Chapter III


Most of the societies of the world periodically keep aside some time for celebration. These moments are of special importance to the group or community. They may be moments of changing from one season to another or from one stage of life to another. They may be the moments to honour some living person or some group or occasions for communal work with feasting and merry making. These recurring moments of special significance with the celebration that fill them are called festivals.¹

Festivals reflect the culture, tradition and history of the people of a country. It keeps people away from the monotony of hard works, worries of worldly affairs etc. It has always been occasions for feasting and gaiety for the entire community during which the rigidity of social restrictions is relaxed. Men and women enjoy greater freedom than usual.² The festivals, which keep people, amused amidst the monotony of hard work and worries of worldly affairs occur almost in every month. People wait with great eagerness for its advent. Because it brings a promise of leisure and pleasure. It is a great diversion for people whose standard of living is poor. It is

² Rama, Raju B.: Folklore of Andhra Pradesh, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 1978, P. 74
chiefly meant to make people religious minded and create an atmosphere of sanctity. A festival is chiefly devised to educate the mass through amusement to attract their minds to the Almighty who appears before them in concrete forms for fulfillment of their desires. It also inspires people to visit different places and exchange ideas with different people. A festival includes a puja and may also include a vrata. A vrata is always individual and puja may be performed either individually or in a group. People have festivals for commencement of agriculture, for rains, for good crops, for harvesting, for thrashing, for close of agricultural operations, for hunting, for fishing, for the welfare of children and cattle and so on.

Behind a festival, there may be a myth. Rightly does observe R. J. Smith:

On the basis of this sort of hypothesis, whole systems were built in explanation of the nature of the primitive mind, the relation of myth to ritual, and the nature of the festival itself. Thus the festivals originally were exclusively religious. In the present context also it may be said that most of the festivals are still associated with religious observances.

Festivals form an essential aspect of all culture of the world. Most of the societies either primitive or folk or elite or

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5 Smith, R. J.: op-cit, P. 160.
modern have their own festivals and these are celebrated in one form or the other from time immemorial.\(^6\)

Since in ancient days most of the civilizations were agricultural in their basic character, so their festivals were also mostly related to various agricultural operations like pre-harvesting, harvesting, post harvesting etc. People in those days thought that certain divine powers were associated with the various aspects of human life. So they had festivals in the honour of Gods and Goddesses who were supposed to control the agricultural operations.\(^7\)

As stated earlier, festivals are a part of traditional culture. Their nature is determined by both seasons and religion. Further, tradition is never static. With the change in lifestyle of the people, customs and beliefs are also tending to get changed. For example, we do many things because of habit and not because of belief. Therefore in many festivals observed by the people, we notice more noise and exuberance than the evidence of faith or conventions set by the tradition or insisted upon by elders.\(^8\)

The traditional festivals in general can be classified into the following sub genres, e.g., :

(i) Seasonal festivals,
(ii) Calendaric festivals,

\(^7\) Patnaik, D. : *op.-cit.*, P. 18.
\(^8\) Goswami, P. : *Festivals of Assam*, Anandoram Barooah Institute of Language, Art and Culture, Assam, Guwahati, 1995, P. 2
\(^9\) Smith, R. J. : *op.-cit.*, P. 151.
(iii) Limited participation festivals, and
(iv) Sacramental festivals.

(i) Seasonal festivals:

The chief characteristics of the festivals are popularity and universality. All festivals are universal in the sense that people are generally always busy with their day-to-day monotonous work. They need periodic times to escape from such monotonous work temporarily and in which they can be joyous together. And thus the tradition of seasonal festival emerges. People of different countries of the world perform different festivals in different seasons.\(^9\)

Basing on the definition, the *Bihu* festival of Assam is basically a seasonal festival. It is celebrated before and after harvesting and which may be termed as a festival of magic. Most of the festivals associated with agriculture are linked with rites involving sexual intercourse. N. N. Bhattacharyya has rightly remarked that festivals associated with various agricultural operations are almost invariably marked by ceremonies involving sexual intercourse. Further the *Linga* was the symbol of the act of cultivation while the *Yoni* represented mother Earth.\(^{10}\) The *Bihu* festival is celebrated thrice in a year, e.g.,

(I) *Bohāg bihu* or *Rongāli bihu* i.e., Spring time *Bihu* festival: This *Bihu* is celebrated in the spring season, i.e., in the month of April. It is also called the New Year’s festival. In compare to lower Assam, it enjoys great importance in Upper Assam.

(II) *Māgh bihu* or *Bhogāli bihu* i.e., Winter time *Bihu* festival: This *Bihu* is celebrated in the month of January. It is post-harvesting festival, which enjoys greater importance in Lower Assam.

(III) *Kāti bihu* or *Kongāli bihu* i.e., Autumn time *Bihu* festival: This *Bihu* is a pre- harvesting festival celebrated in the month of October.

Beside *Bihu* festival, some other seasonal festivals of Assam and Orissa are:

1. *Bhatheli* or *Sori* or *Stari* or *Pāwrā* festival is popular mainly in few districts of Lower Assam, namely, Kamrup, Nalbari, Goalpara and so on. It is based on magical rite associated with fertility cult which is celebrated in the context of Spring time festival of Assam i.e., Oct.-Nov.

2. The *Moho-ho* festival is celebrated in the month of *Āghon* and is popular mainly in all the districts of Lower Assam. It is traditionally associated with the driving of mosquitoes. The term *Moho-ho* may have come from Boro language *machā-hōnā*, i.e., hunting of tiger. As such this festival was originally associated with the tiger-hunting.
3. *Ambuvāci* or *Āmati* or *Āmeti* is also a seasonal festival based on fertility cult. Mother Earth menstruates in order to prepare herself for fertilizing cultivation of paddy. During this festival ploughing, digging, etc, are forbidden.

4. *Daulotsava festival* is commonly known as *Holi* and it is prevalent throughout India. The festival is basically a fertility rite. The original purpose of the festival was to promote the fertility power of men, animals and crops.\(^{11}\) The red powder used in the festival and the vermilion stand for menstrual blood and the act of douching red powder or vermilion is believed to enhance the fertility of the Mother Earth.\(^{12}\)

5. *Aksya trutiya* is exclusively an agricultural festival of Orissa, held on the third day of *Vaishākha*. On this day the farmer ceremonially starts sowing seeds in the field. Offerings are made to the Goddess Laksmi in the field.

6. *Gahmā Purnimā* is celebrated in the month of *Shrāvana*. It is also known as *Go-Purnimā*. Because on this day the farmers worship the cattle. Cattle, especially plough cattle are colourfully decorated and given special offerings. The festival is somehow similar to *Garu bihu* (*Bihu* meant for cows) of Assam.


\(^{12}\) Sarma, N. C. : *op-cit.*, P. 73.
7. *Raja Sankrānti* is also a seasonal festival. According to a popular belief, Mother Earth menstruates like an ordinary woman, which is a sign of fertility. All the agricultural operations remain suspended during the period of the festival.

8. *Nuākhiā* is an important festival of western Orissa celebrated in the month of *Bhādrab*. The festival is held for eating new rice of the year. On this occasion, new rice is cooked with milk and sugar then the *pāyasa* is offered to the corn Goddess Lakṣmi. In Assam it is called *na-khowā*.

9. *Garbheṇa Sankrānti* is celebrated in the month of *Kārtika*. During this time paddy plants are so to speak look pregnant. Rice plants represent Lakṣmi. So, She is worshipped with small offerings in the paddy fields. The festival is more or less similar to the *Kāti bihu* of Assam.

10. *Manabasā Gurubāra* is a post harvesting festival. The farmers feel satisfied as the harvest is over. So, the whole month of *Mārgashira* is spent in worshipping Goddess Lakṣmi. On each Thursday different varieties of rice-cakes are prepared and are offered to the Goddess.

Besides these festivals, some other festivals associated with different worships such as *Lakṣmi Pujā*, *Manasā Pujā*, *Jagadhātri pujā*, *Kāti pujā*, *Durgā pujā*, *Janmāstami*, *Nandotsava*, *Kali puja*, *Durga puja*, *Janmashtami*, *Nandotsava*,...
Pacati, Jhulan Yātrā etc, may be regarded as seasonal festivals. Most of the Goddesses, i.e., Mother Goddesses occupying prominent place in the Hindu Pantheon seem to have been associated with vegetation and fertility. Says Bhattacharyya:

...thus in the Durgā worship which is the most popular expression of the Mother-cult of our times a very close relation between the Mother Goddess and the Vegetation forces of nature may clearly be observed.¹³

(ii) Calendaric Festivals: Calendaric festivals are mainly those, which are celebrated, in different months, Sankrāntis, tithis and days. Some seasonal festivals like Durgā pujā, Lākṣmi pujā, Kālī pujā, Dewāli, Sivarātri, and other festivals may also be considered as Calendaric festivals. Festivals belonging to Muslim community such as Maharram, Sabe barāt, Ramzān, and Id- uz-zuhā may also be termed as calendaric festivals. Similarly festivals observed by Christian people like Good Friday, Christmas is also Calendaric festivals. The birth and death anniversaries of Saints and heroes may also be called Calendaric festivals because they are celebrated annually on fixed date.

(iii) Limited Participation Festivals: Festivals, which are limited only to a small group or a few occupational groups, may be termed as limited participation festivals. The occupational groups

¹³ Bhattacharyya, N. N. : op. cit., P. 32.
like craftmen or fishermen, potters, blacksmith, artisans have their own celebrations and are confined only to their own groups. Originally the *Viśvakarma* puja and the festival associated to the worship were mostly confined to carpenters. But now it is no more confined to a particular group of people. Some other festivals like Āg-anā, Goch-lowā, Nāo puja, Dandanāta, Chadak puja, worship of husking peddle etc, are more or less confined only to the limited participants.

(iv) **Sacramental festival**: Human being passes through different stages throughout his life. Because the life of human being is not only a simple biological progression from birth to death. In fact it is a kind of social movement from one status and role to another.  

The occasion of passing from one stage to another stage is marked by special ceremonies and festivities by rites of passage. In most cases each of these celebrations will be directed towards any given individual only once in his life. But he will participate in such celebrations any number of times. The pattern of festivals associated with the rites of life cycle is generally same in all sections of the Tribal and non- Tribal Hindu people.

Different tribes also observe some festivals connected with the rites of the life cycle. The life cycle festivals are limited only to the rites for example, birth, marriage as well as death. Birth

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rites include *Annaprasanna*, i.e., ceremony of putting rice in the mouth of child for the first time, pre-puberty rites, puberty rites, marriage rites and so on. Similarly death festival also involves different rites.\(^{16}\)

**b. Seasonal festivals with reference to Ambuvaci and Raja.**

**Introduction:** *Ambuvaci* festival of Assam is also a seasonal festival. It is directly related to agriculture and fertility. As per Indian Calendar it normally starts from 6\(^{th}\) or 7\(^{th}\) of *Asāda* i.e., *Āhād* and continues for four days. With the main festival, another folk festival is also associated which is called *Sāth* or *Sāthā vrata* or *Sāthā-barat*. An introduction of this festival is given below:

The Sanskrit term for *Sāth* is *bhūmidāha*. The duration of it is seven days. So, the word *Sāth* might have originated or derived from the Sanskrit word *Sapta* or *Saptak* which mean seven.\(^{17}\) Sarat Chandra Sarma in this context says: a socio-religious function of Hindu community of Kamrup district (undivided) to be observed annually for seven days continually from the first day of the last four days of the month of *Jetha* up to the third day of the first three days of the month of *Āhād* following, both days inclusive and to be performed by women section.

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\(^{16}\) Sarma, N.C. : *op. cit.*, P. 77.

worshiping their personal deity as Mother-Goddess possessing the power to procreation in view of the contemporaneous cultivation of crops with the function, thus the celebration may be called to be purely agricultural."\textsuperscript{18} To some others the word Sātha is derived from the month of Āshāra like this: Āshāra-Shāra-Sātha. But this hypothesis seems to be untenable.

The Svalpamatsya-Purāṇa and Gangājalam have given a clear idea about Bhūmidāha, e.g.:

\begin{verbatim}
pūrbe trini, pare trini
sānkrānti madhyavartini /
mithunādau vrisasyōnte
bhūmidāho dinatrayam\textsuperscript{19} /
\end{verbatim}

i.e., the last three days of the month of Jaisthya, i.e., Jeth and the first three days of Āsādha i.e., Āhār and in the middle, i.e., the Sankrānti, this period is known as Bhūmidāha.

According to Acāryya Manoranjan Sastri, the custom referred to in the Svalpa-matsya Purāṇa, a treaty on Dharma-śāstra which was compiled in Ancient Kōmarūpa before eleventh century.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{18} Sarma, S. C. : \textit{Asamīya Bhasar Era Botata,}, P. 213.

As such, it may rightly be assumed that the tradition of *Bhūmidāha* or *Sātha* was known to the people of Kāmarūpa at least before eleventh century A.D.

In the various treaties on *Smṛti* compiled by Scholars like Ripunjoya Bhattacharyya of 17th century and Sambhunatha Mishra of 18th century also mention the *Bhūmidāha* rite. But in the writings of Bengali writers or of other states, there is no mention about *Bhūmidāha* or *Sātha*. So, it clearly shows that the tradition of *Bhūmidāha* or *Sātha* has not come either from Bengal or from any other parts of the country. Only within the geographical boundaries of Ancient Kāmarūpa the tradition of *Bhūmidāha* or *Sātha* is more or less observed. According to Ācaryya Manoranjan Sastri, the tradition is still prevalent in the district of Rangpur, East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and Koachbehar & Jalpaiguri, West Bengal.20

One thing needs to be mentioned here is that the picture of *Bhūmidāha* that is available in the *Gangājalam* is also found in *Svalpa-matsya Purāṇa* (except slight variation). Thus it is clear that the influence of *Svalpa-matsya Purāṇa* on the *Gangājalam* is quite evident.21 Ripunjoya Bhattacharyya has used the word *Sātha* instead of *Bhūmidāha* exclusively in his works. So, it is clear that before 17th

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20 Ibid.: P. 94.
21 Ibid.: P. 30.
century A. D. the word *Sātha* was widely known and used by the people of that time.\(^{22}\)

During the period of *Bhumidāha* certain restrictions are observed by the people of Assam. All religious performances except some compulsory daily rites like ploughing and sowing are prohibited. This is followed in Kāmākhya temple area and also in some other Districts of Lower Assam. A renowned Śmārta Scholar of early Kāmarūpa flourished in the 14\(^{th}\) century A. D., and compiled a *Dharmasāstra* where he has introduced this practice. He suggested that during this period of *Bhumidāha* seeds should not be sown. Except some compulsory rites all other religious rites like *Yajña*, *Dōna*, *Vrata* should not be performed. Neither recitation of holy books like *Vedas*, nor the worship of Gods and *Homa* should be observed. Ploughing and sowing of seeds are prohibited during this time.\(^{23}\) The same restrictions are also found in the *Gangājalam*, which goes thus :

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bhūmidāhe nakartavyam bijānām vapanām bhuvi /
nityādṛte nakurvīla yajña-dōna vrataini. //
na svōdhīyōvā vasatakōrau na devapitṛtarpaṇam /
halānām vōhanām caiva bijānām vapanām tathā/
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Since olden time the fertility of the Earth has been identified with a woman. So, the functions of both the Earth and a woman are same. The identification of the Earth with a woman by primitive men is clear from what Briffault writes:

......the identification of the Earth with a woman pervade the thought of all stages of culture. The Mother and the soil are alike. In ancient India at the wedding ceremony the woman was called a 'seed field' and the priest exhorted the bridegroom, saying sow her with the seeds.25

The primitive people believed that, as a woman possesses the power to produce offspring, so do the Earth bears the capacity to produce corn. They also believed that if a pregnant woman does the plantation, it gives the better result. On the contrary if the plantation is done by a barren woman, it not only gives slacky result but the field too becomes unproductive. The identification of the Earth with a woman is noticed in every culture of the world. In this context the Manusmrti observes in this way:

ksetrabhūtā smṛtā nārī bijabhūtah smṛtah pumān /
ksetrabhiṣa samāyogat sambhavah sarvadehinām.26 //

i.e., the woman has been identified with a field and man as seed. The union of seed and field produce the crops.

In relation to the Bhūmidāha or Sātha and Ambuvāci, the Earth has been identified with a woman, a Mother, a Goddess etc., she is a woman having the power to give birth to corn. A woman menstruates before becoming pregnant. So does the Earth menstruate to prepare herself to produce corn. As a woman feels the burning sensation in her lower abdomen just before menstruation, so does the Earth. To soothe the burning sensation, cool water is necessary. Perhaps that is the reason why we have continuous heavy rain during the period of Sātha. Thus during this time ploughing is prohibited. 27

There is a vow connected with Sātha or Bhūmidāha observed by married woman of the Aryan Hindu Society for the welfare of their husband and family called Sāthā-barat or Sāthar-barat or Barat puja. The women who perform the vow are called vratynthi or baratī or battī. The vow is observed in the Kāmākhyaśīhām and also in some villages of Nalbari district for seven days. But the same vow is observed for six days at Bamundi, Sualkuchi, Hajo and other adjoining villages of Kamrup district. The married women with their husbands alive (sadhavē) perform the vow without taking the help of a priest in Nalbari district. 28 But in

Kāmākhyādhām and at Hajo, Sualkuchi, Bamundi and adjoining villages of Kamrup district, the vow is performed with the help of a priest.\(^{29}\) It can be assumed that at the beginning, the priests were not included in performing the Sāthā barat but subsequently the priests entered into the domain of this ritual. Otherwise the elderly women used to perform the job of the priests.

**Sāthābarat or Barat pujā** : In the early morning of the first day of sāthābarat performances, the women of a household or of the area, willing to observe the barat, after purificatory bath and clean clothes go to the near by river or pond. One of them carries a low wooden stool called *pirā* on her head. The elderly performer first takes three to five numbers of dips and brings from the surface of the tank some clay with the help of a knife and put them on the *pirā*. The other performers also do the similar types of dips and bring clay to accumulate on the *pirā*. At this time they sing a typical mystic syllable.\(^{30}\)

But a slight variation is noticed in Kāmākhyādhām. While going to collect the clay from Saubhāgya kund, the old vratī come to the house of new vratī. The new vratī is to arrange all the requirements for the ceremony viz, different kinds of

\(^{29}\) Informants : (i) Sarojbala Devi, (80, W), Hajo. Data collected on 17-9-99.

\(^{30}\) Same as reference No. 28.
fruits, pulses, flowers etc. Here instead of wooden *pirā* or *āsana*, a bronze plate is used. After accumulating the arranged things on the plate, they come collectively to the *Saubhāgya kundā* with *uruli*. In Nalbari area, the *āsana* is carried by an elderly lady, but in Kāmākhyādhām, the new *vratini* carries the *āsana* on her head. In the *Saubhāgayya kundā* they lit an earthen lamp of *ghee* or mustard oil, and incense sticks on the *āsana*. The new *vratini* first takes the dips five to seven times and places the collected clay on the *āsana*. The other *vratini* standing on the bank sing a mystic syllable after *uruli*. The other *vratini* also do the similar types of dips to bring the clay.\footnote{Informant: Sarala Devi, (66, W), Kāmākhyādhām. Data collected on 6-6-99.}

Again, in Hajo area also a slight variation is seen. Here the new *vratini* are to purchase clay from the old *vratini* to perform the ceremony. The women together visit the pond or river after purificatory bath. One of them carries the wooden *āsana* on her head. In the river or pond they dip five to seven times to pick up the clay. At this time, here too the women sing a mystic syllable.\footnote{Same as reference No. 29.}

On the wet clay, various grain seeds of paddy, pulses, sesame, mustard seeds etc. are sowed for fertilization. After this the new *vratini* (Kāmākhyādhām), old *vratini* (Nalbari and Hajo) carries the *āsana* on her head and return home. She is followed by others with *uruli*. After reaching home, the *āsana* is placed on a
consecrated place of the courtyard for some time. Different kinds of flowers are used for decoration. Varied kinds of fruits, areca nuts, a small knife, a pair of bangle etc. are also placed on the āsana. During this time again some mystic syllables are sung either by the elderly lady of the group or by all.

The elderly woman who performs all the worships is called Ofeni. To some Scholars, initially the worship of a female deity was performed by women only. After all these, the āsana is carried either to Namghar or to Bharālghar.

On the sixth day of Bhūmidāha or Sātha, the āsana is brought out to the courtyard. The old fruits and flowers of the āsana are replaced with fresh one. At this time also some syllables are recited. While worshiping the āsana with flowers, syllables are recited. In fact the worshiping the āsana with flowers is done everyday reciting the same syllable. This is done only in Nalbari area. But in Kāmākhyaḍhōm and in Hajo area the āsana is brought out on seventh day. By this time the seeds mixed with clay start germinating. The future predictions as to the cultivation of paddy, pulses, sesames, mustard seeds etc. are ascertained from the nature of the sprouting of the seedlings. naivedya is offered near the āsana and some vegetables and leaves of plants like dhekiyā (fern), murphulā

plant and old orum are also offered. A plantation leaf having the marks of vermilion is also placed near the naivedy. The characters of the story of Ukuni burhi, Savitri, her husband and their children are drawn with turmeric and rice powder. Women offer reverential prayers to Savitri who is supposed to be the model of chastity and womanhood. They listen to the Vrata kathā, and its importance narrated by the Ojeni. At the end of the Vrata, the āsana, including plantain leaves, flower, fruit etc are emerged after uruli on the river or at the pond. These are done only in Nalbari district.

This vrata is however different from that of Sāvitri Chaturdasī vrata. She (Sāvitri in the vrata) was the wife of Satyavāna a mythical character. She was a Hirō girl who had miraculous power and extraordinary devotion to her husband. Because of these she could revive her husband, who was actually dead.

But in Kāmākhyādhōm, the worship cannot be performed without the help of a priest. On the day of Sapkrānti of Jeth and Āhār month, the vratiṇī after purificatory bath, take out the āsana and replace the old fruits, flowers with fresh one. The āsana is placed again in its original place.

In the early morning of the third day of the month of Āhār the vratiṇī assemble together. Generally the worship is

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performed at the house of a new vratini. Even the unmarried girls can take part in the worship, but as spectators only. Every one including the priest remains on fasting since morning. After bath the vratini come to the worshipping place with a plantain leaf, vermillion, flowers etc. The asana is again brought out and placed on a consecrated place. Near to the asana a pitcher with water is also placed. The vratinis sit around the asana with their plantain leaf where five spots of vermillion are drowned. With every vratini certain vegetables like potato, fern, jute, arecnut, murphulā plant, orum etc. are accumulated. They now prepare a ball with the help of rice and turmeric power. This ball is the symbol of the son of Upanigauri. The priest sits at the center. According to the tantra i.e., hand book of Paśca Devatā, (viz, Ganesha, Vishnu, Aditya, Śiva and Durgā) the priest starts worshiping to Katyāyani or Upaingauri.36 After the worship is over, the priest sprinkles the holy water from the pitcher to the vratini. He goes away after entire process of worship is over.

Now the Ojenī narrates the story of Sāthā barat. While narrating she sometimes relates the mystic syllables having relevance to the vrata. After every recitation, according to the direction of Ojenī, the vratini go on throwing one after another object

accumulated earlier viz, potato, orum, fern, etc. to their respective plantain leaf.\(^{37}\)

The story telling event continues up to the evening. The following tales are exclusively narrated in the Sāthā barat, found at Kāmākhyādhām, e.g., :

i) Opanīgaurī Kathā (the tale of Opanī gaurī),

ii) Bāmun-Bāmnenīr Kathā (the tale of Brahman-Brahmanī),

iii) Sato makurī Kathā (the tale of Sato, the cat),

iv) Niśkalanka Bāsudeur Kathā (the tale of Vāsudeva, the spotless),

v) Bānnī Āru Giratenīr Kathā (the tale of a maid servant and a wife of a Brahmin),

vi) Paṭā-Pā ṭakur Kathā (the tale of a stone slab and a stone roller),

vii) Mahādev-Pārvatir Kathā (the tale of Mahādeva and Pārvati).

The outlines of the tale Opani Gauri are given below:

A Brahmin boy dull in his study could learn only the first alphabet ka after four months of his schooling. So, his father rebuked him and asked his wife not to give him food. Hurt by the

temperament of his parents, left home and wondered aimlessly. He
arrived at a place tired and hungry and rested for a while near a pond.
At that time five sisters viz Opanī Gaurī, Rousasthi, Mankāmini, Mahālakṣmi and Kāmākhyā came to the pond for performing the
Sāṭhā barat. Opanī Gaurī got pity for the poor Brahmin boy and
brought him with her to their home with the intention of teaching
him. She addressed him as Chātra-Kākā. But the boy was not
interested in learning anything. After couple of years he married
Opanī Gaurī, and subsequently a child was born to them. Chātra-
Kākā was aware of the miraculous power of his wife, which she
gained through her regular performance of the Vrata. To test her
supernatural power, Chātra-Kākā got his child killed many times
through different agents. But Opanī Guarī could revive her child all
the times through her wonderful power.38

After few years, Chātra-Kākā returned to his parent’s
home with his wife and children. Here also, she could expose her
tremendous miraculous power on different occasions. Ultimately
they re-married again and lived happily.

The other stories narrated by the Ojenī are also about the
significances of the Sāṭhā barat.

But in Nalbari area the stories are bit different from Kāmākhyādhām. The following are the tales narrated during Sāthā barat in Nalbari area e.g., : Sāvitrī ēru Satyavāna (not the mythical), Dāyu ēru Bāyu, Bāmuni ēru Baicāri, Opanigaurir Sādhū, etc. The outlines of the tale Sāvitrī ēru Satyavāna vrata kathā is cited below in this context.

The story runs something like this --- Sāvitrī (not mythical) was the daughter of a Brahmin. She was very beautiful and pious. She possessed some supernatural power. Everyday from her mouth oozed a golden flower. Hearing her beauty and miracles, Satyavāna, son of another Brahmin married her. But surprisingly, after marriage she failed to produce the golden flower, because she lost her virginity. After some days, a male child was born to her. The father-in-law of Sāvitrī wanted to test her and she had to undergo five tests. They are :

(a) Her son was kept hidden and she had to find him out.
(b) The baby was offered to a tiger and Sāvitrī had to save him from the jaws of the animal.
(c) The baby was thrown into the water and Sāvitrī had to save him from getting drown.
(d) Sāvitrī had to kill her son and revive again.
(e) She had to cook the flesh of her son’s head.
Sōvitri was successful in all the tests by propitiating Ukuni Budhi.\(^{39}\) The other stories are also about the importance or benefits of Sōtha-barat.

In kāmākhyādhām areas it is called Opanī Gaurī, in Hajo areas it termed as Aganī Burhī while in Nalbari areas it is known as Ukuni Burhī. The names differ from place to place. But the process of performing the vrata and the pujiā are more or less same. Even the songs narrated by the Ojenī also resemble with one another. No doubt, Ukuni Burhī or Agnī Burhī are variations of Opanī Gaurī. The reason for this variation may be that lot of girls from Kōmākhyādhām areas wedded to Nalbari and Hajo areas. These girls stuck to their traditional vrata. But the variations that are noticed are because the Opanī Guari merged with Sōvitree vrata. Thus the tales related during Sōthābarat also got bit changed.

After narrating the stories the vrata comes to an end. Now the women take the āsana and other articles used in the worship to near by rivers or ponds and with reverence they immerse the articles in the water.

In all the songs or mystic syllables the word Ukuni budhī is frequently used. The meaning of the word Ukunī is not clear. H. K. Sarma in his book Fasts and festivals of Kamrup has tried to

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define *Ukunī Budhī* ‘as an old woman with lice in her head.’ But the meaning seems to be rather obscure because we do not find any relevance with lice in *Uknī pujā* performance. The Assamese word for lice is *okani* or *okni* and not *ukni*. On the other hand two probable meanings can be inferred.

The meaning of the term *Opanī Gaurī* is not known. The probable meaning may be that *Opanī Gaurī* means little baby or little mother. While the meaning of *Ukunī Burhī* is also not clear. The probable meaning may be that the Assamese verb root *Uk* means to vomit. *Uk-dī* means to relapse, as the seedlings are coming out from the mud. So *Uknī* means something produced. The other source may be: *um* < *usma* - thus *um + ani > umani > umnī, uknī*. *Umanī* means to impart heat. Heat is necessary for production. Whatever may be the meaning of the term, but its purpose is to avert the calamities of the family, which may befall during the year.

Here we can refer to another *vrata* (vow) observed at kāmōkhyōdhām, Hajo, Sualkuchi, Bamundi etc., of Kamrup district. The *vrata* is called *Carō barat* or *Care barat*. Though this *barat* does not have much relevance with *Sāthā barat*, nevertheless it need to be mentioned here for certain reasons. The *Care barat* is also confined only to the unmarried girls. They observe this *vrata* with a view to getting good husband. As the *sātha barat* is confined only to married

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41 Choudhury, R. N.: *op.cit.*, P. 151.
women, they observe this *vrata* to have rain profusely and for the well being of the family members. As in *sāthō barat* the women folk collectively go to *Saubhōgya kunḍa* or to near by river to collect clay, here they go to collect the water. The women folk remain fasting on both the vows.

The *Care barat* is observed on the full moon night of the month of *Āghon*. The votaries go on fasting for whole day and night. Early in the morning they come to the *Saubhōgya kunḍa* to fetch water. While going they sing some songs called *Care barat* song. In the evening the priest performs the *pujā*. A metal pot or a pitcher is installed as *ghat* in a sacred place. Flowers, fruits and some images of birds made of clay are put inside the *ghat*. Earthen lamps are lit and incense is burnt. The priest performs the *pujā* of *Katyōni* in *Sāstric* modes. While the priest chants mantras, the votaries offer flowers and basil leaves on the *ghat*, which is supposed to be the deity. After *pujā* the priest leaves the place. The womenfolk pass the night by singing the *care barat* songs. This function continues for whole night.\[^{42}\]

H. K. Sarma uses the term *Carā* that means to offer something to deity with reverence.\[^{43}\] But in Hajo area the *barat* is

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known as Care barat. Here Care means bird. During the ceremony some birds made of clay are prepared and after pujā, they are being distributed among children.\(^{44}\) In this context we can refer to the Kukkuti vrata of West Bengal. The purpose of this brata is to get children. The ceremony is held on the month of Bhāda.\(^{45}\)

According to the Purohit Darpana, for Kukkuti pujā, a mandala is prepared and the pictures of Śiva and Durgā are drawn inside the mandala. Seven varieties of fruits are offered. One, who worships the deity, will gain everything, is the belief associated with the pujā.\(^{46}\) In Orissa also this vrata is observed. Here Umā and Mahēśvara are worshipped.

From the above discussion it is clear that the aims and objects of both the ceremonies are more or less similar. But in Care barat no picture of Śiva and Durgā are drawn. Both the vratas are limited only to the female gender. No male is allowed to take part in these vratas. The male priest has no place in other places. Only in Kāmākhyādhām, a male priest is allowed, but this phenomenon is not traditional. Secondly the time of the festival is also different. So, it would be rather difficult to associate Kukkuti vrata with Care barat prevalent in Kamrup district.


\(^{45}\) Informant : Arobinda Das, (57, M), Guwahati. Data collected on 5-4-2001.

\(^{46}\) Purohit Darpan. : P. 259.
Ambuvāci

The Sanskrit term Ambuvāci is pronounced as Ambubōchi in Assamese language *ardha tadbhava* manner being equivalent to Assamese spoken term ēmoti or ēmeti. In the month of Āhōra when the sun in the house of Mithuna rāsi steps into the first pāda of constellation Ādra after enjoying Mrigasira the period of Ambuvāci commences and continues till the fourth day.\(^47\) The various Dharma-sāstras compiled in ancient Kāmarūpa deal with Ambuvāci in the following ways:

\[
\begin{align*}
    \text{yasminvōre kṣaṇe caiva ravimithunagō bhavet} / \\
    \text{tasminvōre kṣaṇe caiva bhavet pṛthvī rajasvalō} // \\
    \text{nityam naimittikam kōmyam japa yajjōdikaṅca yat} / \\
    \text{ṛtu matyōṁ nakurbita purba saṅkalpitō dṛte.} \(^{48}\) //
\end{align*}
\]

The term Ambuvāci is a combination of two words, i.e., *ambu* and *vōci*. The meaning of the two words are, *ambu* = water and *vōci* means raining, i.e., the term Ambuvāci connotes the idea of water raining (i.e. *ambu tadvaśarna vōcayati sūcayati*). As such it

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\(^{48}\) Goswami, R, ed., : Mahōmohopādhyāya Dōmodara Mishra’s Cangājilam, Part II, Gauripur, Assam, 1337, Sala, PP. 33-34.
may be said that the epithet applied to the earth during four days from the 7th to the 10th in the dark half of the month of Āśāḍa. When it is supposed that the Earth is unclean and the agriculture is prohibited.49

Since earliest phases Mother Earth has been identified with a woman. So, the functions of the Earth and a woman are same. A woman passes through regular menstrual period once in a month before she is pregnant and remains aloof from any kind of household works, or in other sense she is given complete rest for those days. She is clean by bathing on the fifth day only after the bleeding is stopped.

rajasvuparate sādbhī snāncna stri rajasvalā.50

So also Mother Earth undergoes through her menstrual cycle once in a year. She can come to normalcy after bath. The concept of Mother Earth being subject to menstruation is referred in the Indian mythologies. In Kālikā-Purāṇa it is mentioned that Lord Vishnu in His ‘Boar’ incarnation rescued the Earth from beneath the ocean who was being hidden there by Hiranakshya. At that time the Earth was in her period. Being tempted, Lord Vishnu had sexual intercourse with her. As a result of which their son Narakaśura, was born. Since he was born during the unholy period, so acquired the

50 Manusmrti, : 5/66.
traits of asura i.e., who is not good and became powerful, but ill reputed, e.g.:

rajasvalā kṣamōgarbham yamarvatta jagatpate /
tasmād yōstanāyo bhūvi so appadasyati durjasah. //51

Again,

rajasvalayam sansārgat
vipranām maranat tathā /
kāyah pōpakāro bhutastam
tyaktam yujyatehadhuna. // 52

The belief of the Mother Earth being endowed with female qualities is also found in RgVeda and the Atharvaveda referring to the ‘Sky’ as ‘Father’ and ‘Earth’ as ‘Mother’, while the horizon being their place of union. We are the children of Earth who is our mother. Thus the concept of Ambuvāci possesses in its agricultural, social and religious ideas that have contributed to the emergence of this phenomenon, resulting in observance of some rites and rituals for the occasion. Once the Earth is considered as a female figure, it is natural to associate all feminine qualities with her.

Ambuvāci vrata is recognized in various works. Smarta scholars like Damodara Mishra, Rupunjaya Bhattacharyya, Sambhūnātha Mishra engaged during medieval Assam quote ancient

51 Kaṭikā Pūrṇa : 29/15.
52 Ibid. : 30/34.
verses to rule out performance of all *nitya* *naimmittika* and *kāmya* rites except annual *śrāddha* and *Ekādasi vrata* during the period of *Ambuvāci*. Considering *Ambuvāci* period as unclean, all religious works, including daily worships, prayers, auspicious works, agricultural operations are not taken up, believing that Mother Earth may feel hurt. All kinds of agricultural activities like ploughing, plantation of seedlings, sowing of seeds, digging land etc., are prohibited. Generally a *Brahmacārī* and a widow observe the *Ambuvāci varta* abstaining themselves from taking cooked food during the defilement period. The person who has lost his parent also observes the *Ambuvāci varta* in the first year after death. They take uncooked rice (*bokācāul* or *komal cāul*, curd, *gur*, fruits, sweets etc), which are procured before hand and preserved in such a way so that there is no direct contact with the earth. In the earliest phases of human society man’s thought was conditioned by the urge to promote the fertility of human beings and domestic animals and the production of crops, otherwise survival would have been Impossible. The primitive people instinctively projected their own experiences into the object around them and thus associated with various ideas so as to constitute a practical philosophy of life, making unconscious use of the only principle available to them, viz, the principle of analogy.53 The same pre conditions, which fertilize a woman, are

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also believed to fertilize Mother Earth. Before the advent of Amhuvāci all clothes and garments except those, which are absolutely necessary, are kept separately and nobody is allowed to touch them during the defilement period.

At the end of the period, people wash their clothes, utensils, furniture and other household materials. They clean their floor and courtyard, plaster them with clay and cow dung. The entire household complex is made purified by pouring water. They also throw away the old brooms, which are considered to be very impure. They then take purificatory bath, put new cloths kept out of touching during the period of defilement. The twice born replace their sacred threads with new ones. In the evening the old people assemble at the local Nāmghar to sing hymns. After returning the member of the each family enjoy varied seasonal fruits.

In a sense the Mother Earth is given complete rest for those days. Tradition has it that our sacred Mother Earth is also like a fertile woman, cultivable for germination of seeds and growing of crops and get pregnant as if coition. That is why the women’s womb is compared to Ksetra for cultivation. So Mother Earth menstruates, in order to prepare herself for fertilizing works.

The identification of the Earth with woman pervades the thought of all stages of culture. The mother and the soil are alike. In

54 Bhattacharyya, N. N.: op-cit., P. 8.
ancient India, at the wedding ceremony, the women were called a "seed field" and the priest exhorted the bridegroom saying "sow her with the seeds." 55

The origin of Ambuvāci may be based on the concept that the Earth is a female who is also regarded as a mother by the people of many countries of the world. In the Indian mythology the Earth is said to be the mother of Narakāśura and Sitā because they were born from the womb of Mother Earth. In Hemadri’s Vrata Khanda it is mentioned that prithvi or the Earth was worshipped as a Goddess. 56

According to Franzer, the Oraons, a non- Aryan tribe of Bengal worshipped the Earth as a Goddess and annually celebrated the marriage ceremony with the Sun God; Dharma at the time of blooming of the Sāl-tree. The marriage was celebrated as a charm to ensure the fertility of the ground. N. N. Bhattacharyya mentions that in Punjab and also in different parts of the Deccan, Mother Earth is given time to have rest and special importance is attached to the menstruation of Goddess Pārvati in different part of India and that the Goddess Bhagavati and Kāmākhyā in Kerela and Assam respectively. 57 In several places of Europe, Dāyenā and Siris, local deities of crops are worshipped. In the islands in between North Gini

56 Ibid., : P. 56 ff.
57 Bhattacharyya, N. N.: op-cit., P. 8.
and Australia, people celebrate the marriage ceremony of the Earth and the Sun God to improve cultivation.\(^{58}\) In some interior islands of Mediterranean sea, among some tribes of America, Egypt, Babylon, Greece, Chiriya, Germany etc. *Yoni* and *Liṅga* are worshipped by the people to ensure the fertility of the land.\(^{59}\) These festivals are somehow similar to the *Ambuvāci* in question.

Like the people of many regions of the world, the Assamese people also regard the Earth as a female whose menstruation is supposed to have occurred annually and she is supposed to come fertile consequently. It is worth mentioning that most of the cultivators of Assam sow their paddy seeds, on the following day of the termination of *Ambuvāci* period.

**Ambuvāci in Kamākhyā Temple**

The concept of the cult of Mother Earth has been in it is process of gradual evolution and elevation merged in the *Upaniṣadic* and mythological ages with the concept of *Śrī Devī, Mahā Lakṣmī, Devī* of crops and cereals and ultimately identified with *Mahā Devī Durgā* in the form of *Sakāmbharī*. Mother Earth is defined in a later *Upaniṣada* entitled *Nārāyana Upaniṣada*, the Mother Earth is religiously worshipped and adored as *Devī Vasundharī; Devī*

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\(^{58}\) Bhattacharyya, P. C. : *op-cit.*, P. 59.

\(^{59}\) Das, Kalyan. : "Saktipith Kāmākhyā Ambuvāci Melā" in *Devikshetra*, P. 42.
Bhagavatī gives respectability to this worship when it says that the Boar worshipped Prathvī and then Brahma worshipped Her. After then only it became prevalent in the world.⁶⁰

\[ \text{ādau ca Prathvī devī vorāhena pūjita} \]
\[ \text{tato hi brāhmaṇa pascāt pūjita prathvī tathā}^{61} \]

i.e., It was Brahma who first worshipped the Earth in His Boar incarnation, thereafter it became prevalent in the world.

Thus Ambuvāci festival is celebrated in the Kamakhya temple of Kamrupa with popular and sastric ways. During this period all the temples of Kamakhya and her associated Gods and Goddesses such as Ganeśa, Śiva, Sūryya, Viṣṇu and other deities remain closed with prohibition of regular worship and prayer for visitors. The regular worship is done by the priest. These days instead of normal Bhoga, fruits, curd, molasses, flattened rice etc. are offered. In fact this is a well-known practice in ancient and modern Assam particularly amongst the Aryan society. It is believed that during this time the Goddess is unclean due to her period. On the fourth day after, performance of bathing and regular rituals, the doors of the temple are re-opened ceremonially. Everything is made clean. Temple complex also wears a fresh look. Meanwhile a large number of devotees from various states of India, even from abroad assemble

in the temple complex. They all sacredly maintain the purity of the body and mind abstaining themselves from cooked food, sexual intercourse etc. The signing of Chorus, Bhajana and holy sermons go on for four days and four nights. The pilgrims usually take fruits and uncooked grams and pulses. At the end of the period or on the day of re-opening of the shrine, they take holy bath and visit the Mother Goddess Kāmākhyā for worshipping her.

The importance of Ambuvāci rite in Assam as well as in North Eastern states of India in comparison to other parts of the country where Mother Goddess Pārvatī is worshipped in different shrines is a matter of great attention. The existence of Yoni pitha (the female organ of mother Goddess, Pārvatī) in Kamrup Kāmākhyā of Assam may be one of the causes of giving priorities to the phenomena of menstruations and fertility.62

In earlier times the Tantrik priests of the temple used to speak about the emergences of red water flow below the Yoni Mandala during the period of Ambuvāci. But now a day it is not experienced. Secondly, perhaps no one dares to go for such test also.

According to an informer, king Naranārāyana and his brother Chilārāi of Koachbehar in order to prove the reality of menstruation of mother Goddess, placed a white cloth on the Yoni

pitha during the time of her defilement. Surprisingly the white cloth turned red due to the bleeding of the Devi.  

**Ambuvaci in Satra Institutions**

The *Satra* institutions have been occupying a permanent place in the religious, social and cultural spheres of the Assamese society since 16th century A.D. The *Satra* institutions of Assam may be compared with Buddhist monastery or *Matha* of Medieval period. Originally the term *Satra* was used in the sense of sacrifice. But in the neo-Vaisnavite period the word lost its original meaning and came to be used in the sense of a religious association or sitting where recitation of *Bhagavata-Purāna* took place daily.

The *Satra* institutions have been rendering valuable services in different branches of art being the cultural center of classical music, painting, wood curving and other crafts of bamboo and cane. Besides, the *Satras* were the main literary center, which enriched Assamese literature with their contributions particularly with drama, songs and biographies.

There are three main constituents of the full-fledged *Satra* institution, e.g.,:

(a) *Maṇikut or Bhājghar*,

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64 Rajguru, S.: *Medieval Assamese Society*, Nagaon, 1988, P. 267
(b) Namghar, and
(c) Carihāti.

Maṇikut is an integral part of the Nāmghar. It is comparatively a small shrine attached on the eastern end of the Nāmghar. There is a special decorated seat called Simhāsana where the idol or the sacred scripture is kept. The literal meaning of the word Maṇikut is the jewel. Here maṇi is taken to mean the idol or the sacred book.

Śankardeva established the community prayer hall known as Nāmghar where members of village community could congregate for daily or occasional prayers and where they could listen to recitations from sacred scriptures, the language of which was not unfamiliar to them. The Nāmghar also served as a stage in presenting devotional plays and also as a form of discussion relating to moral, religious and social welfare of the village community. Here supreme Lord Viṣṇu in the form of Kṛṣṇa is only worshipped.66

While Carihāti means four rows of huts where some devotees live together in the Satra compound. In the Satra institutions generally three kinds of earthen lamps are lit, e.g., :

(i) *Aksaya banti*: un extinguished earthen lamp.

(ii) *Guru banti*: earthen lamp lit in respect of the preceptors.

(iii) *Hāt banti* or *Hāt gosā*: commonly used earthen Lamp.

Of these, *akṣaya banti* is lit inside the *manikut*, *guru banti* near the *guru āsana* (inside the *Nāmghar*) while the *hāt gosā* inside the *Nāmghar* only, but can be lit by the visitors also. The first and second one cannot be shifted to other places.67

In the *Satra* institutions and the local *Nāmghar* (community prayer hall) though *Ambuvāci* is observed but not so strictly like that of a temple in Assam. The day before the commencement of *Ambuvāci*, the *bahnās* (specific seat inside the *Nāmghar* for several functionaries appointed in different branches by the *Satra* institution for smooth management) are enclosed with bamboo sticks and ropes. Because for rest three days no one would be allowed to sit there. Same is the case with *Guru āsana* also. The *manikut* and the *Nāmghar* in true sense remain closed for these days. So, *guru banti* is not lit during this time. But as the *akṣaya banti* cannot be extinguished at any circumstance, so to supply the fuel the *manikut* is opened at a regular interval. The man who is to enter the *manikut* is to be in wet clothes after purificatory bath. Further, as he

67 Informant : Gajendra Adhikary, (43, M), Mirza, Kamrup. Data collected on 7-7-2000.
cannot put his feet on the Earth, so he uses plantain leaves at his footsteps.\textsuperscript{68}

Otherwise the regular activities of the \textit{Nāmghar} like \textit{nām prasanga} (prayer) continue in the morning and evening as usual. Since the devotees are not allowed to enter the \textit{Nāmghar}, they sit at the \textit{toop} (It is a part of \textit{Nāmghar} where the front \textit{vārāndō} or main entry \textit{vārāndō} meets the roof of main \textit{Nāmghar}. At the juncture of it a \textit{Viṣṇu cakra}; wheel is fixed at the roof). During this time the devotees use only the \textit{hāt gosā}. The other activities like offering of \textit{naivedya} or \textit{prasōda}, (offering consist of raw husked rice, pulse, ripe banana and other fruits to a deity,) \textit{nirmali} (Sanskrit-\textit{nirmālya}; articles like flowers, a garland of flowers, \textit{durvā}, \textit{tulasi} leaves, rice etc. which are first offered to deity and then taken back by the devotees with reverence) and other offerings are prohibited.

People living in the \textit{cārihāti} observe certain restrictions during the defilement period of Mother Earth. They use new places for cooking, separate utensils, other requirements like rice, cereals, oil, and vegetables are procured before hand and are kept separately.

The day before purification, that is on the third day night people of \textit{cārihāti} remain on fasting. Next day morning all the utensils used during the period, the clothes are all cleaned up. The

\textsuperscript{68} Informant: Narakanta Adhikary, (34, M), Boko, Kamrup. Data collected on 7-7-2000.
floor of Namghar and maqikut are newly plastered. Devotees from adjoining areas arrive and communal nām-prasanga (prayer) is held. From that time the Satra is believed to be purified.

The traditional Vaiṣṇavas also observed this rite. Even this rite is strictly followed in various old and modern temples of Assam. The Satras belonging to the Brāhmaṇa sampradāya observe this rite along with all the customs associated with the Ambuvāci. But in some Satras of the Sankaradeva and the Madhavdeva schools may not observe this rite. This is nothing but a modern tendency.

Ambuvāci among the Tribal People of Assam

The tribal people of Assam observe this rite to some extent. The Boro people an important group of the tribal people of Assam observe Ambuvāci like the non-Boro Assamese people. They call it Āṃthicuwā or Utumāini-thāi i.e., blood oozing out of the naval.69 It is the second agricultural festival among the Boros of Bāthouism. The Boisomuthi (Basumati) is one of the Goddess of Bāthouism, a follower of the Borōi Bāthou, the supreme God. To Boro people this festival is not actually for merry making. It is observed as a special occasion of holiness.70 They too abstain from ploughing the land, cutting trees, touching the granary etc. They

believe that if any tree is cut during Ambuvāci period, then it can never grow again. They observe the festival for six days. On the seventh day the womenfolk throw away their old brooms, and replace them by new one, old pitchers too are disposed off. They clean the houses; plaster the floor and walls with clay and cow dung. The Boro people visit their neighbours' house during these days and enjoy seasonal fruits. Thus Amthicuwa comes to an end. Besides these in some parts of the state, basically in South Kamrup area, a ritual worship is performed by the Boro people. This worship is called Houl Sonāi.

The Boro people believe that the earth, the sky and air are pervaded by spirits known as Modāi, which sometimes act against the interest of mankind. This being so, these spirits are to be propitiated by frequent offerings of animals and other things. Houl Sonāi is also associated with such spirits. The word Houl means malignant or evil spirits while the word Sonāi signifies to drive away. Thus the term Houl Sonāi means to drive the malignant spirits out of the village.

Boro people believe that in the month of Āhār, on the day of purification of Ambuvāci, Goddess Kālī, associated with nine other evil spirits enter into the village. There is a widespread belief that various harms may be caused by Goddess Kālī and her associates. So, to propitiate and to drive away these evil forces,
people offer worship in their consecrated place. As the Boro people do not have shrine or temple, so for any kind of worship, they choose an open space and prepare an altar.

On the day of *Houl Sonāi pujā*, early in the morning people of all ages including women and girls assemble together in the worshipping place and the *pujā* is carried out. The essential commodities necessary are earthen lamp, betel nuts and leaves, pot of water, basil leaves, a he goat and so on. The *pujā* is being performed by the Boro priest called *Deuri*. He chants the mantra which in Boro language called *rāisāng bāy* and then sacrifice the goat near the altar. The following *rāisāng bāy* is chanted:

\[bārāy bāthou mung sourkho sunāgo lānā\]
\[nung thārani nābāyanāy mumākho (jānāimumākho) /\]
\[burnā gusum jabā thugu mumākho nung samnālā.\]

i.e., Lord Śiva of old people, we dedicate to you the things that you desire (eatable things) the black goat or other things, so, please accept it.

The head of the goat is dedicated to lord Śiva. People then pray him to save them from all kinds of calamities. While the body portion is cooked together with rice. This preparation is called

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Informant: Sarbeswar Boro, (64, M), Gosaihat, Mirza. Data collected on 28-7-2002.
rōmsō-ḵāji. After the worship is over, the devotees accept rōmsō-ḵāji with country beer called jow. With that, the first stage of worshipping comes to an end.

The real Houl sonāi ceremony begins at mid night when the villagers fall asleep. The aged people of the village again meet at the worshipped place. They carry different kinds of weapons such as sword, axe, spear, spade or anything prepared from iron. People believe that if one carries iron weapon, the evil spirits cannot attack him. This ceremony restricts the participation of female, children and unmarried man. The commodities necessary for this ceremony include, beside other things, a goat and a sow. The villagers before going to bed keep a plantain leave at the gate, where following commodities are accumulated an egg, five pairs of betel nut and leaves, and some skin of rice. The assemble group after worshipping lord Šiva start their procession. One of them pulls the goat with a string. The procession always begins from the east side of the village and move toward west. They should not carry any kind of light with them. While thus moving, they enter in to every house of the village and strike at the gate, walls of the houses with their carried instruments and dig little soil from the courtyard and speak the following words loudly.

**thu, thu nāng thōŋno nāng/**

**thōŋ thōŋ nāng jungni**
i.e., go, go, let's go, let's go, you will have to go. You should not stay at our village.

The people believe that by doing so, the evil spirits, even if taken shelter in any house can be driven away. At the time of leaving the house, they take away the egg and betel nut along with them. The same process continues till it covers up household each and every of the village. In the last house of the village once more the rāisāngbāy is recited.

After this the group now move to an open field away from the village. After proper worship to goddess Kali, the goat is let loose in the open field. While the sow is sacrificed to Goddess Kālī and her associates after chanting the rāisāngbāy. The blood of the sacrificed beast is placed on nine plantain leaves, where jow; vermilion betel nut and other necessary things are poured on the leaves. The head is dedicated to Goddess Kālī after lighting an earthen lamp on its head. The Deurī does the ceremonial worship. After everything is over, the flesh of the beast is cooked with rice and taken with jow. With this, the Houl Sonāi ceremony comes to an end.

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Informant: Manju Boro, (28, W), Gosaihat, Mirza. Data collected on 28-7-02.
The interpretation of keeping the egg, betel-nut and leaves, skin of rice on the plantain leave is that, since during the month of Āhār and Sōwon, there is heavy rain in Assam leading to flood and it brings havoc to the lives of people, paddy, animals and so on. Further after flood there is chance of epidemics so, through *Houl Sonāi pujā*, Boro people worship *Jal Devātā* (god of water) to counter this damage.

Among Rabha community, especially of South Kamrup area, a similar kind of ritual worship is performed. This worship is called *Mārāṅg Khedā*. The word *Mārāṅg* means evil spirit and *Khedā* means to drive away. Generally, there is no fixed date for the *pujā*, but it is done in the month of *Jeth*. In some places, it is performed on the last day of *Ambuvāci* like the *Houl Sonāi*. The essential commodities necessary for the *pujā* do not differ much from *Houl Sonāi*. The *pujā* is carried on by the *Deuri* at night in the midst of a village street. The procession for *Mārāṅg Khedā* always begins from the house of *Gāo-burhā*. The people form two bands and move from house to house striking the fencing, walls and so on with their long sticks. On this occasion, they worship God *Khākhłām* and Goddess *Kāṃkhhyā*. Two effigies are made of these God and Goddess with straw and are decorated with bark of banana (as clothes) and ornaments. The sow, the he-goat and the cock are sacrificed and are offered to the deities. The body portions are
cooked and communal feast is arranged. Unlike *Houl Sonāi*, unmarried men can also take part in the procession.

Among the Sonowals the observance of *Ambuvāci* is also noticed. They call it *Sāthlagā Sakām*. This is the ceremony consisting four days of the Assamese month Āhār when the Earth is supposed to be unclean. Digging of the Earth is forbidden. Money, valuable things and other things like rice are not taken out from the house. Ploughing is strictly prohibited by the villagers.

During these days vegetarian food is taken by the aged persons. The last day is called *Sāth-bhagā Sakām*. On that day aged men and women perform *nāmprasanga* (holy sermon) in the local *Nāmghar* respectively.

The Chutiyas are of the opinion that as the Mother Earth passes through her period, so the shrines also become unholy. They keep their shrine closed for these days. Towards the end of the month of Āhār month, they perform a ceremony to purify their shrines.

Thus it can be concluded that the idea of the Earth’s menstruation is clearly symbolic of the belief in her productive

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capacity, which naturally become particularly activated after the onset of the wet weather.\textsuperscript{75}

A critical Approach to \textit{Ambuvāci}

We can analyse the composite forms of \textit{Sāthā-barat} and \textit{Ambuvāci} in the following ways, e.g., :

(a) The bringing of mud from the pond or tank or river on the first day of \textit{Sāthā barat} may indicate Goddess Lakṣmī who came out from the water during the churning of sea by Gods and Demons.

(b) Goddess Lakṣmī is also identified with the Earth because the corns are produced on the Earth and the corns are also regarded as Lakṣmī Devī by most of the Hindus. Or in other words corns are the symbols of Lakṣmī.

(c) Different varieties of corns are kept on the āsana during \textit{Sāthā-barat} so also different varieties of corns are kept in front of Goddess Lakṣmī on the day of her worship.

(d) On the final day of \textit{Sāthā-barat} i.e. on the day of worship, idols of \textit{Opanī Gaurī} and others are made with rice powder and turmeric which are in the colour of white and yellow. The white colour may indicate the colour of the corns, which are initially in white colour. It turns yellow when it gets ripped.

\textsuperscript{75} Datta, B. : \textit{op-cit}, P. 115
(e) The other items placed on the āsana like knife; bungle, vermilions are inferred to be the symbol of fertility. Thus from the above discussion it can be inferred that Opanī Gaurī may be identified with the corn Goddess Lakṣmī.

(f) Hiranakshya hid the Mother Earth inside the ocean, later Lord Viṣṇu in his Boar incarnation rescued her, may infer that the incense rain which submerge the cultivated land during Ambuvāci period.

(g) The Boar had sexual intercourse with Mother Earth when she was in her period resulting the birth of Narakāsura who was also powerful and vigorous. This may indicate that in the fertile land the farmer does cultivation and gets good crops.

(h) During Ambuvāci period the farmers do not plough their lands may infer that the farmers take rest and get energetic to take decision regarding his plan for further cultivation after the rain.

**Raja Festival**

According to astronomy, the day on which the Sun enters in to Mithuna rāśi leaving the Brisuba rāśi i.e., Vṛṣa is called the Mithuna Sankṛānti. The Sun remains here for a month and this month is called Mithuna soura month. Mithuna is considered as the life of the Sun and Moon. Through their movement we get the day and night, season, month and finally the New Year. Mithuna rāśi is
imagined as a conjugal image of a Gadādhāri as male and Binādhārini as female. In the book called Prasno panisadi it is said:

cah mithunām utpadayate,
rayam cah pranam cah iti,
etau me bahudha prajōh karisyate iti,
ōditau havai prōno rayireva candramāh.76 //

i.e., Mithuna rāśi is formed with two pādas of Mrigasira nakṣatra, four pādas of Ādra nakṣatra and three pādas of Punarbasu nakṣatra.

Mrigasirā nakṣatra: According to Aaitareya Brāhmaṇa, Prajāpati Brahmā to satisfy his lust gets attracted to his own daughter Rohinī. Out of shame and fear, Rohinī escaped in the image of a deer (mṛga). Prajāpati Brahmā too followed her in the same image. The Devas on the other hand to save Rohinī from the clutches of her father created Bhutbōna with their Roudra parts. Bhutbōna cut the head of Prajāpati Brahmā and established it on the sky. This is known as Mrigasira nakṣatra (Mrigasira - Mriga + sira i.e. deer + head).

Ādra nakṣatra: It fully remains on Mithuna rāśi. The Sun after staying in Mithuna sankrānti for 7 to 8 days merges towards Ādra

76 Patnaik, D.: 'Raja Parva', in Oisāna Parva Parvāni, Ośā-Vrata, Jāmi-Jātra, Published by Utkal Pathak Samsad, Cuttack, 1994, P. 44.
nakṣatra and stay there for 13 to 14 days. At this time there is incense rain in the Earth and she is supposed to come fertile consequently. That is why the Sun before merging from Mrigasira nakṣatra to Ādra nakṣatra, the last three days are considered as the Raja of the Earth.

Punarbasu nakṣatra: There are two nakṣatras of equal power over the head of Mithuna rāṣṭi. They are known as Punarbasu nakṣatra. According to Indian people these two nakṣatras or stars are Yam and Yami, they are brother and sister. But in Western culture they are called ‘Castro Pollex’. In Vedic literature it is found how Yami, the sister appeals to her brother Yam for love and how Yam discarded his sister’s love.

Late Balgangadhar Tilak in his book The Arctic Home in the Vedas has written that about 8000 to 5000 B.C., when Basantik and Bisuva united in the Punarbasu nakṣatra, this imagery was made. The beginning of this rainy season or New Year is termed as Raja by the Oriya people.77

Raja is one of the most popular as well as the national festivals of Orissa. It is also termed as swing festival. It is the chief festival of women in particular of the state. Perhaps there is no other festival like Holi or Durgā-pujā or Rākhi bandhan, the women folk get themselves involved so actively as in the Raja.

77 Ibid. 3 PP. 44-45.
The festival is celebrated one day before the first solar day of Mithuna in the month of Jaistha and it continues for three days. Actually from this time the rainy season begins in Orissa. Rainy season means the welcome of the agricultural year in the state and thus make the soil ready for productivity. Rainy season is a season of fertility and Raja is the first echo of fertility. In true sense, to welcome the monsoon, this joyous and colorful festival is arranged for three days all over the state. Though the festival is celebrated almost all over the state, but it is chiefly popular in the coastal districts like Puri, Cuttack, Bhadrak, Baleswar, Kendrapara etc. of the state. The festival is observed for three days and each day is known by different names. Viz, the first day is called Pahili Raja; the second day is called Raja or Raja proper or main Raja while the third day is called Bāsī Raja or the past Raja (ceremonies on the day following the main Raja).

The word Raja seems to have come from the Sanskrit term Rajasvāla means the menstrual period of women. As a woman menstruates, and is a sign of fertility, so also it is believed that Mother Earth starts menstruating on the first day of Raja and after three days i.e., on the fourth day She is given a ritual bath to come to normalcy. As a woman without menstruation cannot produce any offspring or in other sense, she looses the power of productivity. So how can the Earth be fruitful without menstruation? In an Aryan

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78 Mangaraj, S. : Orissara Raja Parba in Orissara Parwa Parwan, Osa-Vrata, Jarni-Jatra, Published by Utkal Pathak Sarmsad, Cuttack, 1994, P. 42.
Hindu home a menstruating woman remains secluded for three days because of the impurity. During the period she does not touch anything and is given full rest for those days. She can come to normalcy after a clean bath on the fourth day.

Mother Earth has always been treated as a woman since remote past. So She bears the characteristics of a woman. The women have been given priority since remote past in India. The Manusmṛti clearly mentions:

\[ \text{upādhyāyōncacarya ōcāryanām santa pitā/} \\
\text{sahastam pitranātā gokhenātiri cayate.} \]

As a menstruating woman is given rest during her period, so too, during Raja festival all kinds of agricultural operations like ploughing, sowing seed, digging, cutting trees, cooking on earthen chulhā are strictly prohibited. Says the Atharva Veda:

\[ \text{brucānte mithunāko tānmodyapi dinatrayam/} \\
\text{rajasvalā svāta pṛthivi kṛṣi karma birgahi tam.} \]

i.e., during the Rajasvalā period all kinds of agricultural operations are prohibited.

Again, about the Earth it is written:

\[\text{79 Manusmṛti. : 2/145.}
\text{80 Atharva-Veda. :}\]
yasyam samudra uta sindhurōpo
yasyam manam krustayah sambabhuvah /
yasyam midam jinnati prōnadejat
sa no bhunih purvapeya dadhōtu.81 //

i.e., In the Earth where the sea, river and water are there, where food and cultivation of man are there, where everyone lives jointly, where people breath and where they move about freely, we should show reverence to that Earth.

It has been already stated that the womenfolk take active part in the festival because in true sense this is the festival of women, that too chiefly of young girls the potential mother. They all observe the restrictions prescribed for a menstruating woman. They get the training of a menstruating woman from young age and dream to be the mother of healthy child in the future.

On the first day of the festival the young girls getup early at the dawn before the crows shriek, take purificatory bath after anointing their bodies with turmeric paste and oil. For rest two days bathing is prohibited for them. 82

Before the festival, the houses, courtyard and surroundings are cleaned and plastered with clay and cow dung. Actually the preparation for the festival begins at least fifteen days

81 Mangaraj, S. : op.cit., P. 38.
82 Informant : Banalata Mohanty, (50, F), Nimapara, Puri. Data collected on 9-7-00.
before the commencement of it. Though the cow dung is used ritually, but there is a scientific cause behind it. In cow dung the amount of nitric acid is more, so snake and other poisonous insects cannot come near it. In rainy season there is possibility for snake and other poisonous insects to enter the houses, so as a preventive measure cow dung is used ritually to chase away the harmful reptiles and insects.  

On the eve of Rajasamkrōnti, beside other things, a particular cake is prepared out of recipes like rice powder, molasses, coconut, camphor ghee etc. The cake is called Poda pithā. The cake is compulsory for the festival. The specialty of this pithā is that, it is the tradition of Oriya people to use it because in the temple of Lord Jagannātha, after offering bhoga to the deity it is compulsory to offer poda-pithā to the deity. This kind of cake can be used for three to four days without getting spoiled. The size of the cake varies from house to house according to the number of family members. Cakes are also exchanged among the friends, relatives and neighbours during the festival.  

So, on the first day of the festival after purificatory bath the young girls put on new dresses and decorate themselves with ornaments and make-up. For rest two days the girls are seen in the

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84 Informant : Krushna Ch. Pallai, (42, M), Lect. in History, Chandbal College, Bhadrak. Data collected on 2-7-2000.
same garb and make-up. After this they enjoy *poda-pitha* and other items with other members of the family. It is the tradition of Oriya people to send certain items to the girls after her marriage in the first year of Raja from their parent’s house. The items include *Sāree, Rōsi lādu* (seasam sweet ball), *Poda pitha, Sindura* (vermilion), *Alatā* (nail polish), *Raja mudi* (puffed rice, prepared during the festival), *Pōna* (bettle-nut), *Haldi* (raw turmeric) seasonal fruits like mango, jackfruits etc. From the next year, if the parents cannot afford to send all these items, at least few items like *Sindura, Rōsi ladu, Raja mudi, Haldi, Pōna, Poda-pitha* are compulsory to be sent.\(^8^5\)

For these three days the girls observe certain restrictions. Viz, they do not walk bare footed, so use a kind of traditional shoe made of areca nut to avoid troubling the Earth.\(^8^6\) They avoid work as much as possible. They do not scratch the Earth, do not grind, do not tear anything and cut anything, nor do they cook. They do not take boiled rice, instead live on other items. The scientific cause behind this tradition is that maximum acidity is formed from rice and it can cause harm to the body and the womb of young girls.\(^8^7\) So, they take fruits and other things before the evening sets in. Another reason behind using of these things can be that generally people do not take such special items, on the other hand the

\(^{85}\) Informant  : Tarali Patnaik, (65, W), Cuttack. Data collected on 5-7-2000.


\(^{87}\) Informant  : Ajaya Das, (38, M), Bhubaneswar. Data collected on 5-7-2000.
vitamins, minerals found in these items are of great importance for growing stage.

The young unmarried girls of a village or of an area spend those days together in one house. They spend the time talking, playing indoor games and eating. At no cost they can vacate the house. If in case, they are all to go out, they keep a *silapōtā* (grinding stone) as their representative. Beside this they pass the time visiting friends house, merry-making and moving up and down on improvised swing. While swinging they sing typical *Raja* songs out of joy in the form of duet.

The swings used by the girls during the Raja are of different kinds such as *Rām doli, Chārki doli, Pāti doli, Dāndi doli* and so on. These songs are specially meant for the festival. These songs speak of love, sister-in-law’s behaviour, rosy future, prospect of good marriage, and pictures of their lovers and everything of social order that comes to the minds of the singers. Though anonymous and composed extempore, much of these songs through scer beauty and diction and sentiment, have earned permanence and have gone to make the very substratum of Orissa’s folk poetry.89

It would certainly be wrong to claim that *Raja* is the festival of womenfolk only. Because since all kinds of agricultural activities remain suspended for three days, so it is leisure time for

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88 Same as reference No. 72.
89 Patnaik, D. : *op-cit.*, P. 38.
everyone. Young men enjoy the time through various types of indoor and outdoor games. The most favourite being Bāgudi; something like modern Kābādi. Competitions are organized where different teams from adjoining villages take part. The elderly people engross themselves in cards and pasā (dice). The girls play indoor games like card, ludo, Bahu-bahukā, Puchi, Kauri etc. The old people in the morning after purificatory bath and donning new clothes visit temples and shrines to seek divine blessing for rich crops in the next year to follow. They then listen to the religious discourse or reading of the holy books like Rāmāyana, Mahābhārata, Bhāgavata-Purāna and so on, in the shade of the trees or in the Mathas.

In the evening, almost everyone throng to the nearby pandals. In some prosperous villages Yātrā performance or Gotipwa dance is arranged for the whole night. Professional yātrā parties are invited to perform the show. But in some villages local youth perform some plays. Enthusiastic amateurs arrange music competitions also.

On the fourth day early in the morning just at the sunrise, Mother Earth is given a ritual bath in every household. A place in the courtyard or house is selected and purified with cow dung. A grinding stone and a blade of the plough are first washed with the water of turmeric and then with water. After this, milk is poured on it. Thereafter the spots of vermillion and chandana are
fixed on the grinding stone and the blade of plough. After the ceremonial bath, both the things are placed on a wooden stool. Thereafter, the worship is done with beetle-nut, raw rice, grass, bel-leaf and so on. The entire process is called Basumatī snāna. Mainly the work is done by the elderly lady of a particular family. The grinding stone and the blade of plough are the symbols of Śiva-liṅga or the masculine organ. After the ritual bath is over Mother Earth is ready for fertilization. Paddy seeds are extensively sown with the belief that Mother Earth has now become suitable for fertilization. On the analogy of a woman, the ceremonial plough is undertaken in the paddy field. Thus the festival comes to an end.

Though in true sense, there is no rite or ritual of worshipping any particular God or Goddess, yet, here Mother Earth has been identified with the Goddess of productivity. That is why certain restrictions are observed during the festival. For example, on the day of Srāṅkrānti or on the day of proper Raja, people avoid taking any kind of non-vegetarian items. But of course on the first and third day of Raja no such restrictions are maintained.

The festival is like a get together. People staying abroad for different professions come to their respective homes during the festival. A lot of feasting and merry making take place. People wash away their old enmity and assemble together to enjoy the festival.

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90 Informant : Benjulata Swain, (33, F), Lect., Kakatpur College, Puri.
Data collected on 5-7-2000.
Though Raja festival is rather expensive for people leaving hand to mouth, yet, these people eagerly wait for it. Preparation begins couple of days before the commencement of the festival. Whatever it may be, one thing is very clear that the festival is highly popular among all sections of the people of Orissa.

Like Orissa, the swing festival is also current in some other parts of the country, e.g., Punjab, Rajasthan and so forth. The festival is known as Teeyān tyohār in Punjab. The festival Teeyān is an occasion for all married girls to visit their parent’s houses for a few days, and thus enjoy again the carefree days of their childhood. The festival is celebrated in the month of Sāwan. The girls assemble and move to swings on the peepal trees. It is very attractive to see the earth all around becoming green again, because of the welcome drops of rain. While the girls in their colourful dresses play with the swings, out of joy, they sing and dance. These songs are called Teeyān songs while the dance is called Giddhā. The songs mostly speak of love and are highly charged with emotion. A specimen of it is given below:

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\begin{align*}
\text{shauk nāl main giddhe vichchawōn} / \\
\text{boli pawan shōgan manawōn} / \\
\text{soun diā hadtā ve} / \\
\text{eerā jas piplan heth gōwan}.^91 /
\end{align*}
\]

\footnote{Bedi, S. S.: \textit{Folklore of Punjab}, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 1971, P.93.}
i.e., I love to come to Giddhā and sing the boli and perform the shōgan. O cloud of Šāwan, I sing your glory under the peepal tree.

While in Rajasthan, there is a festival called Teej tyohār which is to some extent related to the Raja festival of Orissa. The Teej is a seasonal festival. The cycle of the festivals begins in the state with Teej tyohār and it has been assigned the first place among the festivals of the region. It is virtually the festival of the rains during which, the monsoon is good and widespread, Rajasthan is at its best. The festival is celebrated thrice in a year.

On the third day of the bright half of the month of Šāwan, i.e. Šrāvana the festival is celebrated. But only the unmarried girls can take part in this festival. Again on the dark fortnight of the next month, i.e., Bhōda (or Bhōdra) the festival is performed, in which the daughters-in-law take active part. During these festival the young girls and daughters-in-law are offered new garments. Another important part of the festival is swing. The newly married girls return to their parent's house basically to enjoy the swing in familiar surroundings. On the occasion of the Teej festival fairs are held in villages & towns. The most colourful Teej fair is held at Jaipur.

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