Chapter X

SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the foregoing discussions, deliberate attempts have been made to throw light on the phenomenal changes that occurred in the tradition of the Bihu festival in course of its transition through the ages.

The fact that Assam has been a refuge of so many peoples belonging to diverse races since prehistoric time, is ascribable mainly to favourable climatic condition for agriculture, abundant natural resources and easy access to the land. The heterogeneous society of Assam, a common Assamese speech and a composite Assamese culture are the significant contributions of these immigrants. The composite culture now flourished as the indigenous culture of Assam was basically agro-oriented which had roots in the societies of the ancient Austric and Mongoloid cultivators. The Alpine-Aryan influences added a new dimension to the existing agro-based culture. The subsequent developments which have been taking place in Assamese society after the Austric-Mongoloid and Alpine-Aryan influences, have brought forth conspicuous changes in different aspects of the composite Assamese culture.

Bihu and the allied festivals observed by the tribals and non-tribals in this easternmost part of India have therefore a tribal past and agricultural background. We have shown reasons to believe that the Aryan culture subsequently added religious significance to the heathen utilities of certain rituals now observed by the Assamese Hindus in all the three Bihus. In fact,
the *Bihu* festival has been a synthesis of Aryan and non-Aryan cultural traits. The myths and legends that explain the origin of *Bihu* are rather fictitious stories. Certainly, the origin of *Bihu* lies with the simple fertility beliefs associated with the desire for plentiful agricultural yields of the non-Aryan cultivators of prehistoric Assam. Comparatively, the agricultural rites observed in other parts of India and abroad also have identical origin and background. The very term *Bihu* also, although has been interpreted variously, is traceable to some non-Aryan vocabularies. The antiquity of the term does not go back beyond the fourteenth century A.D. Evidently, the different tribes of Assam still christen *Bihu* in their respective tribal names.

Fertility belief is found to be the inner spirit of almost all agricultural festivals observed worldwide. The cult of fertility could not escape from the sex cult in ancient times; magico-religious designs connected with sex were therefore the essence of the fertility rites and rituals associated with agricultural festivals. The song and dance designs of the springtime *Bihu* are also no exception to this inherent fertility feature of agricultural festival. But as in other places, the magico-religious rituals of the ancient cultivators of Assam also could not fetch them the desired realities at all times; we have shown reasons thereto. With changing attitudes of the people towards the old conception of fertility in the context of modern times, these magico-religious designs have lost earlier efficacy and relevance and have since assumed new meanings.

Although the rites and rituals of *Bohag bihu* or *Rongali bihu* are preharvesting agricultural rites, these are also meant for springtime and
Assamese new year. The complexity that arises in dealing with the rites and rituals of the entire Bihu festival complex is that the same tradition shows variation from region to region. This is attributable to different tribal influences at different regions. The variations deserve a separate and systematic study. Sexual overtones are not peculiar only to the springtime rites of the Bohag bihu of Assam; they also feature in the springtime rites observed elsewhere. The rituals observed on the first day of the month of Bohag are also meant for reception of the Assamese new year which commences from this day. The preharvesting rites are also springtime rites as these begin with the commencement of spring. All these rites and rituals have come down from hoary past accommodating the changing trends of time. These are found in varied forms among both the tribals and non-tribals of Assam. The significance of holding the magico-religious rites and rituals in spring and in the adjoining month of Bohag is connected with the particular position of the Sun in relation to the Earth at this time. As soon as the Sun crosses the celestial equator heading north, a temperate climatic condition prevails in the Earth which concomitantly arouses the power of procreation in nature and animals. In the Vedic world also the month of Bohag is considered to be auspicious; observance of the rites and rituals on the day of Mahavisvan Samkranti are intended to control the movement of the Sun to secure reproduction of seeds. But the most notable change is that the Mahavisvan day has lost its earlier relevance; according to the modern Astronomy, the particular position of the Sun on the Mahavisvan day, as stipulated in the Vedic tradition, now occurs almost one month in advance to the traditional day of observance.
Huchari and springtime Bihu songs and dances constitute the performing art-forms associated with the Bohag bihu. We have shown reasons to believe that these songs and dances were magico-religious rituals connected with the fertility cult of the ancient cultivators. Influences of the Austric, Alpine, Mongoloid and Aryan *culture* are conspicuous in these traditional art-forms of the Bohag bihu. So, there had been changes in the traditions of these art-forms whenever these races came to Assam. Distinctive song and dance forms associated with the Bohag bihu are still noticed among the tribes of Mongoloid origin. But the most outstanding contributions to the traditions of springtime Bihu songs and dances were made by the Tai-shans. The *neo-Vaishnavism* also made significant contributions to the tradition of Huchari. All these changes in the art-forms of Bohag bihu had occurred in medieval Assam. The performing art-forms now exhibited in the publicly organized Bihu festivals are mostly the relics of the art-forms current in medieval Assam. In recent decades, the dance-forms have been reconstructed to suit stage-performance and modern taste. Consequently, the extant dance-forms have shed much of their folk characteristics and come to the category of quasi-folk dance form; the fixed patterns have transformed the modern Bihu-dance into a classico-folk dance. We have focussed on the forces acting behind all these changes.

Similarly, we have shown grounds for believing that there were some institutions of Bohag bihu, in some form or other, in the early agricultural societies of Assam. Such institutions definitely constituted the essential features of harvesting rites of the concerned societies. The Rati bihu, Gabharu bihu and Huchari institution of medieval Assam bear testimony to the prevalence of Bihu institutions in the ancient agricultural
societies of Assam. *Rati bihu* of marriageable boys and girls continued throughout the month of *Choit* and was a ritual till the early decades of the nineteenth century A.D. *Gabharu bihu* was the female part of *Rati bihu*. The ritual traditions of these two *bihu* institutions are believed to be associated with the ancient cult of fertility. *Mukali bihu* is the modern form of *Rati bihu* of medieval Assam. It is now publicly organized either in platform or in open ground giving an opportunity to young boys and girls to dance together. This *Mukali bihu* has assumed immense importance as an entertaining feature of present day *Bihu* festival. The ideal of *Huchari* institution has also a hoary ancestry. *Huchari* represents a *raiz*. The tradition of *Huchari* enables us to have a perception of organized social life of the early agricultural people of Assam and their spiritual and social obligations. All these institutions with the essence of the past have now met in a common ground i.e. the public platform. The identical tribal features also have accommodated themselves in this common ground. The overt changes that are observable in the traditions of various features of the publicly organized *Bihu* festival are unprecedented but eventual since the art-forms have now been exposed to public entertainment.

The *Kati bihu* is a sort of ritual meant for paddy welfare. This *Bihu* observed on the *Asvin Samkranti* day of *Sarata rtu* constitutes the second phase of the *Bihu* festival complex. The time of its observance marks the time of *Sali* variety of paddy growing luxuriantly in the field. Evidently therefore, the *Kati bihu* had evolved on the magico-rituals projected and cast by the early cultivators for well-being of the maturing paddy plants. This *Kati bihu* is significant for the peasants as it underlies the seeds of likelihood. The ritual activities were subsequently merged with the *Vedic*
propitiation of Corn Mother alias Laksmi alias Tulasi. Tulasi puja and lighting of earthen lamps in the paddy field are the main features in the tradition of the Kati bihu now current among the Assamese Hindus. Tulasi puja may be a varied form of ancient tree-worship and lighting of earthen lamp may have probable relationship with fire cult or solar cult. The relics of the ancient magico-rituals are still noticed as collateral rituals of Tulasi puja. A synthesis of Aryan and non-Aryan culture is therefore apparent in the tradition of the Kati bihu. Preponderantly, naivedya of mati-kalai and namaprasanga are seen in the Kati-bihu; these are traceable to the Vaishnavite influence of medieval Assam. The Kati bihu is exclusively observed by the peasantry of Assam. Its tradition has therefore been undergoing changes with the changes in the traditional beliefs and practices of the peasantry of Assam.

The origin of the Magh bihu, observed in winter solstice, is traceable to the fire cult and fire festivals of the early cultivators of Assam who employed 'fire' as a creative agent. The Aryan cult of Agni puja had altered the archaic meaning of the ancient fire cult. The traces of the Agni puja associated with the present day Magh bihu are therefore found in Vedic Mahavrata ritual. Although allied to the forms of Agni puja found elsewhere in India, the Agni puja of Magh bihu has a separate entity with incorporation of non-Aryan traits in prehistoric Assam. Traces of non-Aryan traits are found in feasting, merriments, bhelaghar, dal bhat etc. now exist side by side of the Agni puja. Magh bihu is purely a post-harvesting festival. Similar rites are also found in other parts of India and abroad. The day of winter solstice synchronizes with the day of Makarasamkranti in Vedic sense; the duration of day-time becomes longer
from this day onwards. This phenomenon has rendered the Makarasamkranti day significant for holding rites and rituals intended for controlling the movement of the Sun to ensure reproductive capacity in Mother Earth. The non-Aryan magico-rituals observed in Magh bihu also convinced that this bihu is a fertility festival. The tradition of the Magh bihu had undergone changes with the unfolding of the Aryan culture in prehistoric Assam. In the subsequent ages, there have been so many changes which have swayed the social life of Assam. Amidst these tremors of social changes, the agricultural people have lost the earlier environment, beliefs and enthusiasm. Still, the feasting and Agni puja of the Magh bihu are found to have survived accommodating the changing taste of time.

The tradition of the Bihu festival is being handed down from generation to generation under constant modifications in the perspective of time and circumstances. So many factors, sprang up from the distinctive socio-economic and cultural milieu of Assam and induced from outside, have been contributing to the phenomenal changes in the tradition of the Bihu festival since inception. Since Bihu was initially an agro-based fertility festival, its traditions have been subjected to changes with every change in the means and relations of production and conception of fertility of the agricultural people. Historical and prehistorical sources enable us to perceive that innovation, cultural diffusion, acculturation, cultural assimilation, syncretization and sanskritization were important forces which added composite characteristics to the tradition of the existing harvesting rites of ancient Assam. In medieval Assam, the extant tradition of the Bihu festival was subjected to changes for wide diffusion of South-East Asian cultural traits. The neo-Vaishnavism also educated the people
against irrational beliefs which consequently influenced the attitude of the people towards their old conception of agricultural fertility. In British Assam, the western education had changed the attitude of the neo-educated Assamese who condemned the fertility symbolism associated with the tradition of the springtime Bihu songs and dances. This phenomenon degenerated the process of change inherent in the tradition of the Bihu festival and forced it to remain in stagnation. The tradition showed a tendency to change towards the last part of the British rule in Assam. In post-British Assam, new factors like revitalization, modernization, westernization, cultural globalization, commercialization etc. emerged out of the new social environment. Although a general atmosphere of change prevailed at all levels of the Assamese society, there had also been a tendency to look back to the past traditions. The changed attitudes of the people invoked renovation, revitalization of and innovation in the existing tradition of Bihu in the new light. An assimilation of the old and new in the tradition of the Bihu festival caused unprecedented changes in its content, texture and method of observance.

The most significant changes in the tradition of the Bihu festival in modern times can be noticed in the art-forms associated with the springtime Bihu songs and dances and publicly organized Bihu festivals. The ancient cult of fertility, sexual insinuations and instinctive impulses have been defeated totally as people are now enlightened with modern ideas and attitudes. Despite shedding so much of the folk characteristics, the modern style of exhibiting the Bihu songs and dances is in keeping with time and so, can be said to have received the mass acceptance. This may be evident from the vast crowd of people seen in the Bihu pandals. In
fact, the *Bihu* festival now signifies the publicly organized exhibition of springtime *Bihu* songs and dances that have survived among the tribals and non-tribals. The pagan utilities of the songs and dances have come to light in this new form of the festival. Thus the festival has acquired a progressive trend involving people irrespective of cast, creed and religion. It may be conceived from observations that although nobody of the vast crowd knows anybody, still every mind is seized with a sense of consanguinity towards fellow spectators while enjoying the delightful moments. With the modern changes, the *Bihu* festival may become a vehicle for restoring communal harmony among all Indian communities. While some Indian festivals are observed by the Hindus and others by the Muslims and Christians, the modern *Bihu* is the festival of only human beings. Hence *Bihu* is unique and incomparable by itself. All these positive aspects and the universal appeal of the *Bihu* festival have received exposure through the new changes that have occurred during the last few decades. Although these new changes have definitely propelled the *Bihu* festival to a greater height, there is no denying the fact that certain drawbacks also have crept into the new tradition. But these are not the ultimate changes in the tradition of the *Bihu* festival since social change is a continuous process. In the perspective of the fast fleeting times, there will be new circumstances and diverse forces of change in future which will generate further changes in the tradition of the *Bihu* festival. The present topic will therefore have further scope for study.