the tradition of the *Bihu* festival. Furthermore, the weight of evidence helps us to infer that there was no interaction between the tradition-bound rural folk and the British created neo-middle class or the reflected few. This not only affected the timely changes in the tradition of this festival but also jeopardized the very existence of *bihu*. Thus the period of the British rule in Assam was almost a period of stagnation for the tradition of the *Bihu* festival. Although the attitude of the middle class towards *bihu* underwent an abrupt transition from the last part of the 19\(^{th}\) century\(^66\), the remarkable changes in the tradition of the *Bihu* festival could be noticed only after India's attainment of Independence.

6. **Post-British Society of Assam: Stimuli for Change in the Tradition of Bihu Festival:**

The stagnation in the tradition of the *Bihu* festival during the days of the British was certainly a temporary phenomenon. Evidently, culture follows a befitting course accommodating the changing trends of time.


\(^{66}\) This middle class belonged to the *Jonaki Age*. This class, having national consciousness, was inspired by the Renaissance in Assamese literature and culture brought about by *Jonaki*. Also see P. Choudhury, *Unavimsa Satikar Asamat Fbihunuki*, pp. 5-6
The tradition of the Bihu festival has never been an exception to this cultural dynamic. Not only Assam but the whole of India was subjected to drastic social changes soon after India had attained Independence in mid 20th century. The national awakening which had been bred in Indian society towards the last part of the British rule, gathered momentum immediately after India's Independence. This awakening invoked revitalization of the age-old cultural traditions that were dying out during the days of the British colonialism. Simultaneously, there had been a nativistic revival in Assamese society both springing from within and induced from without.

The impact of the Post-British national awakening was reflected in the changing ideas and attitudes particularly of the educated middle class Assamese. Their positive attitudes towards traditional Assamese culture inspired them to discover the art forms and realize the aesthetic significance underlying the springtime Bihu songs and dances. Naturally, this class undertook a deliberate effort to revitalize the tradition of bihu as well as to evolve some more satisfying forms of the springtime Bihu songs and dances. This resulted in new innovations of the Sanskritized forms of the Bihu songs and dances adaptable to a modern society. Meanwhile, the rural agrarian society had also experienced changes like increase in agricultural productivity resulting from the introduction of improved techniques of production. At the same time, new education...
policy of Independent India also reached the rural folk. In a new environment, people adopted the new ideas and attitudes which divested them of the earlier conception of fertility associated with the tradition of the Bihu festival. In the interim, the modified versions of the springtime Bihu songs entered into printed collections and began to flow into the rural areas; the offsprings of the elderly peasants gradually familiarized themselves with the new rhythms of the songs and dances. Thus, there had been a cultural interaction between the folk or Little Tradition of the peasants and elite or Great Tradition of the educated middle class. Obviously, such interaction is an effective force towards modernization of a traditional culture. The changed ideas and attitudes of the people at both folk and elite levels of the Assamese society immediately after Independence created a new perspective for the old; people began to see their traditional culture in a new light which had been suppressed under colonial rule. The primitive idea of fertility cult having been defeated in the new light, the springtime Bihu songs and dances lost the earlier spontaneity. The rural people used to observe the tradition of springtime Bihu songs and dances ceremonially just to give outlets to their aesthetic desires of life. At this juncture, the Bihu songs and dances naturally acquired a tendency of leaving their agricultural base and rural abode and appeared before the mass people in urban areas as folk performing art.

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70. The improved agricultural techniques included use of manures, irrigation facilities etc. which were unknown to the traditional cultivators. The offsprings of the peasants who were deprived of education during the British Rule, were benefitted by the new education policy.
71. Y. Singh, Modernization of Indian Tradition, pp. 13-15
72. I.P. Vidyarthi, Op-cit., p.101
The instance of such a great change in the tradition of the art form associated with the Bihu festival had never been before. But the tribal societies were naturally less prone to changes; the post-Independent social changes, although swayed also the tribal traditions of bihu, took time to make a headway. Moreover, the other existing community and household rituals associated with all the three bihus of both the tribals and non-tribals also displayed a continuity at the early stage of post British Assam mostly for dominant Aryan Hindu culture. But the traditional sports and pastimes which faced extinction survived subsequently.

As has been observed above, the forces of change that had come immediately after India’s Independence worked at all levels of the Assamese society. Admittedly, the changes in the tradition of the Bihu festival occurred at this period, were based on the past traditions. These changes were simply modifications to suit the changing ideas and attitudes. But the Bihu festivals in an urban setting have been going on, on a larger scale from the fifth decade of the twentieth century A.D. 73. Thereafter, certain new forces became prominent in the Assamese society which disordered the tradition of the Bihu festival with incessant changes. Heavy influx of people to Post-Independent Assam had disturbed the cultural balance of the region by disintegrating the existing socio-economic structure of rural Assam. Consequently, the villages lost self-sufficiency. Moreover, spread of modern education, new waves of development and impact of the industrial revolution had created income and employment potentialities which played a significant role in changing

73. P. Goswami, Bohag Bihu of Assam and Bihu Songs, p.71
the socio-cultural contours of Assam in the fifth and sixth decades of the twentieth century. These forces had subsequently disintegrated the old social pattern and dispersed the close groups at rural folk level. The intimacy of the younger generation with agricultural operation was lost since they naturally preferred to see life in the new light. This resulted in social mobility of young men and women from rural to urban areas in search of education and employment. The increasing demand for labour resulting from urbanization drew out the surplus agricultural labour also from rural to urban areas. These people constituted a part of the urban population. At the initial stage of the Bihu festival in urban setting, these migrated rural people carried and propagated the tradition of the Bihu songs and dances in urban areas. Subsequently, Bihu in urban areas came under the sole domain of the middle class people. And with the modern ideas and attitudes cherished by the middle class people the content, texture and method of observance of the tradition of springtime Bihu songs and dances were subjected to unprecedented changes.

In this way, springtime Bihu songs and dances lost their first existence of rural and agricultural background and assumed a second existence as performing art in urban environment. The large number of spectators irrespective of class, creed and race, who gather in the present-day bihu pandals may find out a clue to their ethnic identity in the public displays of the second existence of the Bihu songs and dances. This

75. P. Goswami, *Op-cit.*, p. 69
77. The nature and dimension of changes in the tradition of springtime Bihu songs and dances have been discussed in a preceding chapter.
second existence has been termed as *Folklorismus* by some folklorists\(^7\). Evidently, the existing tradition of displaying the springtime *Bihu* songs and dances in public platforms is surviving the cultural pressure produced by rapid urbanization, industrialization, advancement of science and technology and modern education in urban areas.

But, the springtime *Bihu* songs and dances have not assumed a second existence without being corrupt. The fact therefore remains that the *Bihu* songs and dances now current in publicly organized *Bihu* festivals may not be genuine folklore in every respect. It is pertinent to observe that although the springtime *Bihu* songs and dances once had left their rural abode, are now back with hybrid forms. The urban style of observance is also seen in rural Assam. The tradition found to be prevalent in the early days of the British and immediately after Independence has shed much folk elements and folk beauty in the course of assuming an elitist character\(^7\). The second existence is not modernization of existing tradition but a transgression of tradition; because, most of the changes are induced from outside and not in keeping along the cultural heritage of indigenous people of Assam. This excessive liberalism does not seem to be suitable in the context of Assam where folkloristic elements pertaining to *bihu* are still not scarce and out of reach\(^8\).

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79. We have already shown the changes which occurred in the tradition of *Bihu* songs and dances after coming over to the public platforms.

An opinion survey conducted in this regard has shown that 49 out of 55 exponents of *Bihu* reacted negatively to the second existence of elitist character and argued in favour of retaining the tradition of the *Bihu* songs and dances as folk performing art.
There is no denying the fact that the tendency to change in the recent past had developed consequent upon detachment of the springtime Bihu songs and dances from their rural roots and agricultural people. Their traditions naturally received exposure to all changes as soon as springtime Bihu was observed as public festival on a larger scale. Evidently, the Assamese society immediately after Independence was not bounded by any particular socio-cultural idealism. Therefore, variegated factors have since been influencing changes in the tradition of the Bihu festival.

The Assamese bureaucrats of the British administration were admittedly allergic to the British model of western culture evolved on world capitalist order. This section acquired the western tastes and habits and adopted a western life style through persistent contact with the British administrators. But it is admitted that westernization does not carry the implication that it is good or bad; but modernization is normally used in the sense that it is good\(^{81}\). So, like modernization, westernization could not make up a ground on the other sections of the urban society of British Assam even though people living in urban areas are more exposed to western influences than are rural folk\(^{82}\). But in post-Independent Assam, the upper section of the middle class who inherited western manners, naturally emerged as wealthy and dominant. Being allured by the splendours of western culture after prolonged contact with this section, the younger generation of the urban middle class also took over the western taste and habit. This change was reflected to some extent in

\(^{81}\) M.N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, p.54
\(^{82}\) *Ibid*, p. 65
the new innovations introduced in songs, dances and costumes associated with the aesthetic aspects of the springtime Bihu. Influence of the sophisticated tastes and habits find expression also in extravagant arrangement of public Bihu festivals. The mass media like radio, television and cinema have also been influencing the tradition of the Bihu festival to assume an elitist character.

The inflow of the ideology of western capitalist culture into the middle class of the Assamese society has inflicted commercial attitude on this class. Commercial attitudes have naturally given rise to fictitious and individualistic attitudes in some middle class Assamese who are now self-styled protectors and promoters of the art-forms associated with the springtime Bihu songs and dances. Their commercial motives have rendered the traditional art-forms of the songs and dances impaired and market-oriented beyond a reasonable limit. It is observed that the present changes in the tradition of the Bihu songs and dances have over taken the changes in present socio-economic structure of the Assamese society. Although projected as the national festival, the present day Bihu festival represents the attitudes of only a small but dominant section of the Assamese society where vast majority of the people are mere spectators. The generation gap which arose out of the conflict between old and new values in the immediate past, is now perceived at all levels of the Assamese society. Some grown men both in rural and urban areas who

83. Our field study shows that 59% of 248 people belonging to different parts of Assam have held western influence, changing taste and habit and influence of mass media responsible for recent changes in the tradition of the Bihu songs and dances.
84. In the above study; 31% have attributed the recent changes to middle class hegemony and commercial, fictitious and individualistic attitudes of this class.
were familiar with the genuine art-forms, now find it difficult to transit their gains and experiences because of the prevailing generation gap. The ignorance and dislike of the new generation for the tradition of the *Bihu* festival and also their blind adherence to irrelevant cultural elements have therefore been influencing *bihu* to take on tradition-deviant changes in many respects\(^85\).

The influx of people from neighbouring Bangladesh was considered to be a threat to the cultural identity of the natives of Assam in the recent past. This led to a student movement intended for deporting the illegal foreign nationals in the last part of seventh and first part of eighth decades of the twentieth century A.D. An emotional change in the tradition of the *Bihu* festival could be noticed during this period since the movement emotionally awakened the people for revitalization of traditional Assamese culture. This change did not have a lasting effect on the tradition of the *Bihu* festival. Soon the impact of cultural globalization could be perceived in the tradition of the *Bihu* festival. Evidently, the intention of cultural globalization had been to spread cultural imperialism by a few U.S. based television channels like STAR, CNN, MTV and also Hollywood branded cinema\(^86\). These electronic media had evidently forced the local cultural traits to face extinction and popularized unrestrained and indisciplined life style including postures, gestures and inaudible utterances among some youths of N.E. India. Such unpleasant

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\(^85\) Some tradition-deviant changes have already been referred to in our earlier discussion of tradition.

and detrimental influence of cultural globalization, though not diffused widely, could be noticed in the tradition of the present day *Bihu* festival.

The threat of losing own cultural identity amidst bluster of foreign culture had made some people sensitive about their past cultural traditions. A tendency to look back to the past had therefore grown among some people of N.E. India since the last part of the eight decade of the twentieth century A.D.\(^{87}\). In Assam, this tendency could be noticed in the latest changes in the tradition of the *Bihu* festival. As an endeavour to preserve and popularize the traditional art-forms, the various aspects of the performing arts associated with the *Bihu* festival were brought under certain fixed patterns through modifications based on the traditional forms\(^{88}\). This renovation has now been justified on the ground that it may prevent the genuine forms from being corrupt and may check intrusion of irrelevant cultural elements into the aesthetic aspects of *Bihu* in the changing socio-economic scenario\(^{89}\). The fixed patterns are found to have diffused as popular culture all over Assam surviving the various trends for change. But noticeably the fixed patterns have not been able to wipe out the elitist character and influence of capitalist culture from the performing art-forms displayed in the present day *Bihu* festivals. This is definitely attributable to the fact that the aesthetic aspects of culture are now dominated by the middle class. This dominance cannot be overthrown without drastic economic change and proportionate growth at all levels of society.

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87. B. Datta, *op-cit*, pp. 135-136  
88. This tendency is now universal. Russian *bele* dance is a fine instance of this development.  
89. B.N. Saikia, "Bihu Nrityar Byakaranar Prayejan Haisc" in *Amar Assam*, ed. H. Borgohain. 10th April, 2003, p.2
Admittedly, the public display of Bihu songs and dances is the core of attraction in the present tradition of the Bihu festival. So, almost all changes observed in this present tradition pertain to this aspect which has already acquired a progressive trend. But the traditions of the Kati and Magh bihu and also the non-aesthetic features of the Bohag bihu where middle class hegemony is out of scope, have not been subjected to any dramatic change in the recent decades. Still some changes, observable in those aspects also, are found to have been caused mainly by forces arising from within the societies at folk and tribal levels. With the spread of education and benefit of science even into the remotest village, the agricultural people have abandoned their earlier fertility belief and so lost instinctive inspiration for holding the fertility related rites and rituals. Changes in the method of production have inevitably changed the method of observing these rites and rituals. As the time of sowing and reaping has changed, the Kati and Magh bihu have also lost their earlier relevance as agricultural and seasonal festival. Religion has been an important factor leading to both continuity and change in the tradition of certain rituals connected with all the three bihus. The pious agricultural people stick to the method of observance enjoined upon by their respective religious cult and change the method whenever there is a shifting of religious cult. The low intensity and enthusiasm for all the three bihus now noticeable at rural folk and tribal levels are attributable to deteriorated economic condition and consequent insufficiency of the agricultural people. A tendency to imitate urban life style has grown among the rural youths.

90. The observations made in this respect have been discussed in the preceding chapter.
This tendency has brought about changes in their habit and taste and a dislike for traditional culture.

Modern ideas and attitudes have definitely changed the rural environment. There are changes in the household dheki sal, randhani sal, tata sal, cotal, gohali, cara ghar, paduli, bari-basti, kheti pathar etc. In this changing environment, the household rites and rituals associated with all the three bihus seem to be observing by the agricultural people because of habits and for relaxation of tiresome rural life.