Agriculture is the principal means of livelihood of the people of Kamrup. Throughout the greater part of the year they engage themselves in cultivation. Paddy is the most important crop raised by the people. Paddy-grains and cows are treated with veneration in India from early times. It is believed that Lakṣmī, goddess of wealth, is pleased when these objects are properly looked after and paid due respect. She blesses such people with abundance of rice and increase of cattle-wealth. The belief is so deep rooted that people in Kamrup sometimes call paddy or rice an-na-lakṣmī, and cows ga-lakṣmī, and perform worship in the name of the deities at appropriate times of the year. Similarly, the workers in the field observe some other festivals in keeping with the spirit of their agricultural life.

In order to preserve the auspicious character of cultivation, the Assamese Hindus of Kamrup select some days for different agricultural operations. Tuesday and Saturday are considered auspicious for āhu paddy cultivation. The first ploughing, sowing or reaping of āhu paddy is started on either of these two days. Monday and Thursday are believed to be good for śāli paddy cultivation. Important phases of the śāli paddy cultivation such as first ploughing, sowing, transplanting and harvesting are started on either of these two days. Ploughing is forbidden on certain days like ekādaśī, pūrṇimā, amāvasyā, saṃkrānti, śrāddha, ambuvāci, the period of defilement caused by the death of a person.
and the pūja festivals. In some places of Kamrup the person who sows paddy-seeds abstains from shaving or having a hair-cut till the paddy grows. If a plough is broken at the time of ploughing, the ploughman observes fast for the whole day and leaves the broken implements in the field. He takes new implements on the next day. The antiquity of such restrictions prevalent in Kamrup is evident from the references in the smṛti-nibandhas of Kāmarāpa.\footnote{Manoranjan Sastri: 'The Kāmarāpa School of Dharmasāstra', pub. in Prāgīvotisa, 1965, p.95; Smṛti-ivotisasāra-saṃgraha, p.11.} Allen also refers to some such restrictions.\footnote{Assam District Gazetteer, Kamrup, pp.172-173.} Moreover, the people of Kamrup observe quite a few rites and festivals connected with the annual agricultural cycle. A brief description of some of them is given below.

**Bhāmpota (the custom of hemp-planting):**

Śiva is regarded by the Assamese Hindus not only as a god of the Hindu Trinity, but also as the presiding deity of cultivation. He is known to be specially fond of taking hemp. It is popularly believed that in order to seek favour from Śiva, who makes the fields abound in crops, hemp is to be planted in the fields before sowing the seeds of any crop of the year. Local tradition holds that Lord Śiva who comes to visit the crops is delighted to see the hemp in the field. So, in some places of Kamrup hemp is planted in the paddy-fields, just at the dawn of the first or second day of Māgh bihu. Dhāturā or erā plants are

\footnote{1. Manoranjan Sastri: 'The Kāmarāpa School of Dharmasāstra', pub. in Prāgīvotisa, 1965, p.95; Smṛti-ivotisasāra-saṃgraha, p.11. 2. Assam District Gazetteer, Kamrup, pp.172-173.}
also planted in stead of hemp in some other places.

**Goch lowā (the transplantation of the first bunch of āli paddy):**

The transplanting of the first bunch of āli paddy (goch lowā) is an important matter for the cultivators. People consult almanacs and experts to find out a day auspicious for commencing transplantation; but usually, the ceremonial transplantation of āli paddy takes place either on Monday or Thursday. Early in the morning the farmer and his wife take their bath and proceed to the paddy-field. A crossing of two tiny bunds (āli) in the field is widened so as to provide room for planting a banana plant, a bamboo shoot, a tulasī and an arum plant. In Palasbari area a flagpole is erected by the side of the arum plant in the spot. The object of planting the banana plant, bamboo shoot and arum plant is that the growth of the crops should be luxurious. It is believed that goddess Lakṣmī comes down to the paddy-field by the bamboo-pole and takes rest beneath the arum plant. An earthen lamp is lighted, incense is burnt and a naivedya together with areca-nuts and betel-vines are offered at the same site to goddess Lakṣmī. Respectful homage is paid to the goddess of prosperity. The farmer or his wife then transplants sixteen bunches of paddy seedlings by the left hand which is believed to be the hand of Lakṣmī. In transplanting the sixteen bundles care is taken to form four square sized 'granaries'. Oil and vermilion are put on all these sixteen bunches. The making of these four 'granaries' signifies the craving of the farmer to be blessed with four
granaries of paddy. After making the four 'granaries' the farmer or his wife transplants five more bunches of paddy by the left hand. After that other persons start transplanting, of course, with their right hands.

The remaining portion of vermilion and oil is pasted on the horns and trunks of the bullocks. The ploughman and the transplanter also partake some of it. The *prasāda* of the *naivedya* is first offered to the bullocks and then distributed among the persons present.

In some places the transplanter is entertained with light refreshment on the occasion of the ceremonial transplantation of paddy. The eatables are also specially selected by the members of the household on that day. A dwarf variety of arum (*dudhacu*) or any other arum, *gañcanā* and black grams believed to be favourites of Lakṣmi, are taken on that day. Any alkine preparation, fish and meat are forbidden, as Lakṣmi abhors all those items. The seeds of jackfruit, it is believed, protect the body from the thorny leaves of ārli grass; so, this item is also taken on that day.

**Goch uthā (the closing of paddy transplantation):**

On the day of completion of the transplantation (*goch utha*) about eight or ten bundles of paddy-seedlings are collected together and transplanted in one bundle (*goch*) in a corner of the field (where bunches of seedlings are transplanted in a circular
order). A lump of earth is put inside the bundle and respectful homage is paid to Lakṣmī. In some other places there is a custom of transplanting four sheaves of seedlings in a corner of the field in the form of a square with the edition of one sheaf at the centre of the square, called bhākharī (granary). The farmer pours a little water on this area in the name of Lakṣmī and then returns home without looking back. Some persons sprinkle water on the transplanted seedlings with a hope of getting rain in the same manner.

In some places a ceremony called nāñal dhowā (plough-washing) is observed to make the end of transplantation. On that day the plough and the yoke are washed. A special cake popularly called nāñal dhowā pithā (cake prepared on the occasion of plough-washing) or bhāt-pithā (rice-cake) is prepared and taken together with other eatables on that day. This ceremony is observed in some places on the saṃkrānti day of the months of Āśvina and Kārtika.

Āg anā (the bringing home of the first harvest):

The ceremony of bringing home the first tuft of harvested sālī paddy is called āg anā or Lakhimī ādarā uchāv. It is performed in the month of Agrahāyaṇa (November-December) when the paddy crop matures. The function is mainly an individual affair. But in Bajali circle people observe it collectively.3

This is generally done either on Monday, Thursday, or, on an auspicious day. On that day a tulasi plant is planted in the courtyard of the performer, an earthen lamp is lighted at the foot of the tulasi plant and a basket (don), brimful with paddy, is kept on a piece of plantain leaf. A sickle and a gāmochā having floral designs on the boarder, are placed over the basket. Some people, however, keep these articles on a place adjacent to the granary.

The person who collects the sheaf of paddy from the field, first takes his bath, puts on new clothes and proceeds to the field carrying the basket with the sickle and the gāmochā on his head. Occasionally the person is followed by two or three other persons in a procession playing cymbals and bells. On arriving at the field the person lights an earthen lamp and pays respectful homage to Lakṣmī, the Harvest-queen. Thereafter, he holds three tufts of paddy in one bundle by his right hand and reaps the bundle at one stroke of the sickle which he holds in his left hand. Then the harvested sheaf of paddy is kept on the banana leaf together with the sickle, and is wrapped by the same banana leaf and the gāmochā. Saluting again (the goddess Lakṣmī) he keeps the bundle on the basket and carries it on his head. He does not utter a word until he reaches home.

4. In some places, however, no lamp is lighted and the person goes alone to the field.

5. It may be pointed out that in other parts of the world too the corn is personified under the names of the Corn Mother, Harvest Mother, Great Mother, Grand Mother, etc. (vide, The Golden Bough, pp. 526-532).
A woman of the family ceremonially receives the sheaf of paddy at the gate-way. She holds a bamboo tray wherein she keeps vermilion, earthen lamp, chowry or a fan. She puts a vermilion mark on the tuft of paddy before which she waves a fan, chowry or a betel-leaf or a whisk made of the tail hairs of a yak. The basket is then kept in front of the tulasi plant or on the seat arranged adjacent to the granary. The womenfolk of the neighbourhood assemble in the place, sing traditional songs and make hula-huli sounds. The songs are called Lakhimi ādārā git i.e., songs of welcoming the goddess, Lakṣmī. Some people light earthen lamps before the tuft of paddy and offer a naivedya. The man who collects the paddy-sheaf and the woman who receives it ceremonially, abstain from taking food till the function is over. In south Kamrup, the woman observes fast even in the preceding night. Many families wash their cooking utensils and take only vegetarian meals that day.

In many places the basket containing the tuft of paddy is kept either in front of tulasi or the granary for three or five days, and earthen lamps are lighted there every evening. The tuft of paddy is then placed in the granary and the sickle is again used for harvesting purpose. Tradition has it that the goddess Lakṣmī is displeased if the tuft of paddy is not kept in the granary before other paddy-grains are stored there.6

6. The festival of welcoming goddess Lakṣmī is observed only on the occasion of harvesting the sāli paddy. In case of āhu paddy, the paddy harvested on the first day, is left in the field and is brought home on the second day, or a few days later. In some villages of Sarthebarī area one tuft of āhu paddy is brought home and kept tied in a post of the granary. One naivedya is offered on that night and prasāda is distributed among the neighbours.
Dhan-uthā (the closing of the harvest):

The ceremony, called dhan-uthā, is observed on the day when the harvesting is over. On the occasion the last three bunches of paddy are tied together and the ground below is carefully cleared for keeping a naivadya, areca-nuts, betel-vines, coconuts and the sickles of the reapers. The reapers working nearby are invited to the function. The owner of the harvested paddy offers homage to Lakṣmī, while others utter loudly the name of the goddess. Finally prasāda is distributed among them all present. The keeping of the three bunches of paddy in the field symbolises the common belief that the paddy field should not be left empty. A field completely laid empty may not yield as much in future as it did before.

On the particular evening people prepare pole-cakes (cuñā nithā) and distribute the same among the neighbours. Paddy is not thrashed on that evening.

Na-khowā (the taking of newly harvested rice):

It is an old custom among the Assamese that some neighbours and relatives are invited to a dinner while the harvesting of sāli paddy continues or soon after the harvesting is over. This is called na-khowa or the taking of newly harvested rice. This is one of the important rural festivals observed widely by the Assamese Hindus of Kamrup.

7. In the villages like Nārowā and Bartalā the ceremony is performed in the time of harvesting āhu paddy.
This dinner is usually a lavish one where fish, meat and many other delicacies are served. Pole-cakes are also prepared by some people on this occasion and distributed among the neighbours.

Kūhiār perā (the ceremony of crushing sugar-cane):

The cultivation of sugar-cane is a difficult and complicated matter. The whole process, from the time of planting the cuttings to that of crushing the sugar-canest and the preparation of molasses requires special care and immense labour. The crushing of sugar-cane is itself an arduous task. It is not easy for a single family to complete it alone without the help of outsiders. And the occasion is always approached with such devotion and seriousness that a ceremony is associated with it. For this purpose, a spacious area is cleared and on one side of it a big, deep and circular hole is dug. Near this hole a few sugar-cane plants are erected. A naivedya is offered to the plants along with the lighting of earthen lamps and the burning of incense in the name of Lord Śiva daily till the end of the crushing. The hole is called jāilā-gāt and it is used for boiling the raw juice obtained by crushing sugar canes. The crushing process continues till all the sugar-canest are exhausted. The tedium of crushing the sugar-cane for long hours is often relieved by the singing of traditional songs which are known as kūhiyār-perā-git.

8. The word jāilā is derived from jvāla , meaning flame or heat of fire applied for boiling or cooking purpose.
On the day the sugar cane crushing is completed, a big naivedya together with other accessories, is offered to Śiva. Special constituents of the naivedya are hemp and sweet-balls which are considered to be Śiva's favourite. Lord Śiva is given a ceremonial send-off in that function at the end of which the offerings including the erected sugar-cane plants are distributed among the persons present. In some places a feast is also arranged at the site of crushing of the sugar-canes.

II

The bihus

The bihu is the greatest festival of the Assamese people. The festival is closely associated with agriculture. The Assamese people celebrate three bihus in a year, viz. Bahāg bihu, Kāti bihu and Māgh bihu at three different stages of cultivation of paddy, the principal food-stuff of the Assamese people. At the first stage land is prepared for cultivation, at the second stage young paddy seedlings begin to grow and at the third stage the harvest is over; and these three stages synchronise with the three bihus respectively namely, Bahāg bihu, Kāti bihu and Māgh bihu.

The word bihu is derived from Skt. visuvan, meaning equinox. Astronomically, Bahāg bihu and Kāti bihu are associated with the vernal equinox and the autumnal equinox respectively, but Māgh bihu has no connection with equinox, it is associated with the winter solstice. In Kamrup the word domahi, meaning the juncture of two
months, is also used to denote the bihu.9

Bahāg bihu:

Bahāg bihu, the new year festival is celebrated for seven days (sāt bihu) from the Mahāviṣuva or Caitra-saṃkrānti to the sixth of Vaiśākha or Bahāg (mid-April). But the actual festival is held for a period varying from two to four days. This is an occasion of rejoicings. Nature assumes a gay look of the early spring. The refreshingly warm weather, blooming flowers and the scintillating songs of birds such as the cuckoo and ketekī (Indian nightingale) arouse a sense of jubilation and the youthful spirit. It is but natural that Bahāg bihu which falls in this season, is celebrated with abounding joy and merriment (ram) and so it is popularly known as Rahgālī bihu. The details of Bahāg bihu, consisting of songs and dances show an element of erotic culture associated with fertility cult.

Despite some differences in the mode of observance of the bihu festival in Kamrup and Eastern Assam, certain features are common throughout the state. These common features are: (1) washing of and giving new rope to the cattle on the first day which is known as Garu bihu or the bihu for the welfare of the cows; (2) putting on new clothes and exchanging greetings by men on the second

9. The term visuva instead of visuva was used in early Assamese literature. Vide, Saṅkaradeva's Urogavarnan, v.208; Rāmacarana, v.2065; Sūryaḥādi Daivajña's Darrangrāj Vaṁśāvallī, pp.12,21; Ratikānta Dvija's Darrangrāj Vaṁśāvallī, v.49.
day which is known as *Manuh bihu* or the *bihu* for the amusement of men. The functions held in the *Garu bihu* day in Kamrup are as follows.

In the morning children make a kind of garland with the pieces of bottle-gourd, brinjal, turmeric, etc., fixed on the pronged bamboo sticks. They apply mustard oil and paste of radiatus (*māṭi-māḥ*) and turmeric to the horns and body of the cattle. The herds are then washed in a nearby river or tank. The cattle are fed with some pieces of gourd and brinjal. The cattle are belaboured with the twigs of *sīghalati* and *mākhivatī* plants while the following verse is recited:

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Take gourd, take brinjal,
grow stronger from year to year.
Though born of parents, both small,
grow mightier and better than all.10
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After the striking is over the children let loose the cattle in the field and throw away the old ropes. They return home and keep some pieces of gourd and brinjal in the cattleshed with a belief that these would save the cattle from disease for rest of the year. In some places the ploughmen wash their ploughs and farrows and show some kind of reverence to these implements by placing cakes and other offerings on them as these are the mainstay of their agriculture and livelihood.

10. Such magical practice seems to be very old. The practice of striking of a cow with the sprig of a khadira tree for the protection from the ferocious animal is mentioned in the *Atharva-veda* (vide, B. K. Barua: *Asamīyā Bhāṣā āru Saṃskṛti*, p.208).
In the evening a smudge of straw, paddy chaff, cowdung and some kinds of green leaves is lighted near the door-way of the cowshed. This is done not only for driving away the mosquitoes but also the evil spirits.\(^{11}\) Hand-fans to be used during the coming year are waved by the side of the fire.

In the evening the hoofs of the cows are washed and they are fed with \textit{cīrā} and cake. They are then tied up in the cowshed with new ropes made of fibres of jute and wild cardaman (\textit{tārā}). Red threads sanctified by sprinkling water with \textit{tulasī} leaves are also tied to them. The new rope and the red thread are considered as \textit{bihuwān} or the \textit{bihu} present to the cattle. In some places vermilion spots are put on the foreheads of the cows. Goswami points out, Brāhmaṇs and other people in the Kamrup district offer \textit{pūjā} to cows in the conception of \textit{Go-Lākṣmī} or Cow-Lākṣmī.\(^{12}\) This shows what an important position is given to the cows in the \textit{bihu} festival of Assam.

The young men and boys of some villages of Kamrup go on a hunting expedition to the nearby jungles for catching or driving away animals like hare, fox and marble cat (\textit{jahāmal}) on the \textit{guru bihu} day. It is customary for some people to use \textit{sarvaśuddhi bari}

\(^{11}\) Dr P. Goswami refers to the \textit{Atharva-veda} as mentioning "a sacrifice offered with chaff - a magic performed to frustrate the efforts of demons." He further notes that "in some parts of Europe pungent smoke is supposed to drive witches and evil spirits away from house and homestead." (vide, the \textit{Springtime Bihu of Assam}, fn. p.20). This shows similarity of belief of Assamese people with that of the primitive people of India and outside on charms and magic.

\(^{12}\) P. Goswami: \textit{The Springtime Bihu of Assam}, p.20.
or certain principal drug on the Garu bihu day to remove the evil influence of the planets on them. Some people take tender mango-fruit and jute leaves (sukuta) for securing a sound health in the year. After bath, in the noon, people of different Zodiacal signs (rāśi) take different eatables like salt, molasses, sugar, ghee, honey and milk. In the name of Almighty an offering consisting of gāī; cirā and cakes is made in every household and prayer-service is held in the sattras and the village nāmghars. On this day people have a meal of cirā, curd, cakes, etc., instead of cooked rice.

The second day of the bihu festival, the first day of the New Year, is called bar domāhl or mānuh bihu, and is meant for men. In the morning, one or two nimba leaves and some lentils (macur dāl) are served to the members of the family immediately after they get up from the bed. This practice is believed to warrant safety from snake bites throughout the year.

After taking bath at noon, people pay their reverential salutations to the elders who in turn offer their blessings. New clothes called bihuwan or bihu present in the shape of a towel (gāmocā), scarf (cādar) or handkerchief are presented to the members of the family and to the invited guests. In some rural areas and in the sattras people listen to the astrological prediction (bihu ganaṇā) made by the Brāhmin astrologers.13

On this day some Assamese Hindus observe a magical practice by writing a Sanskrit mantra on a leaf of the ironwood (nāhar).

13. A similar custom is prevalent in the Andhra State where the New Year's day celebration is called Ugadi (vide, S. C. Dube: Indian Village, p.99).
and keeping it under a rafter. Lord Mahādeva is prayed through the mantra for protection against hails and storms.

Bihu performed on the third day, is called gaśāi bihu i.e., the bihu for God. The congregational prayers in the village nāmghārs are the main feature of the day. Musical and dramatic performances are also held in some of the sattras. In some of the principal sattras like Barpeta and Sundaridiyā the ceremonies are extended over a week.

There is a custom called bihu-diya or bihu-khedā observed on the first and second bihu days in some villages of south Kamrup. According to the custom batches of young boys move from house to house dancing and singing. One boy of each batch puts on a cap made of paper, plays the role of a clown and with his mimiery heightens the merriment. The boys shower blessings on the householders and take in turn a gift of money or rice. The group of singers and dancers may be compared with the hucari singers of eastern Assam even though the content of the hucari songs is quite different from that of the bihu-diya. There are no special functions assigned to the last four bihu days during which, however, cultural functions, sports and public gatherings are held in different places.

It is customary for the girls and elderly women of some of the villages in Kamrup to go to the field and collect seven kinds of herbs on the seventh bihu day. The custom is called sāt sāk tola. At Barpeta it is performed on the second bihu day. It consists of the womenfolk going to the field singing cheerful songs, sometimes dancing and plucking the herbs. The herbs are afterwards
taken as curry.\textsuperscript{14} On the eighth day of Bahag bihu thiva-nām i.e., chanting of prayers with rhythmic movements in standing posture is performed in sattras like Barpeta and Sundaridiyā.

Formerly there was no custom of singing hucari songs in Kamrup. But now, for a few years it is practised in some towns and villages of the district. Likewise, the bihu song which is the most popular folk-song sung on the occasion of Bahag bihu in eastern Assam and regarded as an integral part of the Assamese folk literature, was not formerly current.\textsuperscript{15} But now it, too, has become popular.

Bihu, originally an agricultural festival, observed in the rural areas in early times and received royal patronage during Ahom rule. The participation of the royal family and the state officers in bihu possibly turned it into a national festival. It became customary for the people to shower blessings on the king.

\textsuperscript{14} Shriramchandra Das : 'Nāri-parva Sāt Sāk Tolā', Asam Sāhitva Sabha Patrikā, XVI.2, pp. 111-113; The Springtime Bihu of Assam, p. 23.

\textsuperscript{15} In this connection we may refer to a description of the bihu festival given by Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan in 1829. The description runs thus:

"Another festival (of Assam) is this that there is Bihu music instead of the Caraka festival (of Bengal) for seven days in Vaiśākha. There womenfolk of the common people and dissolute men get together and perform dance and music of a very objectionable type. This festival is most prominent in the countryside but this bad custom is not found in Kamrup, it is found to a large extent in Saumar (Upper Assam)." (As translated in the Springtime Bihu of Assam, p. 34, from Assām Burañī, pp. 103-104).

This remark is no doubt condemnatory, but afterwards the learned people viewed these practices with approbation and aplomb. The Assamese writers like Balinarayan Bora, Ganesh
through hucari songs sung during the Bahāg bihu festival. The festival was observed in the royal capital in a more colourful manner. 16

To-day Bahāg bihu is celebrated in the most luxurious and pompous manner particularly in the towns. Big pandals are constructed and cultural shows are organised on the bihu nights with large public gatherings. People of different faiths and speaking different languages participate in the Bahāg bihu festival with much enthusiasm. Thus bihu has now become a powerful source of emotional integration of different sections of people living in Assam. And it is evident that bihu which was originally an agricultural festival has now turned out to be a composite national festival. Through the passage of time, however, many uncouth or less refined elements have crept into the festival, but in shifting the importance of the festival from the rural surroundings to the urban stage, it has assumed an universal popular character.

Kāti bihu:

Kāti bihu is observed on the last day of Āśvina (September - October). This is also known as jala-visuva-samkrānti. It is observed in a very humble manner. The pomp and grandeur of

Chandra Hazarika and Lakshminath Bezbarua wrote articles in praise of the bihu festival.

Bahāg bihu are absent. The season is autumn, the time of austerity. People face hard days at this time of the year. So, the bihu is popularly known as kañālī or the cheerless one. About this bihu Allen remarked:

"The Kartika Bihu ... ... is not an occasion of very much importance. Hymns are sung in honour of God, and in place of their usual meal of hot rice and curry, the people take cold food such as curd, molesses, plantains and cold rice."

Other important features of Kāti bihu are the worship of the tulasi plant and propitiation of Lakṣmī, goddess of wealth, to obtain better crops. For the purpose, a sacred tulasi is planted in the courtyard. In the evening earthen lamps are lighted and naivedyas are offered at the foot of tulasi and various other places like the store-house, floor of the living room, cowshed, kitchen garden and farm-yard. Like Lakṣmī, tulasi is supposed to be the wife of Viṣṇu. So, in order to propitiate Lakṣmī and tulasi, people hold nām-prasaṅga and sing hymns like:

A deer is moving below a tulasi plant, and Rāma is chasing it from behind.
Rāma had planted the tulasi which was watered by Lakṣmana and cleaned by Sītā with cowdung and water.

On the occasion people also pray to God in the nāmgbar for a better harvest.

Though Kāti bihu is called Kanāli or cheerless, the high hopes and aspirations of the farmers are expressed through it. This is the time when paddy plants grow luxuriantly in the field and begin to have their spadixes. This makes the farmers happy and hopeful about their future. By offering lamps and naivedyas the cultivators pray to the goddess of wealth for bringing forth bumper crops in the year.

In order to destroy the insects big fires are lighted near the paddy fields. Sometimes the branches of cāu tree are cut into pieces and erected in different areas of the field to destroy or scare away the insects. Thus we see that the protective urge of the cultivators is also expressed through the celebration of Kāti bihu.

Bārua observes that the Assamese cultivators take recourse to certain rituals and magical practices for protecting the maturing paddy from birds and beasts. Some of the measures are the whirling of a piece of bamboo and lighting of earthen lamps in the field and reciting a kind of mantra, called rowā-khowā. Bārua refers to the Atharva-veda which prescribed the worship of the Asvin brothers to protect crops from birds, animals, pests, etc.

One important feature of Kāti bihu is the lighting of ākāśa-vanti (sky-lamp) which continues for the whole of Kartika month. One or two earthen lamps under a cover are suspended from

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the tip of one or two bamboos erected near the tulasī plant in the courtyard. The light of the lamp is supposed to lead the departed soul of the dead to heaven and enable one to reach the abode of Viṣṇu.

It is stated in the Agni-purāṇa (ch.200) that lighting of lamps with ghee or oil in the month of Kārtika and intending them for some deity yields great merit. These lamps may be placed in temples, trees, houses and at the junction of four roads. This may point out the antiquity of the practice of ākāśvanti in India.

Māgh bihu:

Māgh bihu, the harvesting festival, is celebrated in Assam for two days, i.e., on the last day of Pauṣa (makara-saṅkrānti) and the first day of Māgha (mid-January). The festival is also called Bhogāli bihu. This is time when the granary is full and there is enough to eat and to offer. Bhogāli bihu is thus a festival of prosperity and an occasion of rejoicing and feasting in every house. The festival is marked by bonfires usually performed on the first bihu day. Agni, the fire-god or the expression of the sun-god, is worshipped through the bonfire.

A long preparatory period precedes the celebration of the bihu function. The women and the young boys become busy for these preparations. The women prepare the eatables like cīrā, nīthā and

The boys collect stubble, hay, dried banana leaves and green bamboos for raising high conical structures called *bhelāpūli* or *pūli*. The structures are also called *mei* (Skt. *medhya*) in some places. The *mei* of Eastern Assam is simply a pile of split fire-wood or straw whereas the *meis* or *bhelāpūlis* of Kamrup are of different size and form. In some villages of North Kamrup usually a tall *bhelāpūli* of about 25 to 30 feet high and a number of small *bhelāpūlis* of about 8 to 15 feet high are constructed side by side by the young boys of the locality. The tallest one is called *māikā* (mother) and the rest are *chānā* (young ones). The upper portions of the bamboos of a *bhelāpūli* are tied together and the top is decorated with garlands. In some places of Nalbari subdivision, two *bhelāpūlis* of different height are constructed. The taller one is called *budhā-bhelā*, *bar-bhelā* or *bhelā* and the smaller one is called *bhelī*, as if, this is the wife of *bhelā*. All types of these *bhelāpūlis* are filled up and covered with dry stubble and banana leaves. In Eastern Kamrup the raised structure of bamboos covered with dried banana leaves is called *math*. A spadix of a plantain tree is kept on the top of it. In South Kamrup two tall *meis* are constructed by erecting nine green bamboos for each *mei*. Here, a raised platform of about five feet in height is first constructed with the bamboos, the *mei* is then completed with the stubble on the platform. The *meis* or *bhelāpūlis* are usually constructed in the field by a group of young boys. Besides, there are also small family *bhelāpūlis* constructed in the orchard-plot or near the gate-way of a household.
Besides bhelapūjīs, a ghōrāpāk and a bhelāghar are constructed in some places of Kamrup. The ghōrāpāk is supposed to be the symbol of an evil spirit, called ghōrāpāk, who lives on fish. The ghōrāpāk of Māgh bihu is nothing but a column of a tall bamboo decorated with dried plantain leaves. The burning of the ghōrāpāk in Māgh bihu may indicate the destruction of the evil spirit of a village.

The term bhelāghar derived from Skt. bhedā (sheep) + grha (house), recalls the mesadāha ceremony performed on the eve of dola festival. On the mesadāha (burning of a sheep) ceremony some hairs of a sheep or goat are burnt along with the hut made for the purpose. The bhelāghar in which a feast is held in the urukā night or the bihu eve, is set on fire in the following morning. The term bhelapūjī may be a corrupt form of bhedā-pūnīja, (pūnīja = heap). It indicates a heap or a column of stubble or dried banana leaves which is to be burnt like a bhelāghar in Māgh bihu. But it may be noted that dola festival has nothing to do with Māgh bihu even though the term bhelāghar of Māgh bihu is possibly borrowed from that of dola festival.

On the urukā day some people go to the nearby river, fen or tank to catch fish, while some others purchase fish or meat from the market and prepare a community feast in the evening either at some body's home or in the bhelāghar. The young-folk usually spend the urukā night in the bhelāghar by singing songs, making

merriments and by playing loudspeakers for the whole night. In the frenzy of their excitement some mischievous people damage crops, flowers and vegetables, remove fences, wooden plank frames or portals and destroy furniture and window glasses. Thus the urukā night, afflicted by the menace of nocturnal vandalism, is a nightmare for many families. As a result, sometimes an unpleasant situation takes place between the urukā revellers and peace loving citizens of a locality.

On the first day of Bhogālī bihu people take bath early in the morning and burn family bherāpūli. Afterwards they proceed to the field in order to take part in the community functions of the morning which include the burning of bherāghar, ghōrānāk, small and big meils, one after another. The sacred names of Agni-devata and Hari are chanted repeatedly during the process. People offer important agricultural products like rice, sesame, black-gram and items like māh-kadāi, nīthā, lāḍū, ghee, areca-nuts and betel-vines to the blazing fire and pay salutation to Agni-devata while reciting the following mantra:

\[
\text{agniṁ prajvalitaṁ vande cāturvyāṁ hutaśanāṁ, suvarṇamamalaṁ varṇaṁ jyotirūpāya te namaḥ.}
\]

As the licking flames envelop the bherāpūli, the bamboo nodules burst producing cracking sounds to the great delight of the spectators. At the end of bonfires people offer nāivedya near the fire place and perform prayers to the accompaniment of large cymbals and kettle-drums for hours together. In Eastern Kamrup people usually burn the bherāghar in the morning and the math...
(or mei) in the evening. At noon people pay their reverence to the elders and perform nāma-kīrtana in the village prayer-hall.

On both the bihu days they take, curd, sirā, nītha, lāddu and other eatables. On the first bihu day, however, meat and fish are prohibited. One special eatable, prepared for the occasion and favourite of the children, is māh-karāi, i.e., a preparation of parched rice, black gram and sesame. This is invariably taken by the children of Kamrup. Some other eatables like cakes, biscuits, omelettes and puddings are also used in place of indigenous bihu eatables by the urban elite.

It may be worthwhile to mention some local beliefs and customs associated with Māgh bihu festival. One common custom is that on the first bihu day some members of a family enter their orchard just before the day break and tie bands of straw round the trunks of the fruit-bearing trees and strike against them with a stick or a knife while they utter the words gach lag lāg, nālaga vadi gorot kāṭim (Oh, you tree, give us more fruits, or I shall cut you down). It is believed that these threats refrain the trees from going away to their mother's house for enjoyment of bihu. 22

Another local custom associated with Māgh bihu is that after burning the bhelāpūi people put marks of ashes on their forehead with reverence. They mix ashes with oil and rub it on the horns of the cow, put marks of it on its body and apply the residue

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22. The custom of fastening cords around the trunk of a fruit-bearing tree is also practised by the Kacharis of Assam. (Vide, The Springtime Bihu of Assam, p.15).
on their own body with the belief that the ashes protect them from skin-diseases. Some amount of ashes are scattered in the corn-field and the half-burnt bamboo sticks are kept reclining to the fruit-bearing trees to increase fertility of fields and gardens.

**Jālī putalīr bivā (Puppet-nuptials):**

There is a kind of mock-marriage ceremony of puppets, called *jāli-putalīr bivā*, observed in some villages of south Kamrup. The ceremony is performed by the unmarried girls just after the Magh bihu festival. A pandal is constructed in a public place or in the precinct of the village *nām-ghar* with the half-burnt or unburnt bamboos previously used for the *bhelāpuśis* under which the mock-marriage ceremony is performed. A wooden puppet is dressed as the 'groom' and the other as the 'bride'. The 'groom' and the 'bride' are first kept in two different households of the village. In the evening of the marriage day they are ceremonially brought and placed under the pandal. Some marriage customs of the local people including the performance of *homa* by a Brahmin priest are followed. It is said that a person of Palasbari area, called Jali, first introduced the practice of puppet-marriage in the locality. So, after his name the ceremony came to be known as *jāli-putalīr bivā*. 
Bhatheli

Bhatheli, a popular festival, is celebrated in Western Assam particularly in the district of Kamrup on any day of the month of Vaiśākha (April-May). People of a village perform the festival only for a day. 23 A few straight and tall bamboos, decorated with coloured cloths, chowries, garlands and gāmochā (a kind of Assamese towel), are erected in a public place, or in the precinct of the village nām-ghar, to which reverential salutation is offered by the village-folk. In some villages the tallest bamboo pole is regarded as a groom while the rest as brides. The decorated bamboo-poles are called pāra or pāurā. On one side of the festival ground a small temporary shed shaped like a dome, is constructed with plantain barks. The shed is called bhatheli-ghar in which articles like naivedya, a coin, an earthen lamp and incense are offered to the deity. This festival, known as the bhatheli or the pāurātuli (a festival performed centering around the erection of a bamboo-pole), continues from noon to evening. The mock-fight, village-fair and some sports organised on this occasion enliven the entire spectacle.

This festival appears to be a reminiscence of an ancient festival known as Puruhūta or Śakrotthāna celebrated to propitiate Indra, king of heaven to secure rain. 24 References to the Indra

23. Allen reported that the festival was observed for many days. (Vide, District Gazetteer of Assam, Kamrup, p.111).
dhvaja festival are found in the Kālikā-purāṇa (ch.81), Devi-purāṇa (ch.11), and Brhat-samhitā (ch.43). The Kālikā-purāṇa gives a detailed account of the virtues of performing the Indra-dhvaja festival, called Śakrotthāna. According to the Kālikā-purāṇa by worshipping Indra a king can rule over the earth for the whole life and can attain the Indra-loka after his death. There will be no famine, nor destruction of crops in his kingdom and his subjects would be free from vices and premature death.25 The banner of Indra was to be made of a special kind of tree like banyan, sāl and arjuna, and decorated with cloths, chowries and garlands. On the eighth day of the bright half of Bhadra the banner was installed on a sacrificial altar and worshipped with the offerings like cakes, flower and homa for seven days.26

It appears that the festival was prevalent in Kamarupa before the time of the Kālikā-purāṇa, i.e., the tenth or the eleventh century. This is supported by a reference to the Śakrotthāna festival in the copper plate grant of the king Balavarma of the tenth century A.D.27 From the account of the Vṛata-viveka28 it appears that the festival was celebrated widely in Kāmarūpa even upto the fourteenth century A.D.

26. Ibid., 87.16, 34-36, 42.
In course of time as in some parts of India the worship of Indra or the Sakrotthāna festival in Assam lost its ancient glory, though it has not been totally forgotten in the district of Kamrup. Bhatheli appears to be a clear reminiscence of the Sakrotthāna festival. Because, like the wooden banner of the Sakrotthāna, the bamboo-poles or the paurās of bhatheli are also dressed with cloths, chowries and garlands. The paurās, regarded as the banner of Indra, are also saluted by the common people. The differences between the Sakrotthāna and bhatheli, however, lie in the fact that the former was celebrated by kings in the month of Bhadra, while the latter is performed by the village-folk in the month of Vaiśākha. The king performed the festival to attain glory by propitiating Indra or to express their merriment after the victory over enemies. On the other hand, most of the village people are cultivators. They believe in Indra as the Lord of rain which is essential for cultivation. So, at the beginning of the monsoon, i.e., in the month of Vaiśākha people pay reverence to the paurās or the bamboo-poles which may be called the modified form of Indradhvaja. It may be mentioned here that the coloured cloths are regarded by some people as the symbols of clouds of different colours and the chowries hung on the bamboo-poles are regarded as the symbol of the wind.

Kakati derived the term bhatheli from bhashthalikā, the sky-region under which the bamboo-pole or the banner of Indra or

Indradhvaja was raised in honour of Indra. There may be other meaning of the term bhatheli. The words bhata (soldiers) and ali (rows) mean soldiers' rally. In the feudatory system of the past the soldiers of a particular clan rejoiced at their own victory over enemies by songs and dances. In the bhatheli festival young people of some villages make mock-fight while demolishing the bhatheli-ghar at the end of the festival. In this connection reference may be made to the account given by Allen in 1905 that on the occasion the villagers danced round the bamboo brandishing their clubs. So, it appears that the term bhatheli bears two meanings: firstly, it is a festival where the pāra or the banner of Indra is erected heaven-wards. Secondly, it reminds us of the soldiers' rally of the past.

The banner of Indra, originally made of a tall tree, is now replaced by a bamboo-pole. The question naturally arises as to why the bamboo-pole is used instead of a wooden post? The answers seem to lie in the fact that the ways of the king are always different from the common people. It is a costly and troublesome affair for the village people to bring a tree ceremoniously from a jungle and rear it up for a year as mentioned in the Kalikā-purāṇa. But the bamboo-pole is readily available and easily procured on the eve of the festival. Secondly, there is a custom of worshipping bamboo (bāg-pūja) among some tribal people of Assam.

30. The Springtime Bihu of Assam, p.28.
32. ch.87.4-5.
For instance, the Rabhas, and the Hajongs worship bamboos which are dressed with coloured cloths. One of the reasons of using bamboo-pole in place of wooden post may also be due to the influence of the bamboo-worship by the local tribal people.

The term para or paurā designating the bamboo-pole may give us a clue to the feudatory system of the past. Roy observes that in ancient times, people of a particular clan possessed one dhvaja or banner painted with a figure of an animal or a bird, and consequently, the name of the chief of the clan was given after the figure of that banner, e.g., Mayūra-dhvaja, Hamsadhvaja, etc. Thus it may be assumed that a certain clan of ancient Kāmarūpa might have used a banner painted with a figure of a pāravata (pigeon). In course of time the custom of unfurling such a banner might have disappeared, but the name pāravata or para or paurā remained; and consequently, the term para or paurā might have come to be used to designate a bamboo-pole erected in the bhatheli festival. The Rabhas of Assam perform a festival called Paro-bah, which is almost similar to bhatheli festival. In Paro-bah festival a tall and decorated bamboo is worshipped with the offering of a pair of pigeons (para). So, it may also be assumed that the term para might have originated from pāra-bāh.

In the bhatheli festival of Rāmdiyā village under Hājo circle, fourteen images of Viśnu taken from the neighbouring

34. Pareshchandra Hajong, 'Bāhpūjār Git, the Mahājāti, March 19, 1969.
36. P. C. Rabha, 'Pāro-bāh'. 
fourteen sattras (monasteries) are placed together in the bhathelli-ground and paid obeisance by offerings of garlands to each of them. In Sarthebari village prayer-service including the thiva-nām (i.e., standing congregational prayer) is offered on this occasion. This leads us to conclude that the Indradhvaia festival observed in different parts of India in ancient times was modified into the bhatheli festival of today in Assam. The process of modification was being accelerated by the impact of the neo-Vaisnavite movement that swept the land in the sixteenth century.

Sori

Sori or sūvari is a festival held in south Kamrup in the month of Vaisakha. The festival bears certain similarities to bhatheli and dola-vātra. As in bhatheli, bamboo-poles are erected on the festival ground where the āsanas (seats) of the deities of the neighbouring village-nāmghars are placed together. The bamboo-poles are so selected that the top must not be tarnished and the tuft must remain as it is. People offer reverential prayers to the images of the deity (Govinda) seated on each āsana. A fair is held on the occasion. The festival starts after mid-day and closes in the evening when the āsanas with the images are taken back to the respective village-nāmghars.

While taking back the āsanas from the festival ground people make a procession as in the case of dola-vātra. The clearing of the road-sides and the merry-making of the processionists are
similar in nature with that of the dole festival. Only the special feature of sori is that the āsana of the deity is kept at the gate-way of every family on the road-side and the members of the family in turn pay reverential prayers to the deity with the offering of naivedya and some coins. Such processions with the deity are also held in some places like Balikaria and Sandheli of North Kamrup.

Like sori, a ceremony called dadhimathan is held in some village nāmghars and sattras of South Kamrup in the month of Vaiśākha. This has been described in connection with pacati. 37

Bhelādiyā

Bhelādiyā or the ceremonial floating of a raft is a festival held in different villages of South Kamrup on different auspicious days of the months of Jyaiṣṭha and Āṣāḍha (May-July). People generally living on the river banks or maintaining their livelihood by means of navigation or fishery, perform the festival on a community basis in the village nāmghar or alone in the household. When observed collectively people offer naivedya and gopālbhog 38 to the water-god and perform a homa in the village nāmghar. Some passages from the holy scriptures like the Bhāgavata and

37. Supra, ch. IV.

38. Gopālbhog is a preparation of certain ingredients, viz., curd, powdered rice, molasses, ripe banana, etc. As a special offering to Gopāla, i.e., child Kṛṣṇa, it is so named.
Kirtana are also recited. All these functions, except homa are performed if the ceremony is held in an individual household.

The main attraction of the festival is a decorated raft made of banana-trunks. The following articles are placed on the raft: nine pairs of egg, nine pairs of ripe banana, nine blazing lamps and nine pairs of areca-nuts and betel-leaves. It is not known why so much importance is attached to the nine number.

At the end of the ceremony the raft, together with these articles, is floated and prasāda is distributed among the members present. Prayers are held in the evening to the accompaniment of musical instruments.

The festival is performed to propitiate the water-god who, it is believed, blesses fishermen to catch more fish and rescues all people from the danger in water and menace of flood.

Bāmbolpīṭā

Bāmbolpīṭā or hepornitā festival is observed in the Bāskā area of North Kamrup. It is held on the full-moon night of Bhādra. In some places of Tamolpur circle it continues for five days during which young boys with sticks in their hands come out in batches in the evening and move from house to house singing songs, called bambolpīṭā-git, by thumping their sticks on the courtyard of the household. Thereafter, they receive coins or rice as gift from the house-owners. The collected articles and money are spent afterwards in a feast.
It is said that heoor is a colloquial word meaning mirth or delight. In the month of Bhadra, particularly in its later part, the transplanting of paddy-seedlings is completed in Baska area. The festive mood of the farmers, just free from the toils of cultivation, find an expression in such a festival. The meaning of the word bambol is not clear, but it is interesting to note that every song of the series of the bambolpita-gīt closes with the words "Bāmbol piṭiba yāō", meaning "let us go to beat Bāmbol".

The question now arises who is Bāmbol? Why do the people want to beat Bāmbol? The meaning of the word is not known. But it is inferred by the local people that the word has some connection with the Bhutiya war of 1864-66. In this war the British soldiers, under the command of Colonel Campbell, oppressed and killed many people not only of Bhutan but also of its neighbouring Baska area. This made the people rebellious and they revolted against the British, possibly by shouting slogans against Campbell. The bitter memory of the event persisted in the minds of the people and in course of time might have taken the form of a community function in which slogans against Campbell were refashioned as the chorus of bambol.

40. Ramcharan Brahma, Suryamal Deka and others of Tupaliya village of Baska area.
Mah-khedā (Driving away of mosquitoes)

The festival connected with the driving away of mosquitoes on the full-moon night of Agrahāyaṇa (November-December) is called mahkhedā or mahoho-utsava in Kamrup. The young men and children enjoy this night to the top of their bent. They sing a special chorus in the evening while moving from house to house. The song is known as mahoho-git or mahkhedā-git, i.e., mosquito-driving song. Every participant carries a stick and while singing a song in the courtyard of a family they produce a rattling sound with the striking of their sticks against one another. The chorus is a form of prayer for the allround wellbeing of the family. The chorus is also called bhāl hack divā or bhāol divā, i.e., wishing the inmates good luck. The house-holders in turn offer some gifts to the party. But when the party comes across a niggardly person he becomes the target of their light banter and sarcastic remarks. A feast is held on some other suitable time with the total collection of the night. In some places of Barpeta sub-division the young children start the amusement a few days ahead of the full-moon night.42

It was popularly believed that by performing this festival mosquitoes may be driven out of the villages. So, the festival is called mahoho or mahkhedā. Naturally the number of mosquitoes

42. Formerly there was a custom of dressing one or two children in dry plantain leaves. They were then termed as bhāluk (bear) and engaged in a dance to the accompaniment of songs sung by all participants. It was done with a belief that a bear swallows the mosquitoes. The practice is no longer in vogue.
diminishes as the winter advances. The life of the farmers also becomes a little easy during this time. Assam is notorious for mosquitoes and people in their leisure time might invent the songs about the lessening of the mosquito menace and hold this mosquito-driving function. Certain similarities can be noticed in the mode of observance of the festival with that of hucari festival of eastern Assam, eurimagā-git\(^43\) of Goalpara district and bāmbolpitā of North Kamrup.

In one mahoho song there is a line which means that a cowry was offered to the singers instead of husked rice (cāul nidi dile kādi). This indicates that cowries were used as medium of exchange in the time of composing the song. We have earliest references to the use of cowries in Kamarupa in the Hārṣa-carita which records that the king Bhāskaravarman (seventh century A.D.) sent to Harṣavardhana "heaps of black and white cowries" as present.\(^44\) The use of cowries is further proved by the Tezpur Rock inscription of Harjījara (829-830 A.D.).\(^45\) It is evident from the account given in an Ahom chronicle\(^46\) that on the occasion of the funeral ceremonies of his mother, the Ahom king Sīvasimha (1714-1744) "gave a feast to the attendants and labourers and presented them with cloths, silver and cowries in innumerable numbers". From this it

\(^43\) Sivananda Sarma, ed. : Goālpara Jilā Saṃskṛti Saṃrakṣaṇa Smṛti-grantha, pp.44-46.
\(^44\) As quoted in H.C.P.A., p.361, from Hārṣa-carita (cowell),p.212.
\(^45\) H.C.P.A., p.361.
may be inferred that cowries were used in Kāmarūpa-Assam at least from the A.D. 700 to A.D. 1800 during which period the mahoho songs might have been composed and the festival mahoho might have come into existence.

Bhattacharya holds that the term mahoho is a hybrid derived from the Assamese word mah meaning mosquito, and the Bodo word ho meaning to drive out. Endle gives an account of the mosquito festival of the Bodos. From this it is clear that the festival has been observed both by the tribal and the non-tribal people of Assam from early times.

Bhekuli-biyā (Frog-nuptials)

Frog-marriage, called bhekuli-biyā, is performed by girls in Kamrup specially at the time when the cultivators are affected by drought. It is popularly believed that such performances propitiate the rain-god, who, in turn blesses the devotees with necessary rains. The marriage is arranged by a group of girls in the courtyard of a household. On the occasion two frogs are brought and seated together on a plantain leaf or sometimes in a jar. One frog, usually the bigger one, is conceived as the groom and the other as the bride. The function starts with the offering of naivedya and the burning of incense as in the case of

47. P. C. Bhattacharya: Asamar Loka-utṣav, p. 68.
an Assamese Hindu marriage ceremony. Both the frogs are fastened together and some specific songs, commonly known as bhekuli-bivār nam, are sung on the occasion. At the end of the ceremony both the frogs are set free and prasāda is distributed among the girls.

It is not known when this practice was introduced in Kamrup. Possibly the primitive people of different parts of the world, who believed in charms, had implicit faith in the power of the frog to influence rain because of its close association with water. It is a common belief that croaking of the frogs indicates the advent of rain. The early reference to such a belief is found in the Atharva-veda. In the Veda the heavenly gods like Maruts, Parjanya and Varuna are invoked and frogs are expected to have croaked for pouring down water. Such a belief is found among different sections of the people of India and outside. So, like the frog-marriage some practices associated with the frogs and rain are observed by the Reddis of South India, the Newars of Nepal, the Korkus of Madhya Pradesh, and the Hajong community of Assam and Meghalaya. It may, therefore, be assumed that as in other parts of India and outside the primitive people of Kamrup

49. W. Crooke : Religion and Folklore of Northern India, p.73; Frazer : Golden Bough, p.96.
50. op.cit., 4.4.15.12-15.
51. Some of the verses of the Atharva-veda are : (a) Let the speckled-armed frogs croak (vad) along with water courses (4.4.15.12), (b) Speak forth unto (it), O she frog; speak to the rain, o tādūrī (a female frog); swim in the midst of the pool, spreading thy four feet (4.4.15.14). (As tr. by W. D. Whitney).
52. The Golden Bough, p.96.
53. Religion and Folklore of Northern India, p.73.
also were convinced of the relation of frogs with water and in course of time under the influence of the marriage ceremony of the Assamese people a mock-marriage of frogs also came to be held at the time when the cultivators were stricken with persistent draught.

Gach-biya (Tree-nuptials)

The marriage of trees is an ancient practice in India. The marriage of Sahakāra tree with Navamallikā creeper is mentioned in Sakuntalā of Kālidāsa. In his Kādambarī Bāṇabhaṭṭa refers to the marriage of Sahakāra with Mādhavī. Kane says:

"It was usual with Indian ladies to amuse themselves by celebrating the marriage of trees and creepers, especially of the mango (and Bakula) with Navamallikā and Mādhavī."57

The Assamese term for the marriage of trees is gach-biya which is arranged between two species of tree, namely, Asvattha (peepul) and Vāṭa (banyan). The peepul is considered a symbol of Lord Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa while the banyan, a symbol of Lākṣmī or Rādha.58

In his Yajurvedīva Vivāha-paddhati Ramnath Devasarma, a smṛtinibandhakāra of Kamrup, taking necessary hints from the

55. op.cit., Act III.
56. P. V. Kane, ed.: Kādambarī (Uttarabhāga), p.23.
57. Ibid., p.23.
Bhavisyottara-purāna, gives a detailed account of the marriage of trees. The book underlies the prevalence of the marriage of trees in Kamrup.

On the occasion of marriage two seedlings of peepul and banyan are planted side by side in one of the important public places like the river-side, road-side, bank of a pond and the precinct of a nāmghar. An auspicious day is fixed for performing the marriage of the trees. On the day both the trees are decorated as the bride and groom. The ceremony starts just like a Hindu marriage-festival and all the procedures, such as adhivāsa, ghatasthamana, vrddhi-sraddha, hema and pujā are faithfully followed. At the time of tying the nuptial knot (lagna-granthi), which is an important feature of a Hindu marriage, one end of a thread is tied round the banyan tree and the other end is taken in a copper-vessel, and with the chanting of the appropriate mantras this end is tied round the peepul tree. Thus the ceremony is completed with the paying of daksinā to the priest and refreshment to the guests.

It is believed that by performing such a ceremony one can be free from sins committed in the life time, secure blessings from Lakṣmī and reside in Brahmalaṅka after one's death. The practice of tree-marriage is gradually losing its popularity.

Sabhā (the village fair)

A special fair held, almost in every village of Kamrup, is known as sabhā. The word sabhā primarily means an assembly, a council, a public meeting, etc. But in this context it means a
village community festival which is marked by some religious and popular practices.

Sabhā is usually held in different days in the months of Māgha and Phālguna (January-March). Some of the sabhās are observed on the particular day of a month, e.g. in Chatemari village on the first of Māgha, in Nowapārā on the second, in Lāupārā on the third and the like. But most sabhās are held on particular tithis, e.g. on Māghī-pūrṇimā day at Vāsudeva-sattra of Bālikariyā village, on śukla-ekādaśī of Māgha at Pipalibari, on kṛṣṇā-ṣaṣṭhī of Māgha at Kaharā, on śukla-pratipad of Phālguna at Mākhibāhā, etc. A sabhā is usually a one-day affair, but in some places like Bālikariyā, Sarthebārī, Mākhibāhā and Raṇā, it continues for three, five or seven days. Subscriptions for the purpose are raised from the people of the locality. A big pandal is raised in the precincts of the village nāṃghar and varied cultural programmes are held.

The ceremony that precedes the sabhā day is called gandha or adhivāsa. It starts in the evening and continues till morning. At the beginning an image of Viṣṇu or Kṛṣṇa or a holy scripture is taken round the pandal in a procession; and after completing three, five or seven rounds the same is returned to its seat in the nāṃghar. After the congregational prayers are over cultural items, such as dūpāli, dhlūhya, opera-party etc., are presented throughout the night. In some villages like Bāmundī, Lāupārā,

59. In the Jāgārā sattra, however, two sabhās, one in the month of Pauṣa and the other in Māgha, are held.

60. Supra, ch. IV. dola-vātrā.
Gholarpār and Chānda, there is a custom of offering *sidhās* to the people of the neighbouring villages who attend the ceremony.

On the following day, the deity is worshipped and a *homa* is performed. Almost all the people of a village consider it a meritorious act to get their foreheads smeared with the marks (tilaka) of ashes from the sacrificial fire. After this people return to their homes to have their meals. Congregational prayers and *dhulivā* (drummers) performances are also held in the afternoon and thus the one-day sabhā closes in the evening. But in cases of a longer duration of sabhā up to three, five or seven days the performances are held at every afternoon and night till the last day of sabhā. A fair held in connection with the festival gives an opportunity to the local people to buy and sell articles like knives, axes, utensils, cane-works, bamboo-works, cloths, etc. This is one of the main attractions of the festival.

Some of the village sabhās are celebrated on the death anniversaries of some particular religious preachers and social leaders. For example, we may refer to the Kahara-sabha observed on the death anniversary of Śaṅkarsana Devagosvāmi, religious head of the Kahara sattrā. The *sidhā* offered on the opening day of the sabhā indicates a likeness to the feast arranged on the occasion of a śrāddha ceremony. Hence the village sabhā may owe its origin

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61. A *sidhā* is a collection of articles like dāl, vegetables, fish, mustard oil, salt, fuel and an earthen pot with which one or two meals are prepared.


63. Supra, ch.VI.
to the observance of death anniversaries of the Vaisnava saints of Assam. However, some village fairs like Ranār sabhā, Majiubudhar sabhā and Kāithother sabhā are held in different villages of Bajali circle on the death anniversaries of Nareswar Rana Patgiri, Ugrasen Majiubudha and Haridas Kakati, the noted social workers of the circle respectively. Along with the march of time some Brāhmaṇical rituals like the homa are also associated with it. In some villages the festival is observed without any reference to the life of a preacher or a religious leader. In such villages the festival is held on some auspicious tithi.

III

The cow has been an object of worship in India since early times. The cow is called go-laksāṁ because it is considered a sacred symbol of the goddess of wealth, i.e., Lakṣmī. The Grhyasūtras refer to some special rites observed for the prosperity of the cows. People in Kamrup observe certain rites and practices for the welfare of the cattle-stock. An account of some of these rites and practices is furnished below.

Birth of a calf:

As soon as a calf is born a tiny part of its soft hoof is removed and placed between the two horns of its mother, and

marks of lime are pasted on the foreheads of the cow and the calf. The significance of these practices is that the hoofs of the calf are set in order at the time of its birth; and the lime mark is given as a protection against germs and evil-eyes.

The first milk of the cow, called phehu, is boiled to a certain thickness, sliced into small pieces and that are pinned together with straws. Every straw contains two of these pieces at two ends. These pieces are offered in the name of the sun-god, birinā grass and the cowherd boys. A few pieces are distributed among the members of the family and the neighbours. Every offering has its special significance. The offering to the Sun-god means that the sun will protect the cow and calf against all odds, and that to the birinā grass means that Lord Kṛṣṇa who once lived in Vṛndavana (birinā) will be pleased with it. The distribution of phehu among cowherds means that they will take care of the cow and calf henceforward. There is a popular belief that the cow will produce more milk if phehu is distributed among more people.

Deodūḍī:

The cow is not milked for a period varying from seven to twenty one days, from the day of the birth of her calf. On expiry of the period the calf is kept tied on one Saturday night and on the following morning the cow is milked early. The milk is first offered to birinā grass, or poured on a piece of stone kept in the door-way of a nāmghar or on a tulasī plant. It is believed that Lord Kṛṣṇa resides in such places and he blesses the cow and the
calf when he receives the milk. This function is called deodudi, possibly because it is mainly held on a Deobar, i.e., Sunday, or because the milk is offered to deva, i.e., God. People start taking the milk of the cow only after this day.

When the calf does not take milk a naivedya is offered to the deity, Gopala. Only the cowherd boys are invited to this function, because they are regarded as Gopala, alluding to the cowherd boy-friends of child Krsna. Milk from some other cows of the neighbours is collected and offered to god on this occasion.

In the event of the loss of a cow, a calf or some cattle a naivedya is offered to Gopala and a flag-pole is erected at the gateway of a prayer-hall or under a tall tree. A tiny piece of white cloth is used for this purpose. On the recovery of the cattle a sweet dish called gopālbhog (Gopāla-bhoga) is offered to the god.

Garakhīvā-sevā:

Like the cows cowherd boys are also worshipped on some occasion by the Hindus. The couples who have no children, hold a devotional function called garakhīvā-sevā with the hope of being blessed with children.

Usually twelve or odd minor boys are invited to the function. The worshipper washes their feet and leads them to their seats where they are offered garlands, sticks, prasāda and daksīna.
The cowherd boys in turn bless the worshipper and the members of his or her family.

The garakhīva-śevā may evolve from the concept that the cowherd boys represent Lord Gopāla-krṣṇa and his friends (gopa-śisus) who according to Hindu mythology, tended cattle in Vṛndāvana. So, it is believed that good results may be secured by adoring the cowherd boys in a ceremony.